

Don (Wilfrid Donald) Stewart

MARCH 11, 2021

Don (Wilfrid Donald) Stewart, late of Regina, Saskatchewan and formerly of Arcola, Saskatchewan passed away peacefully on March 11, 2021 at Victoria Park Personal Care Home, Regina, Saskatchewan at the age of 82. His quiet presence and clever sense of humour is dearly remembered, and he leaves a remarkable legacy from his lifelong need to build things.



Don was born December 26, 1938, in Rivers, Manitoba, the youngest of four children in a musical family, all of whom loved learning, camping, hunting and dogs. Adventurous and industrious, he soon took a paper route, and perhaps inspired by the air base nearby, got his pilot's license after the family moved to Vancouver.

At the University of British Columbia, Don was a founding member of the curling club, and graduated from civil engineering in 1959. He earned his Masters of Engineering at Queen's University in Kingston, where he met Nora Young. She wowed him by playing the recorder while he chorded on guitar. In those days, he was driving a decrepit car with a passenger seatback that would fall flat at a certain speed, but he soon got himself a new Ford Fairlane, much more suitable for dating. They married in Toronto in 1964.

Don took his PhD at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, leaving behind his research on asphalt pavement design to explore computer modelling of transportation patterns. Nora typed the computer code into punch cards by the boxful, which had to be kept strictly in order. Dropping a box was a small catastrophe. For decades afterward, they wrote to-do lists on used punch cards.

In Lafayette, Don and Nora embarked on the first of many house renovations or building projects, and bought what would be their last brand-new vehicle for many years. “The Travel-all” was a massive 4x4 SUV before the days of SUVs. They also bought the first of many used vehicles, a postal delivery van that they towed behind the Travel-all to haul their belongings back to Canada, when Don joined the engineering faculty at the University of Saskatchewan in 1967.

They built a house outside Saskatoon, and then set to work renovating a very old stone house near Craven when Don moved to the Regina Campus (future University of Regina). At the U of R, he became the first Executive Director of the Canadian Plains Research Center, and later the first coordinator of the Regional Environmental Systems Engineering program.

Don would have liked to be a pioneer. He was quite fearless about leading and starting things. While living at Craven, he and Nora started raising cattle. He had spent time on relatives’ farms back in Manitoba, but Nora had grown up in downtown Toronto. He would have taken a homestead in the Peace River area if she had been keen, but they limited their northern adventures to some canoe trips and a month camping at Smoothstone Lake with two very young daughters, Laura and Glenna, in tow, while he and a student travelled by float plane to remote communities to interview Indigenous leaders for the Northern Canada Transportation Study.

One night driving home from the university, Don encountered a cow on the road. The collision took one horn off the cow, leaving her otherwise unharmed, and

rolled the Travel-all. As he hung from his seatbelt, listening to a dripping sound he feared was gasoline, Don worried about getting his briefcase out of the vehicle, because it contained the only copy of a thesis from one of his students.

He wanted to help and protect those he saw suffering. One of his favourite stories featured cows coming to rescue one of their herd. On a bitterly cold night, some cows wandered out on the frozen Qu'Appelle River and fell through the ice. Don was able to pull one out by throwing a chain around her neck and hooking it to the Travel-all. To his amazement and wonder, the other cows immediately surrounded her to keep her warm as she dried off.

At Craven, Don and Nora met Jack Mackenzie, a pioneer of outdoor education who brought school classes out to camp near their home. Together they dreamed up and founded the Saskairie Outdoor Education Center in the Moose Mountains northeast of Arcola. Don moved his young family, now including an adopted son, Flint, to Saskairie, where they lived in tents while building a log cabin for visiting school classes. In a way, Don got his homestead after all. With the patient help of neighbour Tom Scarrow, Don learned many farm skills, including how to harness a team of horses (hint: run one left-turn lead to each horse, not both to the left horse). He built an earth-sheltered garage of railway ties, and started designing their dream off-grid home.

