

Making the old new again: North Platte's first fire station home to antique shop

By TAMMY BAIN

Larry Steele doesn't sell antiques during regular business hours anymore, but the retired railroader can still be found in his shop on the lower level of North Platte's first fire station at 620 N. Vine St.

He still sells antiques and fixes antiques, as well as other furniture, "by chance or appointment," he recently told a visiting reporter.

"Do you have kitchen chairs?" he asked, in his upstairs apartment at the old fire station that he bought, restored and shares with his wife, Sue. "I fix those."

Larry and Sue are thrilled to show visitors their home and their antiques. There's the portrait of a woman, printed on silk, who was likely a wealthy socialite. There's a portrait of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody. There's an old cash register, with a hidden punch pad inside the drawer to put in the unlocking code.

In Larry's shop, there's an antique crib, a bicycle and more. He's been restoring antique telephones, brought to him by a friend. They look a lot better now than when he first started, Sue said.

And then there's the building itself: the city's first fire station, which also housed city offices and a city jail. Sue can point out where the jail was, down in the basement.

The couple purchased the building in 1995. It turned 100 years old in November.

In November 1961, a "new, north-side fire station" hosted an open house, according to news clips and an undated editorial by the late Telegraph editor Keith Blackledge.

The fire station on Vine Street was sold in 1971. It was then used for storage, a haunted house hosted by the Jaycees, and, according to a November 2008 Telegraph story, a place to stay for pigeons and homeless people.

"We had to get rid of 20-some pigeons," Larry said.

Years of vacancy had not treated the old building well. When the couple purchased it, "it didn't have a roof, it had no windows, it was condemned, and they were going to tear it all down," Larry said.

Larry and Sue were dating when they bought the building. Larry lived near Sioux Lookout, near Maxwell. The couple wanted to make their home in North Platte.

"We decided it'd be an absolute wonderful job," Larry said. "And it was a job."

Larry had "built a little" in the past, but his career on the railroad was nowhere near a contractor's job. He recruited the help of a retired cabinet maker and a couple of retired teachers to do the woodworking, windows, roof, "everything," Larry said.

“Every piece of plumbing (was replaced). There’s no old plumbing, no old wiring left. Everything’s new.”

Boyd Gentry was one of those teachers. Later on the day of the interview, he stopped by Larry’s shop to socialize throughout the late afternoon. This is often how an afternoon at the shop goes, Sue said.

Gentry had just retired as a chemistry professor at North Platte Community College in the 1990s when Larry enlisted his help restoring the old fire station. Gentry had helped another professor build his house another summer.

The men now tell stories that if the weather was just right, Gentry might leave his job site at the old fire station.

“If the fish were biting, I wasn’t here,” he said.

And that was OK with Larry. But Gentry didn’t mind the work.

“I enjoyed it,” he said.

Time went on. The Steeles removed 15 truckloads — 28 tons — of rubble. People stopped and asked about the project. The newspaper followed the progress — Larry names Blackledge as one of his biggest supporters.

Sue and Larry were married in 1997. The first downstairs apartment was completed for Larry’s parents. Another space was completed, and lawyers used this space as offices — though they’ve since relocated, Sue said.

There are now four apartments in the station, “counting us,” Sue said.

They built a patio and a courtyard out back. Shortly after the couple moved in, they were featured in the Carousel of Homes in November 1999. People still tell Sue they remember the tour of the home.

The kitchen in the Steeles’ apartment features floors that came from the first North Platte High School, where the downtown First National Bank stands now, Sue said.

They raised the rafters for their upstairs bedroom, creating a loft. They built an addition that includes a large dining room, giving plenty of room for large family dinners with kids and grandkids.

The apartment is decorated with the Steeles’ antiques. Larry used to sell them out of a store where Swan’s Furniture is now.

He started antiques with his first wife.

“We didn’t hunt, fish or golf,” he said, adding that they needed a hobby.

Today, Larry and Sue look for treasures they can enjoy themselves, he said.

The couple also has their collection of news stories and photographs from before, during and after the fire station's renovation. North Platte's paid fire department began in 1918 with two full-time workers, according to the undated Blackledge editorial, in which he cited news clips from the time.

Sue treasures a program for the 10th annual ball hosted by the fire department in 1898 — at that time, a volunteer department. It's still in pristine condition, bound by ribbon with pages of programming, detailing times when specific dances will start.

Larry loves the undated photograph of firefighters rebuilding toys to give to low-income children for Christmas.

The firehouse once housed people who were sick from a flu epidemic, one news clip says.

While the couple collects antiques, many of the fire house's treasures were brought to the couple by people who wanted to restore the mementos.

The fire station wasn't deemed a historic landmark — Larry says he didn't use the right windows in the renovation. History Nebraska has said that to qualify for a historic distinction, certain guidelines for the historic preservation of a building must be met.

The Steeles received no economic incentives from the city, state or otherwise for their project. But the couple doesn't dwell on that.

"We had a lot of fun," Larry said.