

Robert Lessen was born in Arma, Kansas on April 11, 1918 to Joe and Eva (Fox) Lessen. Joe was a deep shaft coal miner with a 2nd grade education. Joe was born in Arma, but his older siblings were born in Belgium. Eva Fox had an 8th grade education. Both Joe and Eva stressed the importance of higher education.

Robert was a typical boy growing up in this era. In the winter, when the train would go by the back of their property, the boys would run with their coal buckets begging for the fireman of the train to throw coal their way.

As Robert approached high school graduation, he was offered a baseball scholarship to the University of Kansas. Robert held two jobs while attending KU -- milking cows near the campus morning and night and as a short order cook for a fraternity. During this time, he would always talk about his love of Southeast Kansas.

Robert helped Joe Scepansky, a future US Air Force Major General be elected student body president. Joe recalled the story that Robert came up to him and asked that Joe run and he promised he would get him elected - and he did! General Scepansky considered Arma a second home because he was always welcome in the Lessen home.

After earning his college degree, Robert moved to Detroit, MI because jobs in SE Kansas were limited. He started working in a steel mill and quickly became a foreman for the steel company. In the summer of 1941, he told his employers that he was going to enlist in the Army. They assured him they could get him a deferment, but Bob refused knowing that the war was coming.

Robert became a sergeant and was transferred to England to prepare for the invasion of North Africa. While marching his men to their troop transport ship, he was run over by a British soldier and was severely injured and had to remain in the hospital and not continue with his troop. Since all of his gear was on the ship when the ship docked in North Africa and Robert wasn't on it, the Army sent a 'Missing In Action' letter to his family. The Army did allow him to call home to let his family know he was safe.

After a few months as a gunnery instructor in the US, he requested to be sent to a war zone. He joined the Army Air Corps and was assigned to a bomber group in China and became a member of the Flying Tigers. The remainder of the war was spent as a belly gunner in a B-24. During his troop ship transfer to Australia for training in the B-29, the ship captain announced that the war was over.

After the war, Robert returned to Arma and enrolled in what is now called Pittsburg State University to obtain his MBA. While at PSU, he worked for his uncle William Fox in his insurance agency. Robert would drive his uncle to client visits since William was a polio victim. As he learned the insurance business, he determined that he would make Arma his permanent home.

He was called back into military service during the Korean Conflict, but he was not required to leave the US as he had already started to show hearing loss. As a staff sergeant at Fort Leonard Wood, he made lifelong friends who later became, business leaders, judges, politicians, and other pillars of their communities.

Robert bought into the family insurance business from his uncle and started to take on more responsibilities. During this time, he realized the importance of community service. These community activities got him noticed and, as always, he promoted Arma and Southeast Kansas. He worked with Congressman Joe Skubitz, who was Robert's high school debate teacher. The Congressman would stop by Robert's house when traveling back from Washington D.C. Robert helped the Congressman pass the legislation for restoring Fort Scott National Park and getting the local district's Social Security office placed in Pittsburg.

All through the 1960's, Robert served on the Highway 69 Committee pushing the improvement and expansion of US 69. State Legislators recognized Robert Lessen and acknowledged his efforts on the committee.

After all he had accomplished and the friendships he had made, he was most proud of his family. Robert's wife Betty was a teacher in area schools. His oldest son, Joe, joined the Army and was a sentinel at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. His youngest son, Rob, returned to Arma after college when Robert suffered a stroke. Rob continues to operate the Fox Insurance Agency in Arma which is proudly celebrating its' centennial this year.

Without Robert Lessen, Arma would not be the great community it is today. This is the reason I am asking for your support in honoring Robert Lessen by naming this section of US 69 Highway the Robert Lessen Memorial Highway.