

Preserving the Legacy of Ernie Pyle

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by Cathleen Nine

In a small Hoosier town surrounded by corn fields, sits a simple two-story farmhouse marking the unpretentious beginnings of a legendary storyteller.

Perhaps it is fitting that the man, famous for capturing the experience of the average soldier, would begin his life on a tenant farm. Today, the Ernie Pyle State Historic site located in Dana, Ind., a quiet town where grain elevators dominate the skyline, is dedicated to preserving the legacy of Ernie Pyle.

The State Historic Site boasts a visitor's center and a historic house to tour, preserved to be similar to what the Pyle family would have experienced around the time of Pyle's birth in the year 1900.

Next to the Greek Revival farmhouse that the Pyle family rented are two Quonset huts, similar to the inexpensive huts used in military operations during World War II, set up as a tribute to Pyle's time as a war correspondent among the troops. Inside the huts is the Ernie Pyle Visitors Center that seeks to capture the life of Pyle through artifact displays, a theater presentation and phone stations where guests can hear his story.

Anyone familiar with images of Pyle will be delighted to find iconic images on display: his familiar knit cap and one of many typewriters he used. It is also noted in the display that Pyle used the two-finger system to type his stories, whether on the battlefield or behind a desk.

The center gives a clear image of the career of a journalist dedicated to the common experiences of soldiers and his fellow human beings wherever he went. Pyle is most famous for his syndicated daily wartime columns during World War II, which let those on the home front understand what their loved ones were going through on the beaches of Europe, the sands of North Africa and the islands of the Pacific.

Before the war, Pyle wrote a column called "Hoosier Vagabond" that was carried by Scripps Howard newspapers. With this column, Pyle traveled across the country telling the story of the people he met along the way – perfecting his storytelling skills, which he would later become famous for as a war correspondent. The visitor's center has copies of

"Hoosier Vagabond" for readers to peruse at their leisure and copies of his later columns as well.

Some of the highlights of the museum that bring to light Pyle's life are a Zippo lighter with his initials, his passport from 1942, a posthumously awarded Purple Heart bestowed upon him by an act of Congress, and a telegram to his father about Pyle's death by a sniper's bullet.

These artifacts combine to give the visitor an idea of this respected journalist. In one of the last displays, guests should get a chuckle from the coat that Pyle wore to his meeting with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. The modest Pyle, not wanting to spend money on civilian clothing, wore a coat that was so worn it had holes in the sleeves at the elbows.

Visitors also learn that Pyle was quite a celebrity in his time, appearing on the covers of *Time*, *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. The museum has touching displays, including the musette bag that was carried by Pyle at the time of his death and the sign: "At this spot, the 77th Infantry lost a buddy," erected by the troops after his demise.

The fact that the troops considered him to be a buddy is not surprising considering he came from simple roots, despite his fame. The house, a monument to Pyle, is plainly decorated and furnished to reflect the modest lifestyle of the Pyle family. The house reflects the early 1900s when Pyle would have been spending his time there. It is a small house that includes a basement with an interactive display for school tours. The short house tour offers a glimpse into Pyle's youth.

Taking one last look of the Pyle home, with its plain white walls and the Quonset huts next to it, a visitor can fully comprehend the man who was a "buddy." "No man in this war has so well told the story," President Harry Truman said on Pyle's passing.