

The Grand Marshal of Sunday's All-American Hoedown Parade in Campbellsburg is living, walking history. Melvin Smith grew up in Campbellsburg and beside his service in the Navy during World War II has been there all of his life. He said there have been a lot of changes over the better part of this last eight decades, including a town that was once full of businesses that recently saw its only bank close.

While many things about the town he calls home has changed, there is a lot that remains the same, including the friendliness of its people.

Smith seemed happy about being selected as the grand marshal.

In addition to his service in WW II, he also spend time as the town's marshal and worked for more than 30 years as a bus driver and a "Jack-of-all-trades" at West Washington.

As he nears 90 years old, his recall to the stories of his life isn't what it once was, but the memories come back as his wife Jo Ann helps him to remember.

Smith quit school at the age of 16 to join the Navy.

He said after very little training they were sent to the battle lines of World War II.

Once out to sea, Smith said he was so sea-sick that he didn't eat for the first week. Then when he finally decided he wasn't going to make it if he didn't eat something else happened.

"I sat down and was ready to try to force something down and one of the other men got sick right across from me and any appetite I had was gone after that," he said.

Smith finally did eat and adjusted to life at sea.

He tells story of him and his shipmates docking and spending time off of the USS Cyrene (AGP-13) when it sank. He said the news gave his family quite a scare.

"I got called to the office and it turns out one of my brothers heard our ship had sank and he surprised me and came to check on me," Smith said.

Smith also recalls time spent in the forest at New Guinea and interacting with the natives there.

When asked if a small-town boy from Indiana was nervous about socializing with head hunters, Smith smiled.

"No they were pretty curious about us, too," he said. "I would take them trinkets and things like that and they were really happy to see us. They would even kind of follow us to a certain point to make sure we made it back safe."

While in the service Smith served with a couple of well known fellows, famous comedian Don Wickles and then later with John F. Kennedy.

Smith said he wasn't surprised that Wickles ended up in comedy as he spent a lot of time at sea making others laugh.

After the war, Smith returned to Campbellsburg.

He spent time working on the rail-road and eventually was laid-off from that job, which opened the door to him working at West Washington.

Smith and his wife Jo Ann live on Oak Street in Campbellsburg and when the town had a house decoration contest for the hoedown, they were shoe-ins to win every year.

They have spent many years watching the annual parade make its way in front of their house and now look forward to sitting at the front of it.

About the Cyrene

(Information about the USS Cyrene was taken from wikipedia)

USS Cyrene (AGP-13) was a motor torpedo boat tender for the United States Navy. She was laid down as Cape Farewell, a Maritime Commission type (C1-A) hull under a Maritime Commission contract, at Pusey and Jones Corp., Wilmington, Delaware.

Cyrene was launched 8 February 1944 as Cape Farewell, sponsored by Mrs. G. L. Coppage. She was acquired by the Navy on 28 April 1944, and was commissioned 27 September 1944 with Commander F. A. Munroe, Jr., United States Naval Reserve, in command.

Service history

Departing Norfolk, Virginia 10 November 1944, Cyrene arrived at Manus on 13 December to escort two squadrons of motor torpedo boats to Hollandia, New Guinea. She then sailed on convoy duty to Leyte, arriving 1 January 1945.

Cyrene then served as tender for motor torpedo boats, and on 17 January 1945 became flagship for Commander, Motor Torpedo Boat Squadrons, 7th Fleet. After the war ended, she sailed from Samar on 21 December 1945 and arrived at San Francisco on 7 January 1946, reporting to the 12th Naval District for repair work in decommissioning small craft. Cyrene was decommissioned 2 July 1946 and delivered to the War Shipping Administration for disposal the same day.

As of 2005, no other ship in the United States Navy has been named Cyrene.

One of her lifeboats is now in use at Dover, England, where it has been converted into a live-aboard vessel.

Don Wrickles photo and photo of USS Cyrene were taken from the wikipedia Web site.