

# A ROAST ON THE MELLON

by M. L. Graham

Steve Winkenwerder for the Clinton Street Quarterly

Tethered to Astoria's Pier 2, the milk white Coast Guard Cutter "Mellon" stood in contrast to the dense fog that obscured the Columbia River. The three hundred and seventy-eight foot cutter was built in 1968 and was named for Andrew W. Mellon, who was secretary of the treasury from 1921-1932. It would provide my passage up the Columbia, one of twenty-seven ships that would take part in the annual Portland Rose Festival.

Sharing the flight deck with a bright orange H-52 helicopter, our group of Astoria-based Coast Guardspeople and assorted civilians listened to a brief orientation by a ship's officer. Then the gang plank was hoisted aboard, our moorings unfastened, and we were underway.

It was an easy passage. The mellow, low decibal hum of the engines was as smooth as the ride. Able to make thirty knots on the open ocean, the Mellon slipped upriver at a gentle thirteen.

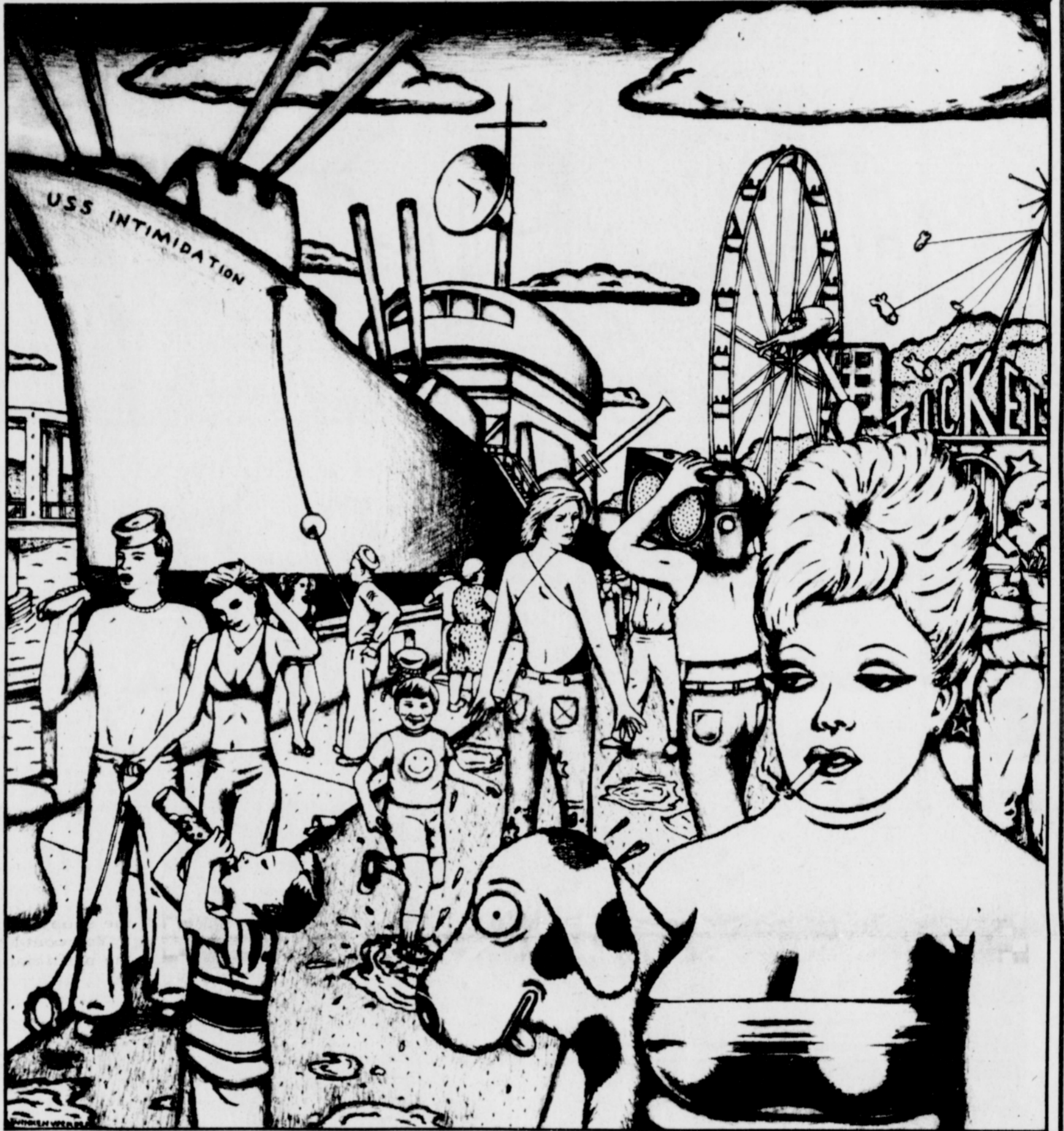
The crew was composed of eighteen officers and one hundred and forty-five enlisted: about fifteen were women, almost half of them officers. Home based in Seattle, the Mellon had just finished maneuvers with the navy in San Diego and after its holiday in Portland would embark for summer duty in Alaskan waters.

