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Pete Wessel has seen quite a bit in his first 100 years. L&T photo/Rachel Coleman

100-year-old Peter Wessel went to see the world, and continues to make friends

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

At 100 years old, Walter “Pete” Wessel ponders each word and sticks to a slow and steady

pace. He and his wife, Marte, maintain an independent lifestyle, tucked away in the Seward County countryside.

But make no mistake about it: Wessel is far from isolated. He is thoroughly a citizen of the world.

“Pete is the second-ranked ham radio operator in the world,” Marte said. “He’s talked to radio operators in 392 countries. He’s kind of world famous.”

Wessel started talking on the radio 75 years ago, when he was a young serviceman in the U.S. Navy.

The QSL cards verifying unique conversations adorn the Wessel “ham room,” where the boxy radio equipment occupies the main portion of the space. In addition to the record-setting roster of countries, Pete has accumulated thousands of QSL cards. Amateur Radio Relay League.

A postcard-sized, written confirmation of communication between amateur radio stations, the QSL is a bit like a baseball card or a Boy Scout badge: it proves the radio operator has accomplished a specific task, and is on the way to checking off an entire set. In Pete Wessel’s case, the set is someone from every known country in the world.

That’s a far-reaching goal for a Nebraska boy born in the early years of the past century. From an early age, though, Pete Wessel had a sense of curiosity about the outside world. He wanted to go places.

“Nebraska City, Neb., was where I was born,” Pete said. “They had a department store. My father didn’t do much work. My mother took care of the store with my sister and her husband. They wanted me to work in it, and I did it for a while.”

“He said he couldn’t stand it,” Marte added. “He wanted to drive a truck.”



Indeed he did, though it took persistence. Pete's mother did not want him to take the wheel — "My mother wouldn't teach me how. She'd reach over and try to steer it," he recalled — so he went to Watson Brothers truck yard, where the drivers gave him lessons.

"I was still in high school," he said. "I wanted to drive a truck."

More than 80 years on, Pete's eyes still gleam with a stubborn focus. Truck driving, Marte says, "was his first love."

Taking deliveries around rural Nebraska did not satisfy his desire for the larger world. Before long, he'd enlisted in the U.S. Navy. The service took him to Great Lakes Naval Base north of Chicago, San Diego, Calif., Ontario and Corpus Christi, Texas. He fought in the Pacific Theater in World War II. In 1945, he met Marte.

Looking at a photo collage she created for his 90th birthday, Marte recalls the instant photo booth where they took their wedding picture.

"68 years ago, and I still absolutely adore him," Marte said. Looking at another black-and-white photograph, this one of a tall man in boxing shorts, she added, "Wasn't he a handsome person? He still is."

After a short Navy posting in Olathe, Pete completed his service and reentered civilian life. For a time, he worked at Monarch Airlines in Denver, a company that had started in 1946 and offered flights in all weather conditions in the region. Though the company offered a cutting-edge type of excitement, Pete was restless at the job.

“He wanted to get back on the highway,” Marte said. “That’s how he ended up with Yellow Freight.”

Driving for Yellow Freight, Pete soon transferred to Liberal, where he drove the regular route back and forth to Albuquerque. In those days, Marte pointed out, “they didn’t have those big highways with four lanes or six lanes. Sometimes it was really dangerous.”

Pete relished the challenges.

“Pete was so great, he’d work on all the holidays so the other people could stay home with their kids,” Marte said. “We’d celebrate whenever we could. He’s just such a wonderful, honorable man, and such a fine person. Everybody admires Pete.”

Though age has rubbed the sharp edges off his vocabulary, he recalls specific trips and recounts them as though he’s seeing the past blur along through the window of his cab. Remembering one winter trek, he recalled:

“I just barely got out of town, and things started happening in the weather,” he said. “I can’t remember how long I was in that outfit, and I got over to the edge of that part of the world, and there was a place where you had to stop and check your load.

“I asked the people if I could take my outfit to the side and wait for things to happen. They said, ‘No, you have to keep going.’” The road was coated with black ice, and he crept along all day, “just barely moving, and I can’t remember anyone else even being on the road. Well, that’s just part of it.”

On her wall of memorabilia,

Marte included many photographs of the standard Yellow Freight double trailers, with Pete in high spirits.

“Pete — the Trucker!” she wrote in magic marker, beneath one image.

When Pete retired, the couple purchased the overnight camper-park on Old U.S. Hwy. 54. Marte scrubbed toilets, she joked, but Pete got all the fame. When an amateur-radio magazine featured the Wessels for their long list of calls, “they only wanted to talk to Peter.” That was all right, she added, because he was the main one interested in the radio.

Along the way, however, Peter had shared his enthusiasm for ham radio operation. When his interest in the hobby became serious, during the years in Denver, Marte got involved. Today, she leads a group for young ladies, handing off the hobby to a new generation. It’s not the first time: Both Wessels recall the friendship they formed with a neighbor boy in Denver. George, whose father “didn’t think much of radio,” Peter said, took to the airwaves with zest. Decades later, he places a weekly phone call to the Wessels to catch up.

“He’s a nice boy,” Peter said. “He’s only 65.”

His traveling days behind him, Pete is happy, at last, to stay close to home. What does he enjoy most about his everyday life at the century mark?

He answers with a wry laugh: “Just sitting here.”

When the radio isn't humming with scheduled calls and meet-ups, the couple enjoy watching sports on television, usually football and basketball. They keep up with current events, comforted by the knowledge that their ham radio connects them with the world, and gives them the ability to help others when emergencies threaten.

"They use ham radios in all kinds of emergencies," she said. "If all the power goes out, we can get on with our generators to help."

The Internet, Peter and Marte said, holds little appeal.

"We already have friends all over the world," she said.

"If I'm not mistaken, some people might have passed my record," Peter said, "but we keep making calls."

The calls kept flowing in on Aug. 28, when Pete officially passed the 100-year mark. With cards from the radio groups and friends and family offering best wishes in person, Peter celebrated in style. More than 50 people attended his birthday party, and had plenty of time to peruse the wall of photos, a record of one person's life history.

Marte has already made plans to assemble an additional poster to add to the story. She stood back and examined the laminated posters that lined the garage wall.

"It's wonderful to have all these memories," she said. "This is his life."

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