

# Marching in memory: Alton hosts oldest Memorial Day parade in the country

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**ALTON** - The longest-running **Memorial Day parade** in the nation made its 149<sup>th</sup> lap around **Upper Alton** Monday.

That honor belongs to Alton, who began having Memorial Day parades immediately following the Civil War. The parade is sponsored by the **East End Improvement Association** with help from the **Upper Alton Improvement Association, Inc.** and the **Optimist Club**. The staging area for the parade was in the parking lot of **Alton Middle School**, in the area referred to as “the pit.” Most of the marchers and floats honored those who have served the United States through military service, with an emphasis on those who did not make the return trip home.

**Parade Grand Marshal Art Williams** represented a generation of United States veterans whose numbers have been on a sharp decline. Williams served in New Guinea, on the Pacific Front of World War II. He rode in a vintage maroon Mercedes-Benz convertible. He was honored to be chosen, and proudly held the plaque he was given by **Alton Township Supervisor Don Huber**.

Williams originally hails from Oregon and moved 23 times in 35 years while working for Shell Oil Company. He came to the River Bend area in 1974, when he was named manager of the Wood River Refinery. He retired in 1982, and decided to stay in the area because of the people.

“Every place has its advantages,” Williams said before the parade. “The weather is not the advantage here, but the people are. The people here are the advantage.”

The **United States Veterans Foundation of Alton** marched in the parade to honor veterans, especially recent veterans who may find themselves disenfranchised upon their return to civilian life. The group's commanding officer, **Chad Reese**, said the group was created to get veterans away from places like bars and being alone at home and help them gather as a community.

“It started with our CEO, **Jason Thompson**, and CFO, **Greg Love**, going to a local VFW and seeing lots of older veterans, but not a lot of younger ones,” Reese said. “So they started a group to help get veterans out and about.”

Reese said the group had eight core members and a large network of additional volunteers. He said the group's mission was to provide veterans with opportunities to network and have fun through community events and outdoor adventures. The group also works to provide veterans with service dogs.

The **McFall family** of Alton had a bright yellow Mustang covered in American flags. **William McFall** was dressed as Abraham Lincoln, and a quote from the late president was proudly displayed on the door of their car: “God bless the soldiers and seamen with all their brave commanders.”

To honor next year's sesquicentennial, the McFall family believes Alton should make the parade bigger and send an invitation to the next president to come to it.



**Alton Mayor Brant Walker**, who rode in a bright yellow Chevrolet Corvette, said he was honored to be the mayor of a town who honored its veterans with such diligence.

“I think that speaks highly of the community that respects those who have served and honors the freedoms for which they fought.”

The parade left the middle school parking lot, traveled on College, and turned onto Washington. Hundreds of people placed chairs and stood close to the street, hoping to catch great views of the massive parade as it passed.



