

Stewarts' Store

A Perth Fixture Since 1906

by Robert LaFrance (May 2007)

In 1906 Herman F. Stewart started a plumbing, heating and hardware business in Perth, on the riverbank almost exactly across the street from the present location of J. M. Stewart Ltd. He ran the business until May 2, 1942 when his son Jim and Jim's wife Louise took over the business and within the next two decades expanded it into other lines until at the peak years they had a total of 35 employees. Last week Mayor Karen Titus of the village of Perth-Andover, which didn't exist under that name until 1966, presented a plaque to present manager Carolyn Stewart in honour of 65 years under the J. M. Stewart name.

"My grandfather Herman F. Stewart started in plumbing and heating and hardware directly across the street from this building," Carolyn Stewart said on Friday, May 4, "and he was there until he passed on and then mother and dad took over on May 2, 1942. They continued with plumbing and heating and went into furniture after that. It was during the war, so business was not booming, but after the war it started booming and the store got big contracts - customs ports, from Clair to Fredericton, post office, schools, hospitals, and old age homes. They were selling furniture across the street and then the power commission came along in 1957-58 and took everybody's buildings. We had to build this one here because business just grew and grew and grew. Dad passed away in Christmas 1985."

The Star interviewed Louise Stewart in her home on Saturday, May 5. Mrs. Stewart, who will be 95 on December 11 this year (2007), said that it was living in the city that convinced her and her husband Jim to come back to Victoria County. "We were in Halifax and he was working there doing plumbing and heating for a company when he decided he wanted to take some courses in air conditioning because he could see that was the coming thing. He went Nova Scotia Technical School in Truro.

"We just didn't like the city life, no place to live; you ended up living upstairs with two kids in a bedroom and the stove downstairs. This was in wartime. We came back to Tobique Narrows and in 1942 took over the business. He did mostly plumbing at first and then we got into the appliances, then furniture. Jim did a lot of thinking. One day a traveller came along and I asked him if he would sell us some merchandise and he said he would by all means. We bought a few rocking chairs and some kitchen equipment. That tied up a room of the house and from that we went into chesterfields. We would go to Toronto, Montreal, and Quebec City to furniture shows. We never dropped (stopped selling) appliances - it was always a good leader."

A Flourishing Business

Once Jim and Louise Stewart took over the business and expanded into other lines, they found during the postwar years that business was booming. With about three dozen employees, J. M. Stewart took contracts from the Edmundston area to Fredericton. "Jim was very good at costing," said Louise Stewart. "Everyone wanted Jim Stewart to fix their plumbing and heating and it just got better. We had 35 employees at the peak years. The oil companies, like ESSO and Shell, he kept their pumps going and he put a lot of furnaces in, Bert Dee did, down at Fredericton. I remember that Mrs. Fraser on Waterloo Row wouldn't have anybody but Jim Stewart looking after her furnaces and plumbing. She was Donald Fraser's wife or mother, I can't remember which. I did all the bookwork and the hardest part of bookkeeping was making 5 or 6 copies for the government when we did work on schools or customs or a government building."

Working out of a building in Perth, the crews had to make their own heating equipment including stovepipe so had to almost carry all their equipment with them. "They took fleets of trucks out with all pipe making equipment, big heavy tools, brakes, cutters, all their sheet metal, pipes, patterns, threading equipment for plumbing, so they had a complete workshop they took with them and boarded there for the week," said Carolyn Stewart. "I remember when I was a kid after school we'd put rivets in the stovepipe. We had long-term employees who stayed here forever, from 1942 right on through. I remember Elwood Baker who was here from 1942 until he died; Neil Boone was here a long time too. It seems that everybody I talk to says: "I used to work there!"

"Then of course when they got into furniture they got into electrical as well," she went on. "Plumbing and heating and electrical, ventilation and air of course and they into TVs and appliances. At the beginning there weren't any refrigerators around here. Carpets...we sold everything there was to sell. We were the largest plumbing supply place around. Today we don't have any staff other than me. We have people on call to deliver furniture but most people today pick up their own."

Asked if she wanted to mention anything else about the J. M. Stewart business, Louise Stewart joked: "A lot of stuff should be mentioned and a lot of stuff shouldn't." What she enjoyed the most she said, were the times of relaxation when she and Jim would take their boat to Long Lake or another lake in the area. "He fished on Long and Trousers and Serpentine lakes. We took our boat out on Long Lake for 25 years. We'd drive that boat home on a trailer 3 times a week at least. That was a good time."