

Paul Willis is a Pearl Harbor survivor and career Navy man

By: LaRAYNE WATTS

Paul Willis was born in Hoquiam April 14, 1917, to Henry and Mattie Willis. His father died early, and after his mother's departure his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. N. P. Willis adopted him.

Paul first attended Washington Elementary school in East Hoquiam. When his grandparents died, his Aunt Pearl (married to Paul Myhrs) agreed to take care of him. They moved to Raymond and brought the Commercial Hotel (the freeway now covers the site where the hotel stood at the corner of the Highway 101 and Commercial). After that Paul went to school in Raymond and graduated from Raymond High School in 1934 in a class of about 65 students.

During the sixth grade he recalls "Our principal, Mr. Johnson, was replaced near the end of the school year after funds raised through students played disappeared. The plays we participated in helped our confidence and ability to project ourselves when necessary."

The next step was junior high. Paul said, "Junior high school was in a separate building and consisted of the seventh and eighth grades. At this time we were fortunate in having two male teachers, Mr. Beck and Mr. Rude, who headed up a Boy Scout program that helped to bring the boys from different areas of town together."

He remembers one occasion when the scout had a camping trip on Smith Creek. A storm came up, and the wind and the rain blew the tent down. Everyone scrambled out. Paul says, "In the morning when everyone was looking for me, I crawled out from under to be thrown in the river."

He also remembers the hazing of freshmen by the sophomores, "Hazing consisted of being held while our hair was being cut in a very atrocious manner."

Because of being needed to work at the hotel, Paul was unable to participate in school sports programs, except in baseball. He was a mascot for the Raymond Town Team and competed in American Legion Junior League and high school competition. Paul recalls, "Because I couldn't compete with other students in sports, I really enjoyed winning the boys' 100 yard dash for ages 16 to 18 at the all nations July fourth celebration in Raymond in the early 1930s."

According to Willis, "When I attended high school I knew that I would have to make it on my own so I took every subject that would help, including typing."

When he joined the Navy in 1936, they sent him to classes to enter the Naval Academy. "When the instructor stated that this was the beginning of a career that would last a lifetime, I stated that I intended to return home after four years, so he excused me," Willis said. "Later the typing classes that I had taken in high school opened the door. In 1937 I attended the Navy Shorthand School and ended up in the flag office of Admiral Husband E. Kimmel."

Admiral Kimmel relieved Admiral J.O. Richardson Feb. 11, 1941, as chief of operations at Pearl Harbor.

Paul remembers, "My wife, Ardelle, whom I married in California in 1938, joined me in Honolulu in March 1941. December 7th found me asleep at my residence. We were awakened by sounds of anti-aircraft guns firing in the vicinity of Pearl Harbor." Paul jumped into a car and raced at full speed to the submarine base, where his office was located. Paul said, "Within five minutes our men were fighting back with everything available. There were no cowards at Pearl Harbor. The attack left 2,113 Navy men and Marines dead and another 987 wounded in the battered sunken hulls of ships in the oil-covered water of the harbor."

Admiral Nimitz arrived at Pearl Harbor Dec. 25th, 1941 Willis continued his duties under Admiral Nimitz and rose to Officer in Charge. In June 1946, he returned to the states. Paul also saw service in Korea before retiring from the Navy in August 1956.

He, his wife, and their four children settled in San Diego and Paul went to work for the San Diego School District, where he spent the next twenty years.

With all of his children graduated from college and single one again, Paul decided to return home to Raymond. He worked at Coast Oyster until 1979 when he decided to retire and travel and visit relatives. He met and married the former Patricia Hynes, who had been a freshmen at RHS when he was a senior.

They spent time traveling, spending winters in San Diego and summers in Raymond. After Patti's death in 1998, Paul has remained in San Diego with his children and grandchildren and keeps busy with volunteer activities.

Paul's advice to this year's seniors is, "Continue your education and set goals that may not seem attainable, but hard work will ensure success."



RHS Alumnus Paul Willis, 1934