

Lila Pugsley Remembers Her First Years in Chester

My earliest memory of Chester was coming to visit my fiance, Robert Matkin, who was working as an abstracter for Liberty County Abstract Co. The month was March, 1949 so the streets were rather rutty and muddy. There was no pavement or even gravel. Some of the sidewalks were the original boardwalks and some were concrete.

We were driving past Wrights ' grocery store and on the north side of the building was a bench with two men sitting visiting and watching the world go by. Bob said , "The whole town will know you were here. "

Bob was living at the Golden West Hotel- a rather dark unkept two story building. He lived in one room -the bath was down the hall-used by all the residents. We didn't stay in town very long but headed for Great Falls to shop for his wedding suit.

Then back to Kalispell, Mt. to the mountains, good water and trees for another month before Chester was to become my home.

The few trees there in town were along the creek and only two homes had lawns-Dodds Keith (the local sheriff) and Hugo Johnson (the Texaco dealer). Needless to say we missed the trees and mountains of western Montana so at first we'd leave town at 5 P. M . Friday night and come back early Monday morning. We did our laundry , leisure baths ,etc. at the home of our relatives. Later a local lady did our laundry until we bought a washing machine and two rinse tubs.

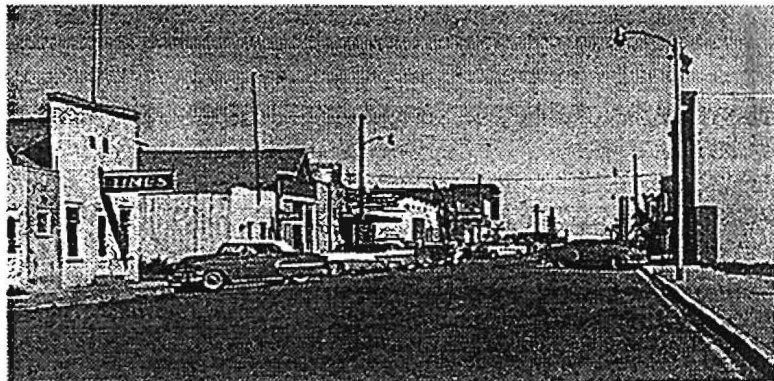
It was quite some time before I began to see the beauty of the country --the changing purple of the Sweet Grass Hills and the opal sky at sunrise and sunset.

I remember walking from the Court House, where I worked in the ASCS office, to the Mint ☐Cafe for our morning and afternoon breaks.

Now there is a coffee room right in the Courthouse.

The muddy streets ruined more than a pair of shoes- at a time when money was dear and shoes expensive.

Chester was just getting a sewer and water system so the small two room house we rented had only a toilet stool and cold running water.



A tea kettle heated the water for all our needs.



There was no available housing and we were glad to have these two rooms until August when brother-in-law Randall came to live with us to complete his last two years of High School. This is a picture we have of Randall.

Finally, in October we were able to move into a two story duplex that had a bathroom and hot and cold running water! The duplex was an old farmhouse that had been moved into town. The siding was warped, unpainted and very weathered. There was no insulation or storm windows. E. A. Bathke was the owner - and no one lived in the other half.

True to our unpredictable Montana weather -the winter of '49-'50 was record breaking cold-52 below zero. The snow and wind blew into the house and the curtains at the windows hung at a 45 degree angle. The Matkin relatives were to come for a Christmas family reunion. A few preparations had to be made so one Saturday about the middle of December, Bob, Randall and I left to go to Great Falls to buy our Christmas things.

We came home the next night - a bitter cold ride in our 1940 Ford - not much of a heater or defroster system. It was 35 below and the water pipes in our house were all frozen - even the goldfish was frozen solid in its bowl. The overhead water pipes leaked down onto the decorated Christmas tree. The house had an old cook stove that had been converted to fuel oil. This stove burned constantly to help heat the house. There was an oil heater in the living room. The only heat in the upstairs bedrooms came through the vents in the ceiling. I did get a new electric Frigidaire stove in time to cook Christmas dinner!

On New Year's Eve the entire town went to the Firemen's Ball held at the High School Gym. Good fun and good music- but this cold year the oil line to the heater solidified so the heater went out and we came home again to an ice cold house. After that an electric light bulb was hung on the line and that kept it from freezing.

Chester was the county seat for Liberty County, so along with the courthouse there was the Liberty County Bank, which opened in 1947 after being closed for almost 24 years . There was a Gamble Store, Walden's Hardware, two barber shops, a beauty parlor, the Mint Cafe, a telephone office, two abstract offices, and several auto and machinery dealerships. Mable Kolstad had a gift shop in the John Deere store. 8.

The grocery stores were Wrights Market, Schultz's, Shamey's, and the Chester Trading Co. (known as the Green Store) . Four churches: Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, and Assembly of God. Five bars: Grand, Laas', Pappys, VFW and Tip Top.

Chester had an excellent high school band, under the direction of Arden Vie, that was invited to the Rose Festival in Portland, Or. New uniforms were needed and true to the Chester spirit and generosity family and friends came thru with money making projects and donations. The band went to Portland and made a proud showing for this community.