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Reflections of freedom

By *DAVE CLARKE* Regional Coordinator

It's a mirror with a message.

Galva industry John H. Best & Sons was looking for an idea for their float in the Sesquicentennial parade on the Fourth of July and came up with something which will be a part of local history and tribute to a very special group of men.

The company had been working on different applications for a laser etching process being marketed through a new division of the 112-year-old company, Best Etching.

Laser etching is used to inscribe lettering, poems, photos and other items on marble, granite, plastic and tile for memorials, keepsakes and gifts for birthday, graduation, anniversary and other occasions.

The family-owned business was founded by John H. Best in 1892 and made display racks for buggy whips and carriage rugs. Through the years, the company, now owned and operated by the third and fourth generations, has grown to become the only full-line supplier of carpet and rug displays in the industry.

After debuting their newest division at the Kewanee Expo this spring, Best Etching was asked to produce items for the Galva and Kewanee sesquicentennials, including the glass suncatchers with the 150th anniversary "key" logo sold by the Kewanee Chamber of Commerce.

When they etched the Kewanee Sesquicentennial logo on an 8-by-12-inch framed mirror to see how it worked, Kennaugh got an idea for the parade.

"Since it was Independence Day, I thought of the Galva National Guard unit serving in Iraq and how much each one of them, and their families have sacrificed," said Kennaugh, who thought it would be appropriate to honor those soldiers. Not just the unit -- F Battery, 202nd Air Defense Artillery -- but each one of the 122 men who were mobilized last November.

He first contacted the Galva News, which could only provide the names of the eight or so men from Galva serving in the unit, which also now includes members of the Kewanee and Dixon units. He then enlisted the assistance of Staff Sgt. Martin Gibson, F Battery's Rear Detachment Officer stationed at the National Guard Armory in Galva.

SSG Gibson explained that for security reasons, the military could not give out the full names of those currently on active duty in Iraq, but called the Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office in Springfield and did get approval for release of a list of first names and last initial for each soldier.

Kennaugh also added the name of 1st Lt. Chris Doherty, an artillery officer from Galva serving in Iraq with the 1st Cavalry to the list.

In thinking of what kind of surface the long list of names should be etched on -- marble, laser tile, or other choices available, Kennaugh had an inspiration -- a mirror.

"I wanted to have it so when people read the names, they realized they were looking at themselves and realize that we are the ones they -- the men of F Battery -- are protecting," said Kennaugh. "It makes the point more quickly and more easily than using words," Kennaugh said.

The design includes two yellow Galva Sesquicentennial train logos, a red, white and blue American flag, and the words "Protecting YOUR FREEDOM" above the columns of names listed in alphabetical order.

At first, you might think that just listing the men by first name keeps us from knowing who they are, but within seconds of first seeing the mirror, I spotted half a dozen guys I could identify just by their first name and last initial -- Jason A., Joshua N., Nathan K., Lucas S., and others. Families and friends will have no trouble spotting their soldier and others they know

and, in a way, that makes the tribute all the more personal.

Kennaugh inputted the names and other artwork into a computer and applied a special program which sets up the laser to letter separate square sections. The sections, like the pieces of a puzzle, were then placed carefully side-by-side to form two 4-by-5-foot mirrors on sheets of plywood, one for each side of a decorated, two-wheeled cart which Kennaugh pulled in the July 4 parade with a lawn tractor.

The idea did achieve the intended effect. You can't look at the panel for more than a few seconds before you see a nearly full-length you looking back from the other side of the four long lists of soldier's names.

After the parade, the cart and patriotic panels were pulled back inside the Best plant and parked, having fulfilled their initial purpose.

Tuesday, Kennaugh took the next step in his plan -- presenting one of the mirrors to those whose names it bears.

SSG Gibson visited the plant to officially accept the tribute on behalf of the unit. Gibson said Major Michael Kessel, commander of F Battery now stationed near Baghdad, will decide how and where the wall-sized mirror will be displayed at the armory where it can be seen by the troops when they return home next spring.

"On behalf of Foxtrot Battery, we would like to thank Mr. Kennaugh and Best Etching for this very special tribute," said SSG Gibson.

Kennaugh said they will donate the other panel to the Galva Historical Society.

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