

Ex-showgirl built crazy collection of rental cabins

By Kathy Jordan

Myrtle Rhea, an ex-showgirl and carnival entertainer, was one of Grand Junction's eccentrics from 1949 until her death in 1963.

Even today when her name is mentioned to those who lived here during that time period, most go "Oh yes, I remember Myrtle."

According to a 1963 story written by Daily Sentinel reporter Alice Wright, "When age dimmed her theatrical talents, Myrtle settled in Grand Junction, using her savings to purchase a bit of property on which she built a home with her own hands."

Originally Myrtle built a five-room house at 660 Lawrence Ave, and over the years she added additional rooms, using many materials such as old wood, pieces of metal, anything she could recycle. Slowly the structure became a maze of 18 rooms with 75 beds. According to The Sentinel, visitors viewed Myrtle's compound with "with considerable awe."

Although Myrtle talked to anyone and everyone, details of her life are scanty.

United States Federal Census records show that Myrtle was born at Desdemona, Texas, Feb. 18, 1893, to Richard S. and Mary E. Halford.

She married Earl Rhea on March 27, 1918, at Wichita Falls, Texas. They were divorced in Albuquerque in 1931.

According to The Sentinel story, Myrtle was a dancer and singer of slightly bawdy songs and had traveled by wagon though out the West, often as a sideshow entertainer with a carnival, the Pap Acondancse Show Co.

After her divorce and retirement from the carnival circuit, she settled in Grand Junction in 1949. Here, she started building her maze of "cabins" as she preferred to call them. She rented her cabins, which were said to be makeshift beds in cubicles, mostly to railroaders for 25 cents a night. For the 25 cents she also provided a hot meal consisting of beans and potatoes.

Danny Tucker, whose mother Nell Tucker owned the store in Riverside, remembers delivering 50 pounds of beans and 50 pounds of potatoes to Myrtle as she got older and it was difficult for her to carry the beans and potatoes to her house.

Cindy Enos-Martinez, third generation Riverside neighborhood resident, recalls that Myrtle's structures formed a horseshoe. Cindy said that Myrtle got her water from a well, and the facilities were an outhouse. A couple of boxcars were part of the make-up the

web of rooms. There was also a barn, which housed horses and a couple of covered wagons.

According to Cindy, Myrtle had a large collection of rifles, always carried one with her, and would not hesitate to fire a warning shot at kids who teased her.

Cindy said that Myrtle had cedar chests full of elaborate costumes and a veritable museum of bits and pieces she had accumulated from who knows where.

Cindy added that Myrtle always wore dark clothing, such as brown, black or blue, along with boots, frequently with red stockings. Her large elaborate hats possibly began life as parts of costumes from her showgirl days.

It was reported in the Sentinel that every available space at Myrtle's house was filled with her beloved "antiques" described as "so valuable in her eyes that she declined to leave them for the medical care and better quarters she obviously needed."

According to The Sentinel story, Myrtle "had a few trusted friends, several of whom thoroughly enjoyed her delightfully entertaining, if somewhat earthy, personality."

By 1954, Myrtle wanted to sell her Lawrence Avenue property and ran this ad in the Reno Evening Gazette:

FOR SALE for \$3,000 cash. Notice to all organizations; a fine place to build a charity home for old aged persons or orphans. A campground with 18 cabins furnished, lights, water and telephone. A bigdwelling house; about 1 acre. There are 30 acres around it that can be bought with it, with a 2-foot irrigation ditch above it. It is a dandy place for a Western Resort; for horseback riding; swimming pool; a wonderful picnic ground. It is on the Colorado River just outside city limits. You won't have to pay city tax. The South end of Lawrence St. No. 660. Phone 914M. See me in person. I will show you all around. The place is clear of debt. Myrtle Rhea, General Delivery, Grand Junction, Colorado.

Apparently Myrtle had no takers and died at her home on May 26, 1963. She is buried at the Orchard Mesa Cemetery, but no headstone marks the location of her final resting spot.