

The Mount Airy News

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**Gwyn served country in W.A.V.E.S.
as Naval officer during World War II**

**By WENDY BYERLY
Staff Writer**

MOUNT AIRY — After spending the majority of her adult life in Tennessee and New York City, Blanch Gwyn returned to Mount Airy several years ago by accident and enjoyed it so much she decided to stay for good.

"The Great Depression was about the time I got out of high school, and it was a depression," said Gwyn. "I got a degree in business because it gave you two choices — you could teach or you could work in an office. I never did teach. I didn't have all the patience in the world, so I thought I might kill someone."

After Gwyn graduated from the Women's College of the University of North Carolina (now UNC-Greensboro), she heard about a job at Tennessee Eastman (part of Eastman Kodak) in Kingsport, Tenn., through a friend, so she applied and got the job.

"I went on military leave from that toward the end of World War II and joined WAVES. WAVES was the name of the first women part of the Navy. It stands for Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services and was later made a regular part of the Navy," explained Gwyn.

"The Navy's purpose in taking in women was to release men for sea duty and put women in shore duty jobs,"

said. "They were looking for officers for the WAVES and came to Bristol, Tenn., and I went up there one awful hot day and took an examination. They didn't call it recruitment, they called it procurement."

"I had to go to Richmond, Va., for a physical examination, and then they ordered me to midshipman school at Smith College," she continued.

When she finished schooling, she was an ensign, the first officer position in the Navy.

"I was an expeditor and mainly worked with electronic equipment like gun fire controls. When a ship would come to port damaged, I would get in touch with the company that had the contract with the Navy and order parts to replace damaged ones and had them sent to the shipyard where it would be fixed."

Once the war was over, Gwyn stayed in the Naval reserves, serving her two-week annual duty and taking correspondence courses to earn her 50 points a year to stay in.

"While I was in the reserves, I continued to be promoted. I retired as a lieutenant commander, which is the equivalent to an Army major," reported Gwyn.

When Gwyn finished her active service (after about two years) and went into reserves, she got a call from Eastman. "They asked if I wanted to

work in New York City so I did advertising and marketing for the southern part of Eastman," she said.

She lived in New York City for 25 years. "Two years before I was going to retire from Eastman they had a little advertising in Tennessee and they needed someone to do technical writing. Since I was a southerner, they asked me if I would like to go back.

"See, when I first went up there it was safe, but it had gotten to where it wasn't safe on the streets anymore," she

explained, "so I took the train and retired from there."

"My younger sister and I had a house on the mountain (north of Mount Airy) and coming back to Tennessee let me spend weekends there in the warmer months."

Gwyn told the story of how she accidentally ended up in Mount Airy again. "I never planned to come back to Mount Airy. You might say it was an accident."

"I had just retired — at the first of April — and was going to live on the mountain in

warm months so I could work on my golf game. I didn't know where I was going to live in the winter yet," she said. "I went back to Tennessee for a get together with friends from New York. It was wet and I slipped and broke a leg and was laid up."

"My family wouldn't let me stay by myself and so I stayed with my brother in Winston-Salem," continued Gwyn. "It came fall and I thought I would get out of there since they had family coming for the holidays. I had some old friends who lived up here, so I took an apartment at Country Club Condos."

She said she thought it was just going to be for the winter. "I enjoyed it so much that I stayed on, and eventually got this place in Ridgcrest when they first opened."

Gwyn served as a Sunday school teacher and deacon and elder at First Presbyterian Church of Mount Airy, where she is a life-long member, when she came back.

"When I came back here I was astounded at how many Gwyns are in the phone book, but I'm not related to them. My father's home was Idlewild on Pipers Gap Road, and his family is from Elkin. My mother is from Oak Ridge, and her family helped start the military academy there."

While she has no immediate family of her own, she

said, "As far as marriage, I had a couple of narrow escapes, but I was focused on my career. I do have six or seven nieces and nephews and some great-nieces and great-nephews."

"Since I am the only one left in my generation, they tell me I'm the matriarch of the family," she commented with a smile.

While Gwyn is a dog lover — she owned a Shih Tzu named Skooter and prior to Skooter she had a little black and white dog named Mercy she obtained from the animal shelter — she told a most humorous story of something she saw one time in New York.

"There isn't much that turns the heads of people from New York, but one time I was walking and there was a man walking a chicken on a leash in New York City. Even in New York where they don't notice anything people were turning around looking at him."

"My favorite thing about New York was all of the entertainment — like music. My mother studied music from the time she was a little girl, and I heard a lot of classical music from the time I was little because she played it," she commented. "Also, there were educational opportunities for just about everything in New York. It was very interesting working there too."

Profile

Name: Blanche Gwyn

Age: 88

Hometown: Mount Airy

Occupation: Retired from Eastman Chemical Products Inc.

Family: Two late brothers; two late sisters; several nieces and nephews; and several great-nieces and great-nephews

Education: High school in Mount Airy; Women's College of North Carolina (now UNC-Greensboro); B.S. and Master's degrees from Columbia University, New York

Hobbies: Reading and music

Favorite food: Apples and most everything else

Favorite music: Classical, jazz and Broadway show type music

Favorite books: The Sea Around Us by Rachel Carson and mystery novels

Favorite T.V. show: Pet Psychic, "because I like dogs."