A Legacy In Clay

By Mike L. Downey

This is a story about clay.

Everyone was a little edgy the day in 1993 that Margaret Rudder was to see — for the first time — the larger-than-life clay statue of her late husband Earl Rudder ’32.

Although she had previously approved a smaller model, this was her first view of the full-sized version of the memorial.

This is a story about loyalty.

There outside the studio of sculptor Lawrence Ludtke ’51 in Houston, Texas, the Rudders’ longtime family friend Frank Muller ’65 would lead the way with Mrs. Rudder following and MSC director Jim Reynolds bringing up the rear.

As they stepped into the studio, the dark clay statue was waiting, poised more than seven feet over them. Reynolds recalls the moment: “Margaret looked up at the statue of General Rudder and literally collapsed back into my arms.”

Ludtke joined them in his studio where Mrs. Rudder hugged him. She didn’t want to change a thing. The others gave Muller and Mrs. Rudder a few minutes alone with their dear friend and loved one.

It was an emotional day, Muller remembered. Everyone was close to tears. While looking at the statue, Muller overheard Mrs. Rudder saying, “I think I’m failing in love all over again.”

This is a story about heart.

That was no ordinary clay Mrs. Rudder and the others were viewing. Art has the power to move people, much the same way leaders inspire others.

The material that shaped that clay model of Rudder is the very same clay used nearly a century ago to sculpt another monument dedicated to one of Texas A&M’s greatest leaders, Lawrence Sullivan Ross.

This is the story of how the modeling clay from Italian-born sculptor Pompeo Coppini, who crafted the Sul Ross landmark in 1915, literally brought the Rudder statue to life. It’s a story of what Reynolds called “the thread of loyalty that weaves through the history of this school. I don’t think this could have happened anywhere else.”

Margaret Rudder and MSC director Jim Reynolds look up at the clay likeness of Earl Rudder ’32 shortly after Mrs. Rudder saw the finished model for the first time in 1993.

Sculpting a Legacy

1910
18-year-old Waldine Tauch of Brady, Texas goes to learn sculpture with Coppini.

1915
Italian-born sculptor Pompeo Coppini has left San Antonio for Chicago in hopes of getting more work there. He does; he gets the commission to do the Ross statue for Texas A&M. However, after he completes the clay model, a freezing snowstorm keeps him away from his studio. Ross and all his water-based models freeze and collapse. In Italy, he buys tons of oil-based plastasine modeling clay to use from then on.

1919
The Sul Ross Statue was unveiled on the Texas A&M Campus.
THE CLAY

The Lawrence Sullivan Ross clay statue lay in ruins in Chicago one cold day in 1911. Coppini had left San Antonio for the East in hopes of getting more work. He did; a commission to sculpt Ross for Texas A&M. However, with the Ross statue and other art pieces victims of a freezing snowstorm, Coppini swore this was the last time he’d use water-based modeling clay.

He acquired tons of oil-based plastasine clay from Italy to redo the Ross statue, the one now standing on the Texas A&M campus. In Coppini’s career, he would use the clay to model nearly 130 pieces of art around Texas and the United States.

THE PROTEGE

Born in Brady, Texas, Waldine Tauch (pronounced tauk) showed such artistic promise in 1910 that a women’s group raised money to send the 18-year-old to San Antonio to study with Coppini.

Impressed by her sculpting talent, Tauch would accompany the sculptor and his wife to Chicago and New York and later back to San Antonio over several decades.

Following a tradition among sculptors, Coppini handed down his oil-based clay to his most promising student, Tauch.

THE PITCHING PROTEGE

Nearly half a century later, a former Texas A&M scholarship athlete and Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher would return to Texas to begin a new career as a sculptor. Lawrence Ludtke, Larry to his friends, was a sales representative for two sporting goods companies.

At the Coppini Academy in San Antonio, Ludtke found Tauch a willing teacher, and she found someone who could work with Coppini’s clay.
I had begun using the clay even while she was living. She sculpted into her 80s,” Ludtke recalled. “No one else uses this type of modeling clay; it’s very soft and difficult, but I use it exclusively.”

As Tauch had learned from Coppini and been bequeathed the clay, so Ludtke had studied under Tauch and inherited the clay at the end of her career. Ludtke would create dozens of sculptures that would be displayed throughout the United States.

