The Laptop of the 1920s

Tammy Real-McKeighan, Fremont Tribune

Jean Meenen might have had the closest thing to a laptop that was available in the 1920s.

Actually, it wouldn't have fit on her lap.

Meenen was only about 5 years old when she got a Chautauqua Industrial Art Desk.

The Fremont Tribune reports the turn-of-the-century tool looks like a wooden briefcase. Open it up and inside is a heavy paper scroll on two rollers. By turning knobs on the side, the user can scroll the paper up or down to see drawings, alphabet letters and musical symbols. The bottom part of the desk features a chalk board on which the user can draw or write.

The Fremont woman has fond memories of using the device, which she believes helped encourage her to become a good student. She still enjoys looking at schematics and illustrations found on an item that's about 100 years old.

A date on the desk indicates that it was made in 1903 by Lewis E. Myers & Co., of Valparaiso, Ind., and Toronto, Canada. Meenen, now 93, said the desk was created so children could learn numbers, letters and various other things at home.

While turning the wooden knob, Meenen scrolled through outlines of basic shapes, illustrations of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, and examples of how to

write letters in cursive.

Telegraph codes, detailed drawings of carpentry tools and examples of shorthand fill other segments of the scroll.

The floor plan of a house, color pictures of birds and flowers, and paintings are included, too.

Meenen was most intrigued by drawings that show distance and perspective.

"I was just interested in knowing how you could draw something and make it look far away or close to you," she said.

Jean Meenen's Chautauqua Industrial Art Desk is a turn-of-the-20th century tool looks like a wooden briefcase. When opened, it contains educational charts and a chalk board. (Tammy Real-McKeighan, Fremont Tribune)Jean Meenen's Chautauqua Industrial Art Desk is a turn-of-the-20th century tool looks like a wooden briefcase. When opened, it contains educational charts and a chalk board. (Tammy Real-McKeighan, Fremont Tribune)The portable desk, which is placed on a table, includes wire holders for chalk or pencils. A lesson book could fit behind wooden slats in the top part of the desk.

Meenen was living in Wichita, Kan., when her mother, Stella, bought the desk from a door-to-door salesman.

"She was anxious for me to learn. When she bought this for me, I was delighted. I loved to try to draw. It was helpful in learning to write," she said.

Meenen appreciates what she learned from the device.

"I've always been a good student and I think that this gave me a head start, because it introduced me to so many different methods of printing and writing and I

learned adding and subtracting from it," she said.

Meenen graduated from North High School in 1937 and from Friends University in Wichita in 1941. She taught high school for one year in a small town. Only getting $90 a month as a teacher, Meenen returned to Wichita and worked as a telephone operator for the aircraft manufacturer, Boeing.

She then joined the American Red Cross and went to Washington, D.C., for study and then to El Paso, Texas, where she worked in the ear, nose and throat department of William Beaumont Army Medical Center. She and her husband, Alan, married in 1946.

Throughout the years, Meenen has taken good care of the desk.

"You might call it an early day computer . It gives you possibilities," she said, smiling.

Meenen knows today computers are much different.

"I realize that all you have to do is push a few buttons and have the world in your lap," she said.

She has a computer.

"It's not working now," she said, laughing a little. "All I have to do is find a child to come and show me how to get it started."

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