

An interview with Jim and Leatha Stewart

During World War II, Jim Stewart served as a Navy corpsman working as an operating room technician. That experience sparked his medical interests, and he became a dentist, retiring from his practice in Franklin almost a decade ago. He met Leatha at the University of Chattanooga, and they have been together ever since. Jim has been a generous contributor to the Club. Leatha is get-it-done volunteer, a Trustee of the Engineers Club Foundation and Chairwoman of the Events Committee.

During a Barn Gang program, Leatha humorously introduced Jim as "a chemist, inventor, mechanical engineer, and creative thinker among other talents, but I think basically he's a junkman." Jim and Leatha have barns full of marble, wrought-iron, lumber and an array of architectural materials from buildings that were demolished. Jim uses these materials to make and repair things, and their sons use them in their business of restoring historic buildings.

• What persuaded you to join the Club in November 1998?

Jim: I had just retired and David Brewer, whom I got to know when we moved to Franklin; our children were about the same age. He took me to the Club. We had a good time, and the first person I remember meeting was - who's the wildest guy in the Barn Gang?

• Jim Custer.

Jim: Oh, yeah, Custer. (Laughter) He was giving me a hard time joking around, so I decided this was a nice lively group to be with. I also find the programs very stimulating.

Leatha: I was first impressed with the building and its historical significance. The business that Jim and I helped our two sons start had to do with historical restoration. We had been working in downtown Dayton saving architectural artifacts and salvaging building materials from the wrecking ball. We identified the Club as a prime example of something we had never seen around - an intact, historically bona fide kind of place in pristine condition. The building has fascinated me ever since. When the husband retires and spends 24/7 at home, that's a big deal for the wife to get used to. When Jim joined and I was able to enjoy the Club along with him, retirement became more enjoyable for both of us. Then I fell in love with the people. We have found kindred spirits here.



Jim and Leatha Stewart

This Club is something Jim and I enjoy and share together. It's probably our biggest social outlet.

• **Jim, you've subsidized countless Club projects and events such as the Christmas party, and the two of you even planted the colorful bed of flowers by the east entrance, among other things.**

Jim: I like to get involved and support things to see if we can get others to respond.

Leatha: When we became active back in 1998 there was no money for such things. There was so much that needed to be done so when we saw a project that was needed, we financed it.

Jim: To improve finances, the Club has allowed organizations to use the building for a fee. I agree with that approach. My own idea is that the Club is supposed to be serving Dayton, not just be used by a few as a strictly exclusive club. I think this is a club that should be shown off so people will see the Club as a classy place that reflects well on downtown Dayton.

Leatha: It's a service to the community, not just our own glorification, to have a building like ours. It is a community asset in itself, which is why I work in the garden to maintain the upscale feeling of it. That is why I was avid in advocating to have the building put on the National Register of Historic Places, a process now almost completed. The designation will give us a better chance of getting grants. Now I'm not going to quit agitating until we get enough funds in the Engineers Club Foundation to get a new roof in a couple of years. It will probably amount to upwards of \$60,000. My motive is to protect for the long run the lovely, historic building in the style that makes it a prime architectural example of the period.



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