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Heritage Center celebrates opening

By Brian Sargent
Staff Writer

Thursday's grand opening of the Edward L. Gaylord-Boone Pickens Oklahoma Heritage Center was more than the debut of a multimillion-dollar museum. It signaled the long-awaited revival of the Mid-Continent Life Insurance Building that was vacant for about a decade.

Ironically, Thursday was 80 years to the day after the building opened for the first time.

About 200 people attended the grand opening at the center, 1400 Classen Drive.

Hayden Patrick Lacey, 10, and Dawson Gorman, 100, were the first visitors on Thursday. They were led into the building by Pickens and members of the Gaylord family, including daughters Christy Everest and Louise Bennett.

Lacey, of Oklahoma City, is a fourth-grader at Will Rogers Elementary School. Gorman, of Oklahoma City, became a centenarian five days ago. He witnessed the raising of the American flag at Iwo Jima while he was aboard a U.S. military ship.

"I am really excited, but a part of me says I'm really nervous. It's just great to be here. If there was a level on excitedness, I'd be a level 10," Hayden said.

Hayden and his mother, Pam Lacey, are featured in Heritage Center's ONEOK Tell Your Story Exhibit. Hayden Lacey told a story about a teacher at a school he attended.

Celebrating Oklahomans

"From the beginning, the continuing theme (of the Heritage Center) has been to celebrate Oklahomans in all walks of life, all disciplines and all ages ... and instill pride in who we are and how we connect. That's been our driving theme, and I hope we've delivered," said Clayton I. Bennett, an Oklahoma Heritage Association board member. Bennett was chairman of the Heritage Center's building committee.

"Another driving element was that this could not be a static museum. It's as unique as anything as I've seen," he said.

The center incorporates interactive, technology-driven exhibits.

There are several touch-screen video monitors and "life tiles," which show a progression of photos morphing into each other.

"This is, I think, aimed at young people. Not that older people won't enjoy it," Pickens said.

Bought from the American Fidelity Insurance Co. in 2001 with a \$3 million gift from Gaylord, the 42,000-square-foot, Mid-Life Continent Life Insurance Building underwent nearly five years of renovations. Pickens later matched Gaylord's gift.

