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Linda Plett today. She will turn 101 on Friday and invites friends to celebrate with her from 3:30 to 5 p.m. at Wheatridge Park Care Center. L&T photos/Rachel Coleman

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

The late-season snow has melted away from the ground at Wheatridge Park Care Center, and resident Linda Plett watches as a robin tugs a worm from the green-tinted lawn. Spring is nothing new to the former Beaver, Okla., resident who will celebrate her 101st birthday Friday — “If I live that long,” Plett joked. “How much longer can you live when you’re already 101? It’s mind-boggling.”

A listener who takes in Plett’s recollections might be inclined to agree. Born in McPherson

County in 1913 to German Mennonite parents, Linda (Boese) Plett moved to the Oklahoma Panhandle with her family when she was just 3 years old. It wasn't until she began her education at Pleasant Valley School that Plett learned to speak English.

"I really had a rough time because the teacher couldn't talk German like I could, and I couldn't understand what she said," she recalled. "I learned pretty good." Plett grew up on the farm with younger sister Mary Ann, and, much later, a brother named Henry and a sister, Mildred.



"They were like a second family, because we had two sisters in between, who both died when they were three years old," Plett said. "They never saw each other."

When Plett completed eighth grade, the family faced a decision: should she progress to the newly-constructed high school in Turpin?

"My mom and dad did not want me to go mix with the English people, so they wanted me to go to Oklahoma Bible Academy, and I could not see the point of that," she said with a chuckle. "I did not want to leave Mom and Dad — what would they do without me?"

That was the end of Plett's education. She took a job with the Ralph Colvin family in Liberal, caring for the family's two young daughters.

"I had to see that they got ready for school, that I had lunch ready for them, that they took their

piano lessons — I had to watch that,” she said. “I was there two or three years.”

Plett earned \$3 a week, a generous sum in the early '30s.

“I didn't save it, lands no,” she said. “I spent it. I was a spender. I would love nice dresses that were far above church dresses.”

The Colvins took Plett along with them on vacations in Colorado and treated her as a member of the family. Her life was intertwined with that of her employers, so much so that when she faced a major life decision, she turned to them for advice.

“When I was going to get married, I was dating two guys. And so I asked the lady I worked for, Catherine Colvin, which of them I should marry,” Plett said. “She helped me pick. One of 'em had a car, and the other was so poor he didn't have anything. We would have started out on nothing. Mrs. Colvin kind of helped me see, well, maybe this one would be better. So I got married in their home, and then we moved to the farm.”

For her wedding, Plett went shopping at the JC Penney store in downtown Liberal.

“At that time, evening dresses were used as wedding dresses and I found a light blue dress that both of us liked,” she said. “It had panels. I wish I had a picture of it. We bought that for \$3. And Mrs. Colvin baked angel food cake for our wedding there in her home.”

Now married to George Plett, the favored groom, Linda settled into life on the farm.

“There was no house on the place or anything, but his parents had an old house that they moved onto the farm and we fixed that up and rebuilt it,” she said. “I loved to cook. I liked to keep house. I loved to drive. We were happy all the time. We were happy even during the Dust Bowl.”

As the sky filled with dirty clouds and farmers found it impossible to plant or cultivate crops, the Pletts clung to their farm.

“We never wanted to leave, no. My parents gave me a cow, and his parents gave us a cow so we had milk and cream and churned butter, two cows and the two calves they had,” she said. George Plett was a typical farmer, she recalled.

“Well, what was a farmer? A hard-working farmer, and very frugal. We had to save up. Our groceries were bought with cream and made butter, churned butter, and we had this clabber milk, oh I’ll tell you that’s so good with pepper and salt and sliced cucumbers. Oh, that was delicious.”

The Pletts had two sons, Leo and Vernon. The younger arrived with a cleft palate, a nearly insurmountable medical problem in the late 1930s. As an infant, he endured multiple surgeries before doctors told his mother they couldn’t repair the problem.

“The doctors tried to close that cleft palate. He had surgery every month for six months, and I stood right there by the operating table and watched every one of them,” Plett said. Vernon grew up with a severe speech impediment, sure he’d never get married. But he did find a sweetheart, and when he and his wife moved to Scottsbluff, Neb., they met a doctor who asked, “Do you want that cleft palate fixed?”

“— And they said, ‘Why, yes! he did.’ And so they got it done,” Plett recounted. “And after that, he took some speech lessons, and it worked out for him. Yes, it did.” Vernon died two years ago.

“He was such a kind guy,” his mother recalled.

As for Leo Plett, he recently moved into a room at Wheatridge, so mother and son see one another daily. Leo’s son, Loren and his wife, Kitty, live on the family farm now. Kitty looks after

her grandmother-in-law, checking in daily to launder delicate clothes, fluff Linda's hair and even apply lipstick when needed.

"Press your lips together, Grandma," she says as she caps the tube of lipstick. "Now, smile!"

After 52 years of marriage, George died suddenly in 1986.

"He had a heart attack," Plett said. "He came in one day, and he wanted me to go with him to look at the crops to see what needed to be sprayed. He said, 'Linda, I'll just go to town and get this business,' and when he came back in the back door, no warning or anything, he just fell down, and he was dead. Never even tried to brace himself. He just died before he fell down."

In the aftermath, Plett said, she continued to keep the farm going.

"You just do it (go on). I was really blessed. George and I had taken out insurance policies, and after he died, I collected on that, and then Leo came to help on the farm. I helped as long as I could. I drove tractor. We had cattle. I didn't go on by myself."

Eight years later, Plett's life took another unexpected turn. A suitor came calling — the same man she'd turned down a lifetime before.

"It was the other guy that I dated, the one that my boss told me not to marry. Ralph Smith," Plett said. "When I was a widow, then he came around, and so we got married. He had one daughter, and I had two sons, and my sons always wanted to have a sister. So that worked."

Smith "didn't have hard feelings" about the rejection decades before, Plett said. He'd married and had a happy life of his own. The reunion was a late-in-life bonus for both spouses, complete with renewed family ties that had begun in the 1930s.

When Smith died unexpectedly on July 4, 2000, Plett said, “his sister said he went out with a bang.” Plett resumed a quiet life on the farm. By that time, Loren and Kitty Plett had moved into the “old” house on the property, and Linda Plett continued living in the newer house she and George had built before his death.

Life experiences had given Plett tenacity, but they’d also taught her to make her own decisions. At age 98, she made the choice to move off the farm and into town.

“When I couldn’t get along by myself, well then Kitty found this place for me,” she said. “I miss the farm, but I’ll tell you, this is the way I looked at it. You know, I’m here now. Would I go back to the farm? Loren and Kitty wouldn’t be able to take care of me. I’d rather be here.”

Plett acknowledged moving from her own house to a care facility required significant adjustment, “but you have to make up your mind,” she said. “Which would I rather do? You have to study your mind and tell what’s best for you.”

Plett takes pleasure in the little things, she said. Life at Wheatridge is pleasant: the facility is clean, the staff pleasant, and on sunny days they take her out to the patio, where she can enjoy the trees, the birds and the breeze.

“They tell me I’m going to have a birthday celebration this week,” said Plett. “That’s what they say. It’ll be nice to see everyone again, because I might not be here much longer.”

“Oh, Grandma, let’s go for 102,” Kitty Plett said.

“We’ll see,” Plett answered. “We’ll see.”

Linda Plett’s 101st birthday celebration will be from 3:30 to 5 p.m. Friday at Wheatridge Park Care Center, 1501 S. Holly Drive. Friends are invited to stop by.

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