

Erwin and Eliza Messer

(Cemetery Walk Presentation, 2013 by Annette Gebert)

Erwin P. Messer and his twin brother Barker Messer were born in Leicester, Vermont, on August 24, 1838. Their parents were J. S. Messer and Julia Barker Messer, a direct descendant of John and Priscilla Allen, famed in the Longfellow poem, *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. The family moved to Lake County, Libertyville, Illinois, in 1857.

Eliza Aurelia Howell was born at Montour Falls, New York on March 18, 1838. She was the oldest child with four siblings. At age seventeen, she went with her parents and family to Illinois in 1855. After a three day train trip, they arrived in Chicago on Christmas Eve.

They settled on a farm in Lake County where she met Erwin P. Messer. They were married at Libertyville near Chicago on September 25, 1862, shortly after the war broke out.

Erwin had enlisted as a Private in May of 1861 at Freeport, Illinois. He volunteered in Company "I" 15th Illinois Volunteer Infantry for what was supposed to be a thirty-day war. After that time was up, he enlisted as a Private again in August of 1861, and soon was elected Captain of Company "F" 37th Illinois Volunteer Infantry. On August 24, 1861, he left the state for St. Louis, Missouri where he served until February of 1862. He was wounded in the arm during the Battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas on March 8, 1862, but went on to serve with the District Southwest Missouri until September, 1862.

He returned home and farmed until June, 1863. During that time he and Eliza were married. She followed her husband to battlefields three different times with other officers' wives.

In 1863 and 64, he was in the Army of the Frontier, the Army of Tennessee and Department of the Gulf. He was on duty guarding frontier operations against guerrillas, participated in the Battle of Vicksburg, and took part in an expedition to capture Yahoo City, Mississippi. From there he was ordered to Corralton, Louisiana, where he took sick and was sent to an Army Corp Convalescents Home near New Orleans.

Erwin served as a state representative for a time. He was also active in the Grand Army of the Republic. He and Eliza traveled to conventions all over the United States. In August 1903, they attended the GAR convention in San Francisco. They also visited Los Angeles and other points of interest. Erwin was the Inspector General of GAR on staff of General John T. Black.

In September 1909, Erwin and Eliza traveled to Greeley, Colorado where they purchased 200 acres of land at \$100 an acre. The choice piece of irrigated land could be planted to potatoes or sugar beets.

Colonel Messer passed away of a stroke on November 21, 1916 at age 78. The chapel would not have been completed at that time, and his funeral was held at his home.

After her husband death, in 1916, Eliza went to Chicago to stay with relatives and friends for a while, but came back to Hartley a short time later. In January 1929, she went to live with her son and his wife in Greeley, Colorado. After Jay's death in 1932, she continued to live with her daughter-in-law, Mae.

During her lifetime, she attended both World Fairs in Chicago. Our country went through a Civil War, Spanish American War, World War and many bloody Indian conflicts. Railroads tied the country together; gold was discovered in California, Colorado, and the Klondike. Inventions such as the telephone, airplane, radio, electric lights, and automobiles were put into use.

Buying her first high heels was an important event in her life. She was seventeen when the cobblers started putting little heels on the high-topped, laced shoes. Buttons came next in the shoe business, fastening the tan and white clothier tops to the shoes.

The *Hartley Sentinel* dated April 1, 1937 gave this account of an interview with Eliza, regarding her experiences during the Civil War:

Mrs. Messer saw first-hand the struggles and hardships of the soldiers at the front. She recalls the sights of wounded soldiers brought in to the hospitals and the weary men falling along the way of the march with their feet blistered and bleeding. She and two other officers' wives took lodging in nearby boarding houses while her husbands' troops were encamped and moved with them as they advanced

farther to the south and east. Mule drawn ambulances usually carried the women, but on one occasion when the regiment started the swing eastward from Springfield, Missouri, Eliza rode horseback. She traveled thirty miles in one day. Sometimes she traveled on foot through six inches of dust. The tents they stayed in would sometimes blow over.

On another occasion, while the soldiers were moving from Chattanooga to Cleveland, Ohio, the women slept in a corn field on hay thrown down for them by the soldiers.

One woman, who passed as a friendly landlady and took the women in, was arrested a few days later as a Rebel spy. Mrs. Messer can still remember the names of friendly old Negro servants who helped her during these difficult days. She was with her husband and his company in Dalton, Georgia when Gen. Lee surrendered.

When asked if there was rejoicing and celebration when the news reached the camp, she replied, "You must remember we were in the South. Of course, we're sure glad that it was finally over-as were the Southerners-but for demonstrations—there were none. The South was heartbroken, but we were all glad to be friendly. I remember those days of peace, the Rebel soldiers and Northerners would meet on the street and with a cheery "Hi, Yank" or "Hi, Reb," and then they would borrow a chew of tobacco.

Eliza regretted being unable to read *Gone with the Wind*, because of her limited eyesight. It told of a time she lived though and loved to talk about, but it was told from the Southern point of view and she may not have liked it as much as she thought she would.

Grandma Messer was active in various clubs in Hartley. In Eastern Star she was the first Worthy Matron of the Golden Sheaf, Chapter OES; and the first president of the World Relief Corps.

On her 100th birthday, March 26, 1938, she was quoted as saying, "Doctors tell us the worry shortens the life span, but I was always a great worrier." She remained in good health and was able to do many of her household duties herself almost to the end of her life.

Eliza Aurelia Howell Messer died on November 17, 1938, at 100 years of age. Jay's wife, Mae Vale Messer passed away on June 3, 1960. They are all buried at Pleasant View.

Both Erwin and Eliza were leaders in their community. They truly enjoyed helping their fellowman.

This poem appeared at the end of Col. Erwin B. Messer's obituary in the November 23, 1916:

Sad are the graves where our loved ones are laid;

Dear are the memories that never shall fade;

Sweet are the thoughts that again we shall meet,

Kneeling together at our Savior's feet.