

Exhibit launches new era for Western Writers Hall of Fame

By Ollie Reed Jr.

Since the journals of Lewis and Clark were published early in the 19th Century, writing about the American West has been enriching the literature of the world.

Now, an ambitious and evolving display at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming, commemorates the diverse and colorful contributions of Western writing. The Western Writers Hall of Fame exhibit, housed outside the center's McCracken Research Library, debuted in April.

Designed by BPI of Norwood, Massachusetts, and built by Exhibit Concepts Inc. of Vandalia, Ohio, the \$60,000-plus attraction includes a mural depicting portraits of some of Western writing's prominent authors; two interactive touchscreens that give visitors the chance to learn not only about the writers but also about WWA, which created the Western Writers Hall of Fame in the 1960s; and a display vitrine featuring items associated with HOF authors.

"Everything today is on the imaginary internet, just in the air, but it's good to have something made of wood and concrete," said Max Evans, 92, a 2015 Hall of Fame inductee. "Everything has a hall of fame, so why not the Western Writers of America who have done more than anybody else to preserve the stories of the Old West and send them around the world?"

The exhibit is the realization of a dream, WWA executive director Candy Moulton said.

"The WWA board has long wanted a more fully developed exhibit, and after years of working on it we finally have something that represents our Hall of Fame and all of our members," Moulton said.

The exhibit is a tremendous showcase for the literature of the West, she said, adding that it is in a venue visited by tens of thousands of people annually.

Sherry Monahan, WWA's immediate past president, said the McCracken is a natural fit for the WWA.

"We're proud to be partnering with them," she said.

An official dedication of the new exhibit is scheduled for 3 p.m. September 20.

The display is meant to pay homage not only to writers selected to the hall but also to other WWA members who have and who continue to contribute to the proud legacy of Western writing.

Funded by donations to the WWA's Homestead Foundation, proceeds from the annual foundation auction, memorials and money from the Authors Coalition, the new exhibit is the successor to a display that dates to 2006.

That exhibit consisted of bookshelves displaying works by Hall of Fame inductees and a few artifacts, said Mary Robinson, director of the McCracken library.

"It did not stand out," she said. "It just was not eye-catching. It was attractive but not flashy."

The new exhibit, Robinson said, is not only impressive to



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Candy Moulton

see, but, because it is computer-based, offers the opportunity for swift and constant updating.

"The WWA has always been at something of a disadvantage in that, unlike the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, say, it has lacked a significant space to pay tribute to its lifetime honorees," WWA president Kirk Ellis said. "The new installation, at a museum devoted to the study of Western history, goes some way to correcting that imbalance and bringing the work of individual authors in the WWA pantheon to a more general audience."

2016 inductee Lucia St. Clair Robson, a former librarian herself, finds the exhibit's location outside a library encouraging, saying: "It will attract visitors who might never think to go to the WWA website and, perhaps, have never heard of the WWA."

The exhibit could draw more writers into the WWA ranks, too.

"They see this exhibit and think, 'This outfit is for real,'" said James A. Crutchfield, a 2015 inductee, "and they are putting out some quality stuff. I should join up."

At a glance

Managed by the Homestead Foundation board of directors, the Western Writers Hall of Fame honors distinguished writers. Before 2015, inductees had to be dead at least 10 years. Today, the recipient of the Owen Wister Award, given to a living writer for lifetime achievement, is automatically inducted into the hall each year along with a nominated deceased writer voted on by WWA members.

Since 2006, when then-WWA executive director Paul Andrew Hutton was also a member of the McCracken Research Library Advisory Board, the Western Writers Hall of Fame has been housed outside the McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.