SHAPING AGGIE TIES

Even as Ludtke continued his sporting goods job and expanded his sculpting career, he was drawn back to Texas A&M. His son Erik would graduate as a member of the Class of ’86. Over the years, his Houston studio became a popular fixture on the Memorial Student Center spring student leadership trips.

Reynolds recalled: “I think the real thing that came through for the students is that art is more than just technical expertise with clay or brush. A sculptor works with his hands, his head and his heart.”

Ludtke said he enjoys opening his studio to Aggies, and he has a great time with them. “I have a University of Houston professor who is a neighbor, and I like to have the students do an Aggie yell on his lawn.”

REGAN SMILES IN CAVALRY CLOTHES

Dick Conolly ’37 has been a strong supporter of the visual arts at Texas A&M since his days heading The Association of Former Students when Earl Rudder was president of the school. He shared a love of the arts — and bird dogs — with MSC director Reynolds and the two became friends in the 1980s.

The two men and their wives were guests at the Ludtke’s home one day in 1991. It was Conolly’s first meeting with the sculptor. After supper, Conolly was admiring a small statue of Reagan in cavalry clothes. A 1930s-era member of the Aggie Cavalry Monkey Drill Squad, Conolly liked all things cavalry as well as the former President.

When he asked Ludtke if he could acquire the Reagan, the sculptor explained that only three existed. He also revealed one other startling fact:

“You might be interested to know that the Reagan piece is made with the same clay that Coppini used to model the Ross statue on campus,” Ludtke said.

Reynolds and Conolly turned to each other and each knew what the other was thinking: we need a statue of Earl Rudder made with the same clay.

Conolly recalled what made him so sure about the statue.

“The first thing was Larry’s tremendous ability as an artist; he can bring an individual alive,” Conolly said. “The Reagan statue is magnificent.”

Conolly noted that the Coppini clay had been handed down to an artist with ties to Texas A&M; this was something that you simply couldn’t ignore.

RAISING MONEY TO RAISE A STATUE

The idea of doing a statue of Rudder had been kicked around since the early 1980s, Conolly said. Ludtke noted that Dan Fallon, former dean of liberal arts at Texas A&M, had visited his studio around then. Fallon had commented on the sculptor’s Ernest Hemingway statue as being a good pose for a Rudder piece.
Conolly led the effort to bring in funds for the statue. Having experience with fundraising, he knew it wasn’t going to be easy.

“You just have to call people and ask for the money, but I don’t discourage easily,” Conolly said.

No one turned him down for funds, but he did recall one problem that surfaced as time stretched on without the statue going up.

“Folks would call me, kidding that they wanted their money back since they didn’t see any statue,” Conolly said.

About halfway through the fundraising process, Frank Muller was asked to join the effort to raise money for the statue. The student body president during Rudder’s tumultuous tenure from 1965, Muller remained friends with Rudder and his wife Margaret over the years.

WHY A STATUE?

Muller said he learned a great deal watching General Rudder deal with the difficult changes at Texas A&M under enormous media scrutiny.

“The general was a remarkable man, a visionary who knew the school had to change in order to compete,” Muller said. “Once he knew the right thing to do, he stayed with his convictions even though his decision was very unpopular at the time.”

Muller recalled how intently Rudder would listen to angry criticism, would never get angry himself and would go right back to discussing the basics of why the school had to change. He knew he was right and would not compromise.

Reynolds recalled that not everyone was convinced the university needed a statue of Rudder. With the Rudder Center, why was one needed, some asked.

“However, once we would get a group together and tell them the clay story, it always would get to them.”

BRINGING RUDDER TO LIFE

Sculptor Ludtke never met Earl Rudder. He would depend on photos of Rudder and talks with his widow and his friends to capture the essence of the man. Here was a war hero, one of the few in American history awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, a man whose actions gave impetus for Texas A&M to develop into a world-class university.

“That’s what’s fun, delving into the character of a person,” Ludtke said. “You have to have the soul of the person.”

Muller, who had known Rudder, said that once he got to know Ludtke, he knew he was the one for the job. Muller made many trips to the studio to see various stages of the Rudder clay model.

“Larry is truly an artist who worries about details, a first-class professional who gets up in the middle of the night because he realizes the eyebrows aren’t right,” Muller said.

Not all the work on the statue was serious and somber. Ludtke recalled a meeting early in the process with Mrs. Rudder.

“She told me, ‘This is the last chance for Earl to lose weight,’” Ludtke smiled. “So he did.”

