C Mark Smith

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WA ‘political junkie,’ author, award-winning Tri-Cities community leader has died.

A Tri-Cities community leader, self-described “political junkie” and author of Washington history and politics books died Saturday. C. Mark Smith, of Richland, was 89.

He retired from a 40-year career in economic development in 2005 that included eight years as a senior official in the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. From 2000 to 2005 he served as the manager of business and economic development for the city of Richland.

The next 19 years he dedicated to his interest in history, biography and politics, researching and authoring five books. He wrote books when he “saw a hole in history he wanted to fill,” said Robert Franklin, vice president of the B Reactor Museum Association and Washington State University Tri-Cities assistant professor of history.

Smith, a native of Tacoma, started with “Raising Cain,” about his childhood mentor, former Washington Sen. Harry P. Cain. It was Cain who exposed the excesses of the Eisenhower Administration’s loyalty-security program as an administration appointee during the McCarthy era.

Next was “Community Godfather: How Sam Volpentest Shaped the History of Hanford and the Tri-Cities.

As much a history of the Hanford nuclear site and the Tri-Cities as a biography of Volpentest, it tells the story of Volpentest’s strong determination to save the Tri-Cities as the U.S. government stopped plutonium production. He wrote a short history of the Lewis and Clark expedition for the American Queen Steamboat Co., which is used by their passengers during cruises on the Snake and Columbia rivers.

Next came “Doc: Congressman Doc Hastings through Twenty Years of Turmoil,” as Hastings’ political career representing the Washington 4th Congressional District coincided with the growth of partisanship and the nation. At the time of his death, Smith was gathering recent information on the Hanford nuclear site, apparently planning to update “Something Extraordinary: A Short History of the Manhattan Project, Hanford and the B Reactor,” written with Robert L. Ferguson in cooperation with the B Reactor Museum Association and the WSU Tri-Cities Hanford History Project. Smith’s Tri-Cities leadership Smith was dedicated to the Tri-Cities community and said that signing up for what would be 23 years with the Richland Rotary Club was one of the best things he ever did. He volunteered as the communications officer for the B Reactor Museum Association and was the vice president of programs for the Columbia Basin Badger Club.

“That drive to be involved will be really, really missed,” Franklin said. Kirk Williamson, president of Badger Club, said Smith was dedicated, organized and had “a real spirit of we could do anything if we put our mind to it.”

He thought big, Williamson said, and was willing to call anyone, including drawing on his large circle of friends and acquaintances, to find speakers for the club’s public forums on important and timely topics. Speakers he brought to the Tri-Cities club have included retired Gen. James Mattis, the former defense secretary; Nicholas Kristof, a New York Times columnist and winner of two Pulitzer Prizes; Alex Biryukov, live from Ukraine; and coming soon, Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the Trinity Forum, opinion writer for The New York Times and contributing editor at The Atlantic. Smith was always focused on what would make the Badger Club and the community better, Williamson said. “Mark was a fine man — accomplished, intelligent and ever-giving to his community,” said Badger Club board member Michael Harrington.

Harrington said he’ll miss Smith’s quiet humor, considerate ways and unparalleled ability to “herd cats” for the club. Smith provided not only a breadth of knowledge and experience to his volunteer work with the B Reactor Museum Association, but also “a welcoming, can-do” attitude, said Dave Marsh, president of the museum association. He brought wisdom to the museum board, both from his decades in economic development and knowledge of local politics and how to work with local institutions, said Franklin, the B Reactor Museum Association vice president. When Franklin moved to the Tri-Cities to serve as WSU faculty, Smith took him under his wing and introduced him to the people who would be helpful to know, before Franklin even realized how valuable Smith’s introductions would be. Mike Gonzalez, the Sunnyside city manager and former Franklin County administrator, also remembered Smith as caring and engaging. Smith always checked in with him when he was going through challenges in county government, he said. WA Lifetime Achievement Award Smith was a 1961 graduate of the University of Puget Sound with degrees in history and political science. He served two terms as a trustee for the university and was awarded the UPS Alumni Association’s Lifetime Professional Achievement Award in 2012.

He was a fellow and honorary life member of the International Economic Development Council and received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Washington Gov. Gary Locke in 2004. Smith is survived by his wife of 59 years, Elsa. They have two sons, Scot and Todd. Einan’s at Sunset Funeral Home in Richland is handling his arrangements.