



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Wilbert Kalmbach will finally get to walk in a Clark College graduation ceremony Thursday. He received his diploma in 1969 but didn't get a chance to take part in the ceremony. He also did not walk in his high school ceremony because of World War II.

March of a Penguin to end soon, in triumph

Clark alumnus will get long-delayed ceremony

By **HOWARD BUCK**
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Come Thursday, east Vancouver resident Will Kalmbach, 82 years young, should finally get closure on something begun long ago.

Three times in life, the gregarious North Dakota native missed out on graduation due to personal circumstance and world history.

Now, he'll walk with about 350 other Clark College students during commencement ceremonies at the Amphitheater at Clark County. And he'll finally hear "Wilbert Kalmbach" — there's no middle name — announced on stage as his family proudly watches.

That's a full 40 years after he actually received his Clark diploma, and 62 years after he took his first math and English classes at the school.

"It's really special. Mercy!" the retired Camas paper mill employee said, laughing inside the comfortable Fairway Village home he shares with his wife, Rose. His story will be told Thursday with a video tribute and brief speech, his reserved seat onstage next to school leaders.

"I'm a dignitary. Can you believe that?" he said, cracking into a wide smile.

The long-over due marriage of achievement and applause came after Kalmbach, an avid photographer during his post-World War II days at Clark, answered the school's solicitation for

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Did you know?

■ Will Kalmbach earned his Clark College diploma in 1969 at age 42. Clark's oldest graduates were 85 and 84 years old when they were awarded associate degrees in 2003 and 1991, school records show.

Grad:

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historic photos as it prepared to mark its 75th anniversary.

Significantly, his tale mirrors the history of Clark College, and Vancouver itself. Which didn't escape the notice of Barbara Kerr, Clark's communications and marketing director, as the two pored over his pictures.

At age 16 in June 1943, Kalmbach left his hometown Wishek, N.D. He followed his older brother, Daniel, who was lured west from Great Depression-wracked sharecropping life by abundant jobs at Vancouver's Kaiser shipyard, then in full wartime frenzy.

Kalmbach spent his junior year attending the old Vancouver High School, on Main Street.

But the would-be engineer worried he might be called into active military duty before finishing the physics, algebra and trigonometry courses he needed. So, he took up a friend's idea, and the two moved back to Dickinson, N.D. for his senior year.

By March 1945, Uncle Sam called. Teachers made sure he took all his final exams before he shipped out in April, and later mailed his Dickinson Central High School diploma. But he'd missed out on graduation.

As a U.S. Army Air Corps cadet, Kalmbach finished basic training and learned to pack parachutes for flyers. But the U.S. victory in Europe in May pulled the plug on developing more aviators, so he never graduated from that program, either.

There was modest adventure serving at Manila's Nichols air base in the Philippines, as the Allies finished off the war. Kalmbach packed parachutes for crews who flew over the "Burma hump" to launch raids on Japan (each custom-fitted to the man's build), then stayed through 1946. Only once on a local flight was he nearly forced to jump from a plane himself, he said.

Jobs were scarce in postwar Vancouver upon his return, so classes at Clark seemed a good idea.

Kalmbach pursued engineering, with photography courses on the side — plus track (he was a sprinter) and chorus — until the subtleties of the slide rule confounded him, he said. Fortunately, he'd found work at the Crown-Zellerbach mill that would evolve into a 36-year career, mostly testing new paper products in the research and development area.

Kalmbach picked up several night courses at Clark in the 1950s to build his skills and résumé. Some years later, he fig-



STEVEN LANE/The Columbian
Wilbert Kalmbach's high school and college diplomas.

ured he'd earned enough credits to graduate. And, when Clark officials agreed a waiver for physical education credits made sense, a Clark diploma soon arrived in the mail.

That was in the summer of 1969, too late for commencement. The next spring, Kalmbach sat and watched his son, Steven, graduate from Clark with a two-year degree and auto tech certificate. But his own name wasn't a part of the 1970 ceremony, either.

Decades later, the lapse didn't gnaw at him — much.

"I didn't think any more about it. I was satisfied," said Kalmbach, now a grandfather of three. But the past resurfaced when he met up with Kerr and relived Clark memories.

What better way to help close the book on Clark's 75th year, Kerr and officials asked.

"Boy, she jumped on that," Kalmbach said, laughing.

And so on Thursday, here come the speeches, the gowns and tassels, the playing of "Pomp and Circumstance." Only this time, fate will play in Kalmbach's favor.

Kerr calls his belated graduation walk "icing on the cake" for Clark's anniversary year.

As it happens, the grandson of Will's brother, Gary — Richard Alan Kalmbach — also will receive an associate of arts transfer degree, one of nearly 1,300 degrees and certificates awarded to Penguin graduates this spring.

It will be an extended family affair, then. And modern digital cameras will capture the long-awaited moment, replacing the classic 4x5 inch Ansco "speed graphic" camera Kalmbach once toted around campus.

Many of those vintage photos have been donated to the Clark County Historical Museum collection.

"I'm happy," Kalmbach said.

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