By JESSICA CRAWFORD • Daily Leader

At the age of 15, Margaret Pellegrini had an opportunity come her way that would continue to open doors in her life for the next 70 years.

A chance meeting at the age of 13, landed her an opportunity that would eventually change her simple life in Alabama – completely. That opportunity was a role as a Munchkin in the motion picture recognized worldwide, “The Wizard of Oz.”

“I had gone to Memphis to visit my family, and my brother-in-law asked me to go to the state fair – to pass out samples of potato chips. So I said, ‘OK, I will do that,’ and I did,” Pellegrini said.

“And while I was there, some little people came down from the show, they had a midget show and they wanted me to join up with the show. I said, ‘I don’t want to leave home.’ I was only 13.

“They asked me to give them my name and address and they will keep in touch,” she continued. “Two years later, sure enough, they gave my name to an agent and this agent wrote me a letter and asked if I would like to be in the motion picture, ‘The Wizard of Oz.’”

For the Mussel Sholes, Ala., native, it was an opportunity of a lifetime that she did not even have to think twice about.

“I thought, ‘Oh, this is great,’” she said with an excitement that has not wavered in 70 years. “Coming from a small town, which I think was a little smaller than Liberal. I grew up in Mussel Sholes, Ala., – I was born two blocks from Helen Keller’s home.”

Pellegrini has many lovely memories from her experience as a star in “The Wizard of Oz.” Her most treasured memories are that of Judy Garland, who starred as “Dorothy Gale.”

“I was 15, the same age as Judy,” she said. “Judy was a very lovely person. She was a normal teenager. She was a typical teenager.

“She used to sit on the yellow brick road and talk with us,” she explained. “She was so excited working with so many little people, and we were excited working with her. There was 124 of us, but there was only one of her.”

Pellegrini has been surprised at the opportunities her participation in the movie has brought her way.

“It has opened a lot of doors for me,” she said. “I have got to see a lot of the country and I have got to meet a lot of wonderful people.

I have friends all over the country. For my birthday, a couple of weeks ago, I got 51 birthday cards – not counting all of the flowers and e-mails, and phone calls. I turned 86 on the 23rd of September.”

Pellegrini first enjoyed Liberal’s OzFest in 1985. She clearly remembers a birthday celebration planned for one of Liberal’s founding fathers, Oliver Brown.

“Liberal was my first one in 1985 – it was my first festival to go to,” she said. “Oliver Brown, it was his birthday, and they gave him a big birthday party. Everything was ‘Wizard of Oz.’ I never will forget it. When we got off the plane out at the airport, they had the Dorothys lined up, and they had all the men dressed in red coats, and when we landed, we all got off the plane and even had a police escort.”

Several other festivals throughout the nation are being conducted in honor of “The Wizard of Oz.” However, due to health reasons and a special love for Liberal, Pellegrini chose to only travel to OzFest this year.

“I had a stroke two years ago,” she said. “The doctor told me I had to cut down on some of my travelling. I wanted to come here, because I hadn’t been here for five years.

“I am so happy that I am back here, that they asked me to come back,”

she continued. “I am so grateful, they are wonderful people. They are just as nice as they can be, every one of them.”

When asked why Liberal was so special to her, Pellegrini gave a very simple answer that fit the occasion just perfectly.

“I love Liberal,” she said with a grin. “There is no place like home.”