This sculpture was created from a sandstone boulder which was thought to be near falling onto the busy Pacific Coast Highway near Pacific Palisades, California. After safely removing the rock, the County of Los Angeles sold it to Australian artist Brett Livingstone Strong. Working with the tools of his trade, and watched by thousands who passed his place of work in a shopping mall, he carved the face of John Wayne. When the work was completed, in February, 1979, it was purchased by Tom G. Murphy of Phoenix, Arizona. He displayed it at Grauman’s Chinese Theater in Hollywood for a year and stored it until December, 1985, when he gave it as a gift to Lubbock Christian University. It remained in storage until it was placed here in 1991.

The rough-hewn features of John Wayne emerge from the thirteen-ton rock as a theatrical mask. Strong named his work “Life-Time-Light,” but, upon its placement in this setting, it is renamed “Spirit of Independence” in honor of the pioneer quality of character so instrumental in building the South Plains. Its presence in the Pioneer Gallery should remind all who see it of qualities in the character portrayed by John Wayne, who, many years after his death, still appears on lists of most-admired Americans. In his screen roles he was invariably a man with a code. His screen characters were usually men of the West, of heroic proportions, and capable of facing every situation. He was hard-working, honest, courageous, fiercely independent, God-fearing, and polite (especially to women), never looking for a fight but never running from one. In the minds of many around the world and in this country, he was the symbol of the cowboy (the great figure in American folklore) and therefore symbolic of the American male.

One of his sons said Wayne not only portrayed those qualities but actually had them. When asked how he wanted to be remembered, Wayne once responded with a Spanish epitaph – “Feo, fuerte, y formal,” which means, “He was ugly, he was strong, he had dignity.” Perhaps the same qualities fit this sculpture.

As written by Dr. Steve S. Lemley (posted in LCU Library)
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