

Winter 2014 Issue

Joseph Manly Hendrickson

A Profile of Service and Community Spirit – by Chris Robinson



"Nick" Joseph M. Hendrickson, at his home in Landenberg with the White Clay Creek flowing

Joseph Manly Hendrickson loves his home town of Landenberg. He was born there in 1926 when a nearby mill made buttons from oyster shells, the Pomeroy & Newark train serviced its small railroad station, the American flag displayed 48 stars and Calvin Coolidge was president. He grew up in a mill house, served two years in WWII with the US Merchant Marines then returned home to raise his family in the home he grew up in. Over the years Mr. Hendrickson endeared the community with his hospitality, stories and shared his home along the White Clay Creek with all. He is a humble, family man who enjoys the company of others, cares for all animals, tells great stories and fondly reminisces the local history and natural serenity of Landenberg.

US Merchant Marine Service

"Nick", as he is popularly known since he was a boy among many Landenberg residents, remembers as if it was yesterday of that late winter day in 1944 when he and his boyhood friend, Donald Barns, anxiously went to the nearest Government Recruiting Office. They wanted to serve their county and at the same time see the world. The Navy or the US Merchant Marines were their "ticket". Their respective physical heights, however, predetermined their choice; taller than Donald, Nick could and did joined the US Merchant Marines while the Navy deemed the smaller Donald a perfect fit for their submarine vessels. After training at the US Maritime Service Station in Sheepheads Bay, Brooklyn, NY, Nick boarded his first US Merchant Marine ship and headed for dangerous waters far away from the tranquil waters of Landenberg.



Poster recruiting sailors for the US Merchant Marines during WWII. Over 240,000 mariners signed up.

He did, indeed, "see the world"; from the bow of several US Merchant Marine transport ships, known during the war as "Liberty ships". From 1944 to 1946 Nick circumnavigated the world

twice, each time crossing the Suez and Panama Canals connecting the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans. More extraordinary is that he survived to tell about his US Merchant Marine combat service. Not popularly known is that these WW2 mariners suffered the highest casualty rate compare to other military services: An astounding 1 in 26 sailors died while transporting ammunition, medicines, food rations, gasoline, aviation fuel, tanks, airplanes, trucks, amphibious craft, jeeps and other critical materials for the war effort. US Merchant Marine transport ships were integral for every allied invasion during the war, from Normandy to Okinawa.

From the moment a Liberty ship "crossed the bar", and thereby leaving the safety of an American port, its entire crew were on the front line. All sorts of enemy fire assaulted these Liberty ships: submarines, surface raiders, mines, bombers, kamikaze, and land-based artillery. Nick served on several large ships carrying war material freight; "William Bradford", "Thomas Stone", "Richard Hopkins", and on several tankers carrying fuel such as the "Milford Barrow" and the "SS Great Meadow". These and other liberty ships took Nick through hostile waters to ports of call in France, England, Argentina, Brazil (where the mountain top Christ the Redeemer statue could be sighted from far away from port), Venezuela, Italy, South Africa (where the mariners spent one month on leave in beautiful Cape Town), Russia, Guadalcanal and Okinawa. Returning to port of New York was especially emotional for Nick and his crew mates when their Liberty ship passed



A Liberty ship, the USMM O'Brian.

by the Statue of Liberty, or as she was fondly referred to "their girlfriend". In these ports thousands of tons of material and, sometimes, troops were successfully delivered. Between each destination, though, watching for enemy fire dominated the sailor's duties on deck.

Among his duties on deck Nick manned the 22 caliber anti-aircraft gun, and at times fired the gun so much that smoke obscured enemy targets, mostly aircraft. These guns represented the extent of the ships firepower. There were no other guns. US Navy escort cruisers provided their primary protection by circling the moving flotilla of merchant ships guarding them with their anti-aircraft guns and depth charges to ward off or destroy the most deadly threat, submarine torpedoes. While in the Mediterranean Sea on their way to supply allied forces in Russia, Nick recalls witnessing one of their 200 foot merchant tanker ships get hit by a torpedo: "Stood straight up, its rudder visible and went straight down, then oil coming up".

The mariners were relentlessly on watch for submarines. Their ships were almost sitting ducks without the protection of the US Navy. Quoting from the United States Merchant Marine document:" Over 1,500 ships were sunk, with 1 in 8 mariners losing their ship. Casualties were kept secret during the war to avoid providing information to the enemy and to keep mariners at sea." Asked if he was scared while serving on these Liberty ships Nick replied as a matter of fact:

“Initially, yes, for a day or two. But, hell, when you sleep on top of it – tons of explosive material – you get used to it.”