Don's vision was bigger than an outdoor learning center in an untouched natural setting. An early environmentalist, Don wanted Saskairie to be a working farm, where students could see people living in harmony with nature. But as fuel costs ballooned in the 1970s, school travel plans shrank, and so did ambitions for Saskairie. Don turned his engineering research toward alternate energy, and he and Nora found a new place to build their off-grid home on their own farm just a few miles west.

Don designed the house tucked into a hillside to save heat, with salvaged barn lumber, thick insulation, and active solar heating supplemented by a wood-burning furnace. He cut back his teaching to half time so he would have more time for cutting firewood, putting up hay, and always building things. At the university, he worked on an experimental design of a vertical-axis wind turbine with wooden blades, on the hypothesis that wood would stand up to bending and pulling forces better than steel. To shape the blades, the engineering technician didn't have a big enough room available to run the 16-foot spruce planks through a planer, so they set it up in a hallway. At one point something blew apart and sent parts into the ceiling. The turbine was eventually assembled, but as funding for energy research shrank, the team struggled to finish designing an electronic braking system for it. After many years of work, it was never let loose to generate power.

The Travel-all shrank over the years. Don carved out part of its roof to give it a truck box, and built a wooden door between the box and the cab—a door that leaked dust and bits of hay at higher speeds. Later he carved away some more roof to make the truck a flat-bed. As it got older and harder to keep running, a succession of other trucks came along, all eventually joining the line of worn-out farm equipment on an eroded knoll down in the hay meadow.

At the top of the meadow, Don planted pine trees, to resemble the pine-topped ridges he had admired in the Peace River area. He had some ponds dug and dams built for stock watering, but as the years passed, he was less interested in changing the land and more interested in learning how it might have looked before settlers came. When Nora started a business growing native wildflowers and grasses to sell seed for restoration projects, he designed and built or modified various contraptions to help with harvesting and processing all those unique sizes and shapes of seeds.

He always had dogs, and continued to hunt for many years. In his boyhood, his mother had cleaned the ducks the boys brought home, but for Nora, he cleaned them out a bit in the field. When she went along, she sometimes had more hunting success than he did. Later he was just as happy to watch wildlife as to shoot it, and he planned farm projects with habitat in mind. To stay on good terms with the critters, he built and maintained good, tall fences around the gardens and orchard.

He loved sour tastes: tart homegrown apricots and cherries; wild chokecherries straight off the bush; lemonade mixed up with no sugar at all—a “toe-curler,” as he called it; and on rare visits to a restaurant, he might ask for a grapefruit float.

A quiet man, he enjoyed slipping extra meaning into just a few words. Hauling hay home from the lease back in Moose Mountain Park, he would ask, “Is it time to check the load?” That meant we were coming to a spot where he had noticed ripe raspberries that morning. On a winter evening, if he wasn’t out late in the workshop, he might call, “Fourth?”, just like the grad students back at Queen’s had done when they wanted to play bridge—even if only the first player was present.

As his children moved away, Don never got around to downsizing. Before he retired as Dean of Engineering in 1996, he went back fulltime at the university for a few years. Nora gave up the cattle herd, and they bought a temporary second house in Regina, where Don opened out a wall for a great room, created a doorway from a bedroom into the backyard with a chainsaw, and built a garage. Back at the farm, he kept building, adding several out-buildings, extending a dining room and sunroom, and adding a viewing tower with a homemade spiral staircase. He helped his brother Frank build a home on Mayne Island, B.C. When his daughter brought her family back to the farm, he helped build a strawbale extension onto their mobile home, and later a sunroom expansion on their house in town. His grandchildren Ruth and James got to join in farming and building as his children had years before, chasing stray cows, fetching tools, and even smoothing fresh

concrete. He helped design, build and get funding for the new skating and curling rinks in town, as well as a pavilion for events at the fairgrounds. As his Parkinson's advanced, his building projects grew more creative, and his designs more fanciful and, to his disappointment, less achievable.

A highlight of retirement was a trip to see Don and Nora's ancestral homeplaces in Scotland. In Arcola they learned Scottish country dancing and helped organize an annual Robbie Burns night. Don got a set of highland dress, including a Stewart tartan kilt, and took lessons on the bagpipes.

