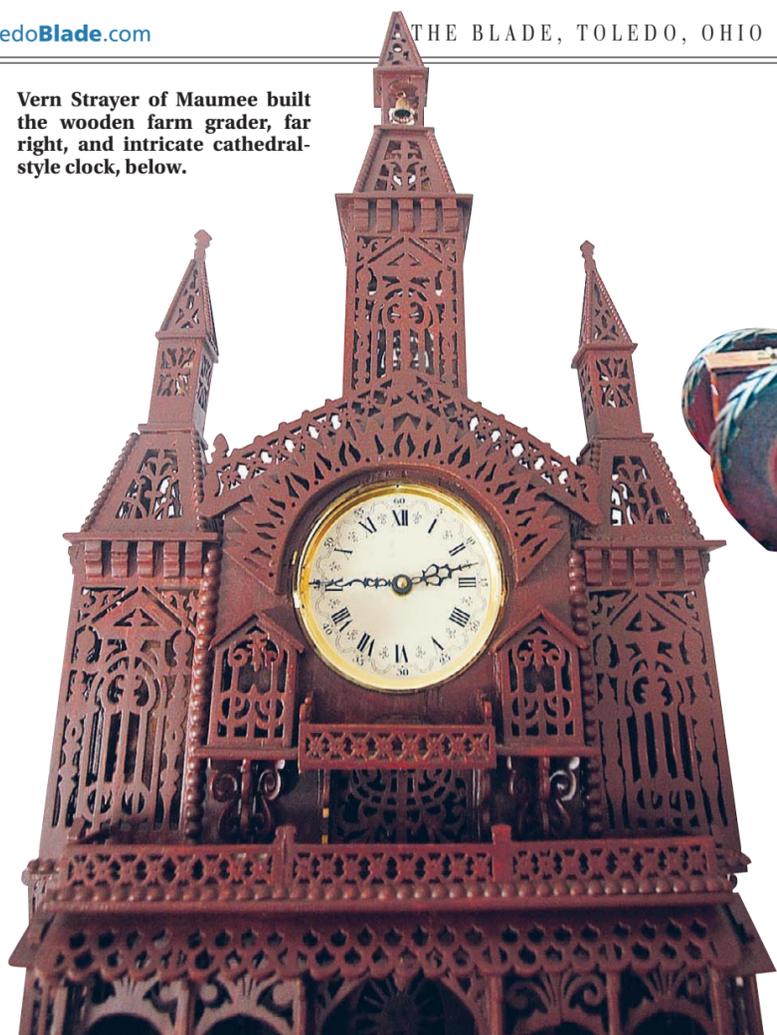


Vern Strayer of Maumee built the wooden farm grader, far right, and intricate cathedral-style clock, below.



Busy Hands

For Maumee couple, hobbies are 'a way of life'



BLADE PHOTOS BY LISA BERNHEIM

A rolling pin shows off the beauty of the woods' color and grain.

By TAHREE LANE
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Erma Strayer has sewn more than 500 small "prayer" quilts and hand-stitched a dozen gorgeous bed quilts.

Vern Strayer has crafted hundreds of toys, a dozen grandfather clocks, and crosses for all the congregants of his church.

He'd toil in the basement and she'd sew upstairs, tapping her foot on the floor to let him know when it was dinner time.

Their hobbies, after the busyness of raising four children, provided them with decades of relaxation, creative pleasure, and the admiration of others. "It was a way of life," says Mrs. Strayer, 90.

As her husband's retirement drew nigh, she encouraged him to take up a hobby. One Christmas, she gave him a kit for a grandmother clock; it's a beautiful piece that stands in the dining room of their spotless Maumee home.

Mr. Strayer, 94, read wood-working magazines and books to get project ideas: wreaths, three-dimensional pictures, and raccoons made out of multiple woods. Advancing to big projects (a maple dining room table, hutch, and chairs, and a bed and dresser of cherry), they "shopped" furniture stores for inspiration. And when Maumee United Methodist Church replaced the pulpit and lectern that had stood on the altar from 1957 to 1993, it was suggested he make mementoes from the wood.

"They brought the wood to me and I asked them to let me think about it for a few days," says Mr. Strayer. He crafted more than 100 five-inch crosses on stands for the original church members.

A neighbor brought him old clocks he'd found at garage sales, sometimes in a box, and Mr. Strayer rebuilt them. An intricate one he calls "the cathedral," full of tiny details, hangs in their bedroom. "I always called it a monstrosity," says Mrs. Strayer, laughing. "It's hard to dust."

They laugh a lot. "Why shouldn't we?" he says. "There's humor in most things. After a few years you learn to take things as they come and make the best of it."

He operated heavy equipment for the city of Maumee before becoming superintendent of the water division; Mrs. Strayer worked in food service. They recall life without electricity, indoor plumbing, and phones, times when the sound of an airplane sent people scampering outside to look skyward.

He's the fourth generation born into farming in Maumee. In the mid-1800s, four Strayer men had come from Pennsylvania, each receiving 180 acres of land near what's now Strayer and Coder roads in exchange for promising to clear and farm it. Until 1959, Mr. Strayer raised wheat, corn, soybeans, and sugar beets on 95 leased acres where the former Ford Stamping Plant was built.

In 1959 when his machinery needed to be replaced and property was being developed, they quit farming and moved into town. "I said it's the best decision we ever made," he says.

In an upstairs bedroom, Mrs. Strayer has created a minimuseum with artifacts

from their ancestors — furniture, a hand corn planter, Mr. Strayer's father's wooden and wheeled high chair that collapses into a walker, and Mr. Strayer's Boy Scout uniform from the early 1930s. There's a wind-up Victrola that "Grandpa walked into town to get," she says.

She demonstrates a scale that measures the size of an egg. After they married 68 years ago and she moved to his farm, she raised chickens and sold eggs and fryers she'd kill, dress, and freeze.

Their middle years were full of raising children, coaching sports, church and community involvement. "We've tried to keep ourselves busy," says Mr. Strayer.

Six or seven years ago, his advancing macular degeneration made it difficult for him to see what he was doing with his wood projects.

"I came upstairs and told her I'd unplugged all the equipment, and she breathed a sigh of relief."

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Erma Strayer, above, displays a few of the many quilts she has created. A grandmother clock that Mr. Strayer built from a kit stands in their dining room. A duck wall hanging made of different types of wood is one of several that Mr. Strayer has made.



ABOVE: Vern Strayer proudly presents a model steam locomotive he created. He found a love of woodworking upon retirement. Shelves behind him hold other projects.

RIGHT: The Strayers display many of their antiques in one room of their home. This wall shows farm and home implements and Mr. Strayer's Boy Scout uniform from the early 1930s.

