

Homes of History: Arnold home remains in family

Written by By John A. Arnold III and Ava Barlow, Staff Writer
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April 14, 2011 - The John A. and Cella Mae Grider Arnold family home sits in the middle of a quarter of a block at 601 North Main Street. The lots were bought from the Melton family and the Arnold's built the house in 1941 around a large pecan tree and a water well in the front yard. John Alton Sr. was also known to some as "Rosie"; and Cella was known as the instrumentalist at the Leonard Presbyterian Church, as well as a local instructor in piano.



John Sr. was born Nov. 24, 1892, in Valley Creek and Cella Mae Grider was born Dec. 31, of the same year, also at Valley Creek. They married Jan. 21, 1914, and John Sr. established J. A. Arnold Insurance on the west side of the Leonard Square. They had one child, John A. Jr. John Sr. died at 51 years of age in 1943 of a stroke and Cella continued his insurance business until she retired in 1974. The Grider and Arnold families were some of the early settlers in the Valley Creek area, only moving to Leonard when the town was being built because the Katy railroad had come through.

The home was built with heavy timbers, from an old bank in Celeste, with all wood interior walls and ceilings, and was designed to have outside ventilation from three directions in the living room, kitchen and three bedrooms. The other rooms have outside ventilation from two directions. All the rooms are large with windows in every available wall.

Entering the house through the front door, there is a closet under the stairway landing and a step up into the entry. The large living room is to the south through an arched entry and has a fireplace made from marble from the old bank in Celeste. The old upright piano, that Cella got to teach piano when they married in 1914, is still in its original location. There is a powder room off the entry that also has marble from the bank. Through an arch to the right is the dining room with a door leading to the kitchen and breakfast room. There is a screened back porch with doors from the entry and kitchen. Another door from the kitchen leads to a breezeway / utility room, which is connected to a two-car garage.

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The upstairs has a master bedroom in the south end with a large balcony facing east. There is also a restroom, den and two additional bedrooms. The northwest bedroom has knotty pine walls and ceiling with an outside door to a balcony that covers the breezeway. The balcony also leads to a large attic above the garage.

Cella Arnold lived in the house from 1943 to 1982 then the house sat empty for about five years until 1987, the year after John A. Jr. died. John Arnold III, his wife Mary, and two children, Jeff and Caroline moved to Leonard, inhabiting the family home of his father. John and his brother Jim continued to run their father's construction company, even to the present. The family was active in the First United Methodist Church; Mary was involved with the scouts, school activities and the Leonard Housing. Jim and Debbie Arnold have raised three sons, Josh, Jake and James and have lived in Leonard for over 18 years.

John and Jim remember their visits to Leonard and the family home, growing up spending every Christmas in the house and coming down the stairs to see what was left by the fireplace. They'd go to Cella's insurance office in the old bank building on the west side of the square, visit Yoddie's store, ride with Cella to fill up with gas from Blabber Brown at the Mobil gas station, walk down the alley to get hamburgers from Lillie Deel's small grill across Connett from the present Kiwanis Park and sometimes the Tiger Grill, all the summer visits to the Leonard Picnic, going to the Presbyterian Church and having Easter egg hunts in the large yard.

John III and Mary moved away from Leonard in 2008 to be nearer to John's work. They still own the Arnold home-place and have a long heritage and lots of memories in Leonard. John III and his wife made some upgrades to the house but it's basically the same as originally built. Changes include filling in the original water well in the front yard after it collapsed during a rainy spring in the early 90's; overlaying the wood walls and ceiling with sheetrock; adding a shower and new countertops in the bathrooms and kitchen; reworking plumbing and gas lines; installing a new electrical panel and wiring throughout; and adding a tool shed north of the garage.

The house still uses Dearborne gas heaters and window units to condition rooms as needed. A pecan tree on the property still produces grocery sacks of pecans annually.