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This is part of an occasional series by the Sanpete County Travel and Utah Heritage Highway 89 Alliance on the people and places along U.S. Highway 89.

Annual “Big Daddy Roth” Open House

Hundreds of Iraq-Bound Soldiers to Lead ‘Big Daddy Roth’ Parade, Collect Custom-Designed ‘Rat Fink’ T-Shirts

Some 450 soldiers who will soon be deployed to Iraq will have some special new “uniforms” to take along with them — a “Rat Fink” T-shirt especially designed for them based on an original drawing by the late Ed Roth.

The members of the Utah Army National Guard’s 1/145th field artillery unit will be presented with the shirts by Roth’s widow, Ilene Roth, June 2 during the fifth annual “Big Daddy Roth” open house, which runs May 31 to June 2 in Manti.

Roth also invited the entire infantry to lead the annual ‘Big Daddy’ parade. It starts at 5 p.m. on Saturday and runs down Manti’s Main Street. She doesn’t know how many soldiers will attend, but said all 450 of them are welcome.

Ed Roth was famous for designing and building hotrod cars and for creating the cartoon character “Rat Fink” in the 1960s, a rodent who was featured on posters, T-shirts and other items for years. In 1966, he created a decal for army soldiers being deployed to Vietnam and the image was modified with Ilene Roth’s permission for soldiers in Iraq. This is the first batch of shirts to be handed out to troops going to Iraq.

“Since our local unit, which includes my son, is being deployed in June, I thought it would be great to send Ed’s image on a t-shirt to help them with this war,” says Ilene Roth.

The local guard unit provided input for the custom changes made to the image, and a shirt will be provided to each soldier. In addition, T-shirts will be available on-line and at the reunion for anyone else wanting to show their support, Roth says. “(The reunion) is a great opportunity to give the T-shirts to our guys. I wish them GOOD LUCK!”

Ilene Roth started the annual “Big Daddy Roth” open house after her husband’s death in 2001 to honor his memory and work. It is held each year at the museum that was created to showcase her late husband’s art and memorabilia. The museum, which is an addition on the Roth home, is located at 404 East 300 North, Manti.

An avid hotrod enthusiast from the age of 12, Ed Roth started out by fixing up old cars in his garage. He then moved on to building cars from scratch and quickly became known as an artist rather than a mechanic, with his creations earning the title “Sculptures on wheels.” He financed his passion by making cartoons and T-shirts, including drawings of cars and monsters driving cars, including Rat Fink.

The museum that Ilene Roth created to honor her late husband, which includes displays of Ed Roth’s art work and other memorabilia, will also be open during the reunion and is open to the public year-round by appointment.

Other highlights of the weekend include a “postcard run” Friday night to places that are connected to Ed Roth, and the parade and a car show on Saturday in Manti’s park.

Ed Roth’s life was the subject of a new documentary, Tales of the Rat Fink, by Canadian film maker Ron Mann. The movie stars John Goodman as Big Daddy Roth. It’s a combination biography/cultural commentary on Roth. Goodman narrates the film from heaven, playing Roth as he looks down on Earth with fond memories. The film also includes the voices of Jay Leno, the Smothers Brothers, Matt Groening and Paul Lemat. The real Ed Roth is included in the film in archival footage and new interviews.



The film was screened in Utah last year and in 2006 and 2007 was seen during festivals around the world, most recently in Michigan in March and in April in Singapore.

Ilene Roth said her late husband met with Mann in 2000 when he came to Utah to discuss the movie. She said her husband was very excited about having a movie produced to spotlight his creations with Rat Fink and fiberglass cars.

Ilene Roth met her husband after he moved to Manti from California in 1987. For more information about the Ed "Big Daddy" Roth Open House, call (435) 835-2393. Information is also available online at: <http://www.edroth.com/>

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