



Marie Messer looks at the garden on her property. Messer moved into the home she now lives in at the age of 2, and after many years away from Liberal, she moved back in 1986, purchasing the home from her brothers.

At 94, Marie Messer remembers the places, people of Liberal from early 1920s

By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

During her lifetime, Marie Messer has lived in many towns across America, but a huge portion of it was spent in the community she was born and raised in – Liberal.

Born one year after World War I, Messer, now 94, moved with her family from their original home at what is now Eighth and Pennsylvania to what now is her home on West Fourth Street.

“That was my grandmother and grandfather’s home,” she said referring to the home on Eighth Street.

At the time of her birth, Messer’s family was already leaving its footprints on Liberal’s history. Her grandfather, J.E. Mann was “the biggest insurance man in this whole territory back in those days before 1900.”

Messer described the house she was born in.

“It was a show house,” she said. “It had a veranda on the bottom of it that went halfway around. It was on the second floor that was on the front of the house, and it had a little tiny one that you could crawl out the window up on the third floor.”



Nowadays, there are things that are common in most homes, but in the early 1900s, Messer said her grandfather’s house was quite unique.

“People would come and look at grandma’s bathroom,” she said. “She had running water in the kitchen. It was piped in from the ice house that was out back of the house.”

Mann's influence in Southwest Kansas was so big that it even caught the attention of entrepreneur J.C. Penney, whose name is now on hundreds of stores across the country.

"One summer, (Penney) stayed in the house over there after it was built and played tennis with my father," Messer said. "He had his two nephews come with him, and they played with my brother and I. My brother was two years younger than me. Those two boys, he trained them to take over the business. He never got married."

On the day she was born, Messer's father would buy the house where she now lives, and around the time she turned 2, she would move into the house. She described some interesting features of the home.

"This is the only place from St. Louis on west that had an English garden," she said.

"See where that evergreen is there?" she said pointing to a tree on the property. "It was not here when I was a little girl in the late '20s and all of the '30s. We had a tennis court in there, and that house wasn't there to begin with. It came later."

Liberal is now home to several tennis courts, but when Messer originally moved in, her home had the only court in town.

"Coach Baker and my father and uncle, Frank Mann, would play, and the kids would play with whoever was the single," she said.

The Fourth Street property was also home to a lily pond, which holds some memories for Messer.

"When the postman would get little fish, whether it was guppies or angel fish or swordfish or goldfish from Japan, no matter where, he would call Daddy," she said. "It was 2 o'clock in the morning. We'd all have to get up and get dressed, and Daddy would go and get the fish to put in

the little fish pond in the summertime. In the winter time, he had this extension built on the dining room so he could have aquariums in there all the time."

While most fruit did not grow on the property, Messer said there was one particular fruit that would.

"Oranges never did any good, but he grew great big lemons that were as big as plates," she said. "That was in the Liberal newspaper in 1933, I think it was. I think he told me one time, she made eight pies out of one lemon."

One of Messer's neighbors in west Liberal included the founder of one of the town's original grocery stores.

"Tom Blakemore, who owned the Ideal stores here in Liberal, he lived there," she said referring to a nearby house in her neighborhood. "He had two sons. My brother and I loved to play with them. They'd either come over here, or we'd go over there."

While tennis was a big recreational activity in those days, Messer said many in Liberal in its early days went to the railroad tracks that cross through town to watch trains come in.

"They'd come in, and the people would get off," she said. "Some of them would be all dressed up, and some of them wouldn't be. During the Depression, the hobos would ride the train. You'd see them jump off. They'd come up to this house, and Mother would always give them a job to do. There was always something to be done around here."

Messer's father himself owned Cimarron Motor Company in the building that now is home to the Leader & Times.

"He had to shut it down during the war because Dodge and Plymouth quit making cars, and they went to making parts for those tanks and those amphibian things that they used back

then," she said.

The telephone was still in the early days in Messer's younger years, and in about the late 1920s, it made its way to Liberal. Messer's father was one of the first to get the device.

"Daddy's company was number 18," she said. "He got the 18th telephone in this city, and he got a little box for me to stand on so that I could reach it. He taught me how to say, 'You have reached the Cimarron Motor Company in Liberal, Kansas.' I would say, 'Can I help you?' and if Daddy was walking in the shop about that time, he'd say, 'It's may.' I never learned how to say, 'May I help you?'"

Messer began working with her father at the age of 12, and she would later move to the Big Apple.

"I had moved to New York City, and there was a gentleman that came to live in my bedroom there and his wife," she said. "They had, I think, three children. Their name was Salazar, and they had fled the Nazi regime. The nearest person I saw to looking like them, I saw on TV a good six months ago, and his name was Salazar. He works for our current president."

Messer later married, and with her husband, Jack, being an inspector between Boeing and the federal government, the couple lived many places, including Bermuda and Seattle.

After many years away from Liberal, Messer and Jack moved back into town in 1986, buying the house that then belonged to her brothers. Messer said when she came back to town, she found the house she had previously lived in had changed.

"When we bought this house, it was very run down," she said. "This whole area, it was overgrown."

Messer had noticed something else when she moved back to town.

“Liberal had grown up,” she said. “We’d become very modern. We didn’t have all the gossip back when we’d ring the operator and find out what was going on.”

Messer said some of the changes she saw and has seen since moving back disappointed her somewhat.

“I liked the bank being on the corner of Kansas and Fourth Street,” she said. “I didn’t want them to move, but they did.”

Despite all the changes, however, Messer is once again back in the community that was and will be her home for the remainder of her days.