His attitude was similar to many unsung and courageous sailors of that Great War. He kept the faith and delivered the critical materials to win the war. The allied nations could not have won the War without these “US liberty ships” with their courageous crew. Nick survived the perilous routes of the US Merchant Marines where more than 9,200 mariners were killed and more than 11,000 wounded. In late 1946 when most of the US Merchant Marine ships had completed post war missions Nick was honorably discharged and returned to civilian life in his home town.

Landenberg



Nick standing on the Landenberg Bridge. Note RR Bridge behind him.

Landenberg is a small and charming former mill town defined by the White Clay Creek rushing through it, a bridge, a country store, a church and a hotel and several mill houses. The oldest of four sons and two daughters his parents raised them all in a mill house that his grandfather and father lived, situated along the creek opposite from the Landenberg Hotel. Nick recalls childhood memories about the operating woolen mill and button mill, and listening to stories of the closed bone mill just a sprint down the creek from his home. He remembers the old metal Truss bridge that provided an easy walk across the creek to Landenberg’s very convenient country store and the adjacent hotel with its sometimes rowdy natives at

the bar. Or walking up the steep Landenberg road to St. Francis Church and serving as an altar boy for Sunday Mass. And of those early springtime mornings with trout fishing along the creek flowing past their house, followed by summertime swimming and wintertime ice skating.

One of his earliest memories of Landenberg is hearing the hissing and clanking of railroad steam engines coming through the valley and watching them pass close by his house on the lower Pomeroy & Newark track or the upper Wilmington & Western track. Sometimes Nick and other youngsters placed pieces of toy gun roll caps on the rails for the explosive “pop, pop, pop” sound when the heavy and slow moving train wheels crushed them on their way to Wilmington or Newark. Other times they helped the W&W railroad engineers manually rotate the large steam engine on the turntable located just up the hill from his home. A particularly fond memory occurred at the age of six when his mother walked him to the Landenberg Train Station to pick up a surprise: a desk delivered just for him.



The former Landenberg Railroad Station located a short walking distance north along the tracks from the Hendrickson’s home.

After his WWII maritime service Nick returned home and married his sweet heart, Betty Mae George, from Glasgow, Delaware. They raised two daughters and two sons. Nick work for the National Volcanize Fibers as foreman for its paper mill in Yorklyn, Delaware. He oversaw the process of recycling rags into quality of paper used for its fiber products. He worked there for more than forty years missing only two days.

Over the decades Nick and Betty May beautified their homestead with plantings of colorful flowers, trees and shrubs and built several ponds. They shared their peaceful home with surrounding animals and lured countless ducks that eventually adopted the Hendrickson habitat as their home due to the dependable supply of feed they found there along the creek bank.

After the railroad tracks were dismantled and the Hendrickson's acquired adjacent land containing sections of the former tracks, Nick constructed ponds to compliment his wife's landscape of wildflowers. He piped some of the hillside's clean, cool spring water to fill two small ponds for caught golden trout and to a larger woodland pond for a variety of eager amphibians and endless entertainment for his children and their friends. Some of the spring water was piped to their house. The



One of several ponds Nick built for Betty Mae.

locals called this water "rock juice" because it tasted so good. Mrs. Hendrickson's homemade coffee and ice tea became very popular with the growing and extended Hendrickson family and friends. Particularly so among fishermen. Each spring when the White Clay streams were populated with trout dozens of local and faraway fishermen came to its banks. Some of the lucky fishermen cast their line by the Hendrickson's home. There they imbibed Betty Mae's hot and satisfying coffee all the while trying to beat Nick's phenomenal record catching the allowed quota in the shortest time, 6 trout. After Nick reached his quota, he would stop fishing and then sit on the deck sipping his wife's delicious coffee while watching others enjoy what he so much enjoyed during his many decades living in Landenberg, the forever peaceful lullaby of the flowing White Clay Creek.



Frequent visitors to the Hendrickson home, deer and fishermen.

Medals

Mr. Hendrickson received many medals and letters of Honor for his US Merchant Marine service. To name a few: A Victory medal for service during WW II by the War Shipping Administration; a letter from President Truman recognizing him "for the most severs task"; a Commemoration

medal from the allied countries of France and Russia thanking him “for the WW II victory of the Great Patriot’s War against Nazi Germany. Personal sacrifice of each soldier will forever remain in our memory.”

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Wild ducks on the White Clay Creek stopping by Nick’s family home.

“Nick” Joseph Manly Hendrickson is 88 years old and resides in a retirement home not too far from his beloved Landenberg. Recently, the author had the privilege to interview Mr. Hendrickson and to meet his daughter, Joan Hanna. New Garden Township recently purchased the Hendrickson property and is preparing it as a preserve. Volunteers from the Friends of the New Garden Trails are building a trail there as

part of a larger Township trail system, and constructing a garden picnic area adjacent to the White Clay Creek in honor of “Nick” Joseph Manly Hendrickson and his wife, Betty Mae.