In Anacortes, walls are windows – into the past.

Turn one street corner and you'll join a somber crowd at the city’s first car wreck. Turn another and a boxer is ready to pummel you. Fishermen, gold miners, musicians, mayors, soldiers, shopkeepers, newsmen, bankers – even a dragon may stop you as you stroll the city streets.

It’s all part of the Anacortes Mural Project, a name chosen “because we liked the initials: AMP. We had a slogan at that time: 'amplifying history'.” The time was 1984, and the force behind the project was Bill Mitchell, a local artist with an amped-up love of history.

Twenty-five years later, Anacortes boasts 125 (and counting) murals. Visitors and locals alike wonder – just who are the folks on the walls? What did they mean to Anacortes? Who created these plywood people, and how?

It’s time to discover the murals all over again – unmasked!
Murals Unmasked!

Production

For Bill Mitchell, the murals' roots reach back to when he was a sprout with a sketchbook and a teacher gave him a wall to fill with drawings. Years later, he's still finding walls to fill.

It's a little more complicated now, though. Wheelchair-bound in body but not in spirit, he notes that being an artist and being handicapped have at least one thing in common: they both involve a lot of problem-solving. Having friends to move the plywood, cut, sand, mount, and more eases the difficulties of mural-making. About 25 folks have helped on the AMP over the years; without them, "I'd be just another guy with another idea, going nowhere."

The initial problem-solving involves finding a photo, a sponsor and a wall. Often, someone comes to Mitchell hoping to have a mural done of "oh, Uncle Bob," and he'll scan a family album to find a photo he can work with. "I can very quickly tell whether something is going to make a good mural or not, whether it's going to be of interest to the community and our visitors."

Good photos have that little extra something, "not just somebody standing there in shirtsleeves." Full-body shots with strong shadows are ideal. Mitchell purposely emphasizes the shadows and highlights in his murals "because if you try to blend your colors and be real artistic, it doesn't register from a distance." Or show up well in snapshots.

Sometimes a photo needs to be altered a bit, what he calls "Frankenstein work." Small people are sometimes made taller; legs may be lengthened or shortened. A photo of Mayor Rice with one arm behind his back didn't fully work for a mural, so Mitchell recreated the arm holding a jacket over his shoulder.

It takes as little as five days to do a mural. Large ones may require a month or more. An image is projected onto a sheet of primed 3/4-inch plywood with an overlay that seals the grain and keeps the mural from falling apart over time. The image is then drafted onto the wood, taking special care to position the face markers, and afterward the plywood is laid out where Mitchell can draw a cut line around it. The line is critical, he says, since the mural "can't be painted right if it's cut wrong."

After cutting, routing, sanding and more, the mural is finally what Mitchell calls a "done plug." Now it's ready for the detail painting that will bring it to life and make it a striking addition to the Anacortes street scene.
The AMP is the only project that depends on “dead people and babies,” Mitchell says with a grin. Dead people, yes, but babies? Glass baby-food jars are perfect for mixing “One-Shot,” a top-of-the-line paint that doesn’t take kindly to plastic.

The mural project started in sepia. But when Fred White’s safety bike failed to “pop,” Mitchell switched to color. That worked well, because “instead of blending into the buildings, (the murals) blend into the people who are on the streets.”

Mitchell does most of the painting, applying a first coat in stock colors, fine-tuning colors on a second go-around, then working in the highlights and shadows. When people ask why the faces seem dark, he reminds them they’ll “chalk up” as the murals age.

Once painted, “the last thing we do with these things is screw 'em up.” He makes an effort to place the murals appropriately. The two mayors are on city hall. Editors bracket the door of the news building. The Model T at 6th and Commercial is only a hundred feet or so from where it once parked.

Free of Mitchell’s workshop, the murals have to take their chances. About a dozen have been stolen, prompting wanted posters and rewards. The first to go missing was the Shamrock Bar Trio. John Wayne rode off into the sunset and back again. Someone tore the heads off Mayor Hogan and Douglas Allmond – twice – and two years later Allmond disappeared to Sedro-Woolley (he returned, thanks to information posted on the back of each mural).