A THIRTY-TON ROCK

Since he was being honored as President of Texas A&M, the decision was made to present Rudder’s statue in civilian clothes, but Ludtke wanted to somehow honor Rudder’s military heroism on D-Day.

The cliffs of Pointe du Hoc in Normandy, France where Rudder’s Rangers stormed up...
100-foot inclines under constant enemy fire played a major role in the success of the World War II D-Day invasion. These cliffs closely resemble that of granite, the same that is quarried in Marble Falls, Texas. Rudder lived for years in the Brady area, just miles from the Texas Granite quarry in Marble Falls.

“We saw the romance there,” Reynolds said.

Reynolds, Ludtke and Conolly traveled to Marble Falls to the Texas Granite company. The company saw the appeal of its stone memorializing the man they considered to be a hometown hero. A deal was made with one condition: the men could have any piece in the yard that had already been quarried and cut.

“Their ‘yard’ was 200 acres with granite scattered all over,” Reynolds recalled with a laugh.

Conolly, Reynolds and Ludtke spent most of a day traipsing over the acres, looking for the perfect piece Ludtke had described.

Then Reynolds called, “How about this one?” to the sculptor as he stood atop a huge slab of granite, rocking it back and forth.

“It looked like the cliffs at Pointe du Hoc,” he said.

The 30-ton piece of granite was “perfect,” Ludtke said.

The granite backdrop representing Rudder’s D-Day role does give more significance to the statue, Conolly added. Rudder didn’t only save a university, he also played a part in saving the American way of life, he said.

“What I’d like for students to think a little bit about when they see these statues is the blessings they have because of what men like Rudder and Ross have done,” Conolly said.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Some time after the dedication ceremonies and the speeches, Mrs. Rudder said to Muller: “We’ve got to come out here sometime to drink some wine with Earl.”

Since alcoholic beverages are off-limits on the Texas A&M campus, Muller could not confirm that such an event ever took place.

Muller can confirm how the statue makes him feel today. Visiting the Rudder statue is like seeing an old friend, not at all like going to Arlington Cemetery or a gravesite, he said.

“I’m happy to go see the statue. It brings only positive things, positive memories. It’s uplifting,” Muller said.

He feels it’s important for younger Aggies to be proud of Rudder.

For Conolly, the Rudder statue reminds him of the man he knew and the changes he brought.

“I can’t help but have a feeling a pride in seeing it,” Conolly said.

Conolly also likes the clay connection between the Rudder and Ross statues. He recalls those years as a freshman student in the early 1930s passing by the Ross statue every day. “I did my share of polishing Sully then,” Conolly said.

THE LEGACY OF THE CLAY

The 74-year-old Ludtke has about a ton and a half of the Coppini clay in his studio. At this stage of his career, he only does work that has meaning for him, he says.

“I would love to do more work for Texas A&M,” Ludtke said.

Ludtke also would like to preserve his studio, as well as his tools and the clay.

An effort is underway at Texas A&M to begin some sort of sculpture-in-residence program with Ludtke, said Reynolds.

Ludtke notes his association with Texas A&M has been wonderful, and he hopes there are more projects in Aggieland.

“There are heroes here that need to be remembered,” Ludtke said.
From idea to statue

THE WASTE MOLD PROCESS

Once the clay model is finished and approved, the sculptor makes a plaster mold over the model.

When it is hard, the mold is removed, cleaned, oiled on the inside, and reassembled. A creamy mixture of plaster is then poured into the mold, and the mold is smoothly rolled to distribute the plaster evenly over the inner surface. The process is repeated until the desired thickness is achieved.

When dry, this newly-formed plaster shell is freed by chipping away the outer mold. The result is a perfect replica of the original model. Because the original clay model and the mold are both destroyed in the process, this is known as a waste mold.

The plaster cast now can be used as a model for further casting in more durable materials such as bronze.

THE BRONZE CASTING

The two principal methods are the sand mold process and the lost-wax process. The first uses a specially prepared sand mold, the second a silica mold.

Each mold has an inside core, built to leave a thin space between itself and the outer mold. The space’s outer contour carries the exact contour of the original cast the mold was made from.

When hot liquid bronze is poured into this space, it takes the shape of the original plaster, resulting in a perfect reproduction. The wax is baked out in an oven. The space in the silica mold is filled with the molten bronze, hence the name lost-wax process.

Patina is the term used for the surface color and quality of bronze and other materials. Artists use acids, heat, and other devices to achieve immediate effects of mellowness, age, and subtle color.