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Rockwell: a legend in bronze 2 new statues are proof of his historic status

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To say he's become larger than life is an understatement. Now, not one but two bronze statues of Mormonism's own "long arm of the law" are proof of his legendary status.

Orrin Porter Rockwell, bodyguard to LDS Church founder Joseph Smith and Utah's first deputy marshal under Brigham Young, figures large in the history of Utah and the West. Beginning this week, his 12-foot likeness will greet motorists traveling I-15 southbound around the Point of the Mountain, as the first bronze statue of the frontiersman is placed on a pile of granite outside a new, 23-acre business park that has taken his name. The Porter Rockwell Business Park, which now includes two buildings with a third in the planning stages, is being built for lease, mainly by high-tech companies looking for ready access to the freeway. Two tenants have already been signed on to occupy what will eventually be nine separate buildings on the site.

The statue, commissioned by S. Devcorp of Midvale, depicts Rockwell doffing his cowboy hat to passers-by with one hand, his 7-foot-long muzzleloader resting comfortably in the other.

It's believed that no one in state history except Brigham Young has more public statuary to honor his memory.
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"If you compare the stories about Porter Rockwell with those of Jesse James or Wyatt Earp or Doc Holliday, (he) has been involved in many more gunfights and controversial events than any of those characters. Because he was involved with the LDS Church, it's kind of been a quiet thing and hasn't been publicized as much," said Bob Trepanier, one of the partners involved in construction of the park, just off I-15 near the Utah State Prison.

A Rockwell fan from way back, Trepanier said he and his partners plan to develop a second Porter's Place restaurant in the same location within the next couple of years. The first one is in Lehi.

It will be followed by construction of a lodge known as the Hot Springs Brewery Hotel. The complex will be something of a re-creation of Rockwell's own hotel of the same name, located near the site of the planned development, Trepanier said. The original contained a saloon, something Trepanier said he's "not so sure about" re-creating.

Rockwell developed his own way station on what was a desolate outcropping between what were then the "Mormon" and the "Gentile" roads to Camp Floyd from Salt Lake City to capitalize on business from both groups. He also operated a Pony Express station at the site, which was later used for overland express.

Trepanier hopes placement of the sculpture will help create a landmark as well as renewed interest in one of Utah's most enigmatic figures.

He's not alone in that vision.

Lehi historians and descendants of Rockwell have plans to place a second bronze cast of the colorful gunman in the city's new Pioneer Park, on the same spot where Rockwell's cabin once stood, this spring.

That sculpture, also literally larger-than-life, was created after local fund-raising efforts, spearheaded by the Lehi Historical Preservation Commission, to honor the man many residents regularly pay homage to at Trepanier's local Porter's Place restaurant on Main Street.

Placement of Rockwell's likeness at the business park this week comes only six months after artists Richard Young and Lena Toritch began work on the statue at their tiny studio and foundry just west of the railyard in downtown Salt Lake City. After several interviews and a lot of research on Rockwell, the two created a small drawing, followed by a clay cast that is one-quarter life size.

"At first we had him waving a raccoon cap, but when we talked to Bob we found out he would have worn a cowboy hat," Young said.

Working steadily on the details, the artists -- who helped re-create the statue of Columbia atop the Salt Lake City-County Building -- said they're confident they've captured the spirit of the colorful Rockwell after viewing several photos of him at various ages.

Legend has it that Rockwell killed more than 100 men during his lifetime. He was accused of trying to assassinate then Gov. Lilburn Boggs of Missouri, who issued the infamous "extermination order" against the Mormons before they were driven from the state.

A convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at age 16, Rockwell served as leader of the first LDS scouting party to enter the Salt Lake Valley and later accompanied Brigham Young on his trips around the West. While Rockwell remained true to his faith until his death of natural causes, he remains one of the most controversial figures in early Mormon history.

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