One summer, mustaches applied with double-stick tape appeared on all of the downtown murals. It took Mitchell and crew several hours to remove them and since most of the murals were older, the patina tore off with the tape.

“Everybody's lower face was darker because of the lack of patina, so it made everyone, including the women, look like they needed a shave.”

He appreciates it when someone tells him they deflected mischief, and feels that on the whole, vandalism and theft have been relatively minor. He thinks he knows why. “Every kid in this town has grown up with these murals. You can't be a kid here without you grew up with them, and liked them as a child.”
Murals Unmasked!

A New Spirit

Murals are sponsored by families, friends, businesses, the City, Chamber, and local service clubs. Mitchell owns the murals, to insure they can’t be moved to someone’s private residence. “This keeps the project together but it also makes me responsible for the maintenance.”

One of the original goals of the project was to inspire the town’s merchants to spruce up their buildings. It gratifies him that a decade into the AMP, the downtown had a new spirit. “People had been painting their buildings and there was a new feeling of optimism downtown that I would like to think we helped to create.”

Mitchell, who recently turned 60, meant to end the mural project years ago but can’t seem to let go. There are still too many characters and scenes he’d like to capture. And if along the way he can inspire other towns to give it a go and recover their mojo, that would be just fine with him.
Mural Sponsors

Ace Hardware
Anacortes American
Anacortes Arts Festival
Anacortes Chamber of Commerce
Anacortes Cinema
Anacortes City Council
Anacortes Community Theater
Anacortes Cycle
Anacortes Health & Nutrition
Anacortes Mural Project
Anacortes Port Commissioners
Anacortes Printing
Anacortes Women's Club
Anders Signs
Anderson, Barbara
Bessner, Annette
Bowe, Clara
Boyenton kin
Buba Sudz
Cartwright clan
Clancey, Paula
Colley, Joe
Colvin twins
Crosby, Lloyd
Demopoulos clan
Depot Arts Center
Dorsey daughters
Dunton's Body Shop
Debro daughter
Eagles
Elks Club
Fahey Furniture
Flounder Bay Boat
Friends of Bobby Holloway
Frontier Industries
Funk, Gary
Funk, Wallie
Gere-a-Deli
Guemes Ferry crew
Hood Graphics
How It Works
Jack Papritz’ pals
Jim Brown’s family & friends
Jamie’s Signs
Johnson, Luanne
Kach clan
Kiddler family
Kiwanis Noon Club
Kiwanis Sunrisers
Knapp, Worth
Knights of Columbus
Lakeside Industries
Latham family
Lowman, Bill
Lowman family
Lowman House
Luvera family
Malland, Dave
Marina Inn
Marine Hardware & Supply
Marinokas kin
McCallum clan
McCracken family
McLean, Fr.
McMillan Motors
Miller, Walt Jr.
Misha Marson’s folks
Mitchell, Bill
Mitchell, J.A. family
Mitchell, Tom
Monahan clan
Murphy, Jim & Lynn
Nickerson, Debbie
O.A.R.S.
Overton, Dave
Palmer, Thelma
Petrish, Nick
Pickett, Bob & Erica
Pinson, Ron
Poet’s House
Red Snapper
Reinsner’s Texaco
Ross, Jerry
Rumsey, J. L. clan
Scrabin, Malcolm
Sebo’s
SeaPort Gifts
Skagit Old Car Club
Soroptimists
Steinman, Ruth
Steve Henery’s friends
Summers family
Swanson, Beverly
Way, Bobbie
Wells, Bill
Weyrich, Rich
Wills, Ken
Wood, Leighton
Wooding, Bill
Woods, Tom

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Murals Unmasked!
A Peak Behind the Project

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Turn another and a horse is ready to pummel you. Fishermen, gold miners, musicians, masons, soldiers, shopkeepers, newspaper carriers, even a dragon may stop you as you stroll the city streets.

It’s all part of the Anacortes Mural Project, a time machine. Because we like to look inside AMP. We had a slogan at that time:

“Unmasking History”.

The time was 1984, and the force behind the project was Bill Mitchell, a local artist with an unprecedented love of history.

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