The fog lifted shortly inland from Astoria, making way for bright sun and tufts of cumulus clouds. A stiff wind blew across the bow when we started out, but further upriver it became a warm breeze. The sun's heat baked the steel decks and we began peeling off layers of clothing.

Midway between Cathlamet and Longview, a Coast Guard Sikorsky HH3F helicopter from the Astoria air base buzzed the Mellon. In a grand display of showoff flying the chopper demonstrated a rescue landing at sea, setting down like a fat bird in the calm waters of the Columbia. Then it sprang into the air and roared past our stern, flying back downriver in search of other vessels to impress.

The shores were lined with people fishing, which prompted one of our number to claim it as an example of the disastrous Oregon/Washington employment picture. Waves of children watched us intently as we inched up the river. One happy chap on the Washington side rang a bell from the deck of his house. The Mellon responded with an unexpected (by us landlubbers, at least) blast from its horn. I caught a glimpse of a male nudist standing near the river, his naked hull gleaming as white as the Mellon.

Noon mess was a baron of roasted beef on paper plates. After filling my boilers I left the galley for the main deck — and like running into a concrete wall I looked straight out at the huge bulk of the Trojan nuclear plant's cooling tower. It rose above us like a watchtower on the Rhine, and I could not have been filled with more foreboding if a Valkyrie appeared on its ramparts. Suddenly thirteen knots was much too slow. China Syndrome thoughts played through my mind as we plowed toward the old river port of Saint Helens. Its namesake, the volcano, belched a plume of steam high into the air. An announcement from claimed the display was compliments of the U. S. Geological Survey.



The closer we got to Portland the more river traffic we encountered and the higher rose the temperature. The sun's heat on the ship's white steel hull and deck roasted us. We left the Columbia for the Willamette and were welcomed by fireboats which shot fountains of water into the sky. Party boats crewed by half-naked revelers raced in our wake. One by one the city's bridges cranked up for us to pass through, bestowing a feeling of enormous power and prestige upon all aboard. A crew of gandy-dancers working on the Steel Bridge in eighty degree heat shouted down at us, "Hey, it's Miller Time!"

After passing the Burnside and Morrison Bridges

we eased toward the Portland seawall. We passed the carnival which was set up for the Rose Festival along the waterfront. Near the Hawthorne Bridge the Mellon displayed its unique retractable bow propulsion unit; a side-thrusting effect that allowed the ship to move sideways and dock unaided by tugboats. After eight hours the voyage ended as quietly as it began. After bidding our hospitable crew adieu, we left our sealegs behind and merged into the crowds ashore.

M. L. Graham is an Arch Cape writer whose only previous experience aboard a deck was the Port Angeles ferry.



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