Back in high school in Vancouver, Don had been a proud member of the Kitsilano Boys' Band, and later in life he took up the baritone again, enjoying many small-town parades as a core member of the Arcola Community Band. With no regular bass drummer, the band recruited family members or even bystanders to pound out the beat. If the recruit was a small person, Don would march along with his horn held in front and the big drum strapped on his back, so the little drummer could follow behind him to hit it. When Don and Nora got too old for marching, the band rode on a decorated float. They were still playing Christmas concerts in care homes just months before Don and Nora left the farm for their own care home suite in January, 2020.

Don is survived by his wife Nora; daughters Laura (Grant) and Glenna (Blair); numerous grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

He was predeceased by his parents Wilfrid and Jessie (Betts) Stewart; his sister Sara "Sally" Harrity; his brother Francis "Frank"; his sister Ruth; as well as his son Flint.

The family would like to thank the staff at Victoria Park Personal Care Community for their kind and attentive care in Don's final months.

Those wishing to pay tribute to Don are encouraged to donate to promoting the energy transition, whether that's supporting an environmental organization or even just talking to a neighbour about what's possible.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, a Celebration of Life will be held at a later date.

Messages of Condolence

So sorry for your loss. We had so much respect for Don as a person - his kindness, his intelligence, and his commitment to things he held dear. He made a positive mark in many lives. Our love to all of you.

— **Anita and Foster Warriner**

So sorry for your loss Laura !! Praying

— **John and Blanca Powell**

Loved your words Laura, and would have loved to have known your dad, my kind of man; deep condolences.

— **Ken Christopher**

Don and his family came to Arcola and soon became outstanding citizens taking part in all community functions and a leading part in some. I wish Nora and her family the very best in the future. You have earned it.

— **Murray McMillan**

Deepest condolences to the Nora, Laura, Glenna and families.

Arcola has lost another of its brightest lights

— **Leigh Robinson**

Our deepest sympathy to Nora and family. Don's and Nora's contributions to their community and the earth is respected by many who had the pleasure to know them. They were good partners. Wishing Nora peace.

— Harry and Debra Laurent

Our deepest condolences to Nora, Galena, Laura and family. It was a pleasure meeting Don and his beautiful family, great memories.

Loves from the Lombardo family.

— Adrián Lombardo

I loved reading this tribute to your Dad, Laura. As is often the case, I wished I had been able to know him personally. I'm sure we would have had some great conversations. What a gifted and energetic man! I see now how you got your love of the environment and your pursuit of justice. May your memories warm your heart and may you find that peace that passes understanding as you grieve this great loss. My sympathy to your family. Take care of each other! ☐

— Linda Stumpf

Mrs. Nora, Glenna, Blair, Laura, Grant and families I offer you all my heartfelt condolences. I was fortunate to get to know Don many years ago through my friendship with Glenna.

Glenna often narrated childhood memories of her amazing off grid life on the farm to me. I was awestruck by the images that her stories conjured in my mind as she describe the life that her mom and dad provided for her, Laura and Flint.

It was through these stories that I quickly learned that Don was an intelligent, creative and innovative man who embraced the simplicity of nature, the harmony of music while balancing life with the prominence of education.

Don's work ethic as well as his passion for nature and the environment not only molded his children into well rounded individuals but also inspired generations of young people who embarked on a career in engineering.

Don will be missed but his memory will live on forever in those who knew and loved him.

— Maureen King

I am sorry to hear of your loss Nora and family. As a member of Saskairie I was lucky to see Don's enthusiasm for the outdoors. He led an honest and good life and I feel fortunate to call him a friend. I am sure you are left with so many wonderful memories of a great guy.

— Ray Christensen

So sorry to hear about Don. I had the privilege of working with him when we were planning and building the new rink in Arcola. I was so glad to have him with us, his knowledge and attention to detail gave our committee much needed depth. We all learned from him and always enjoyed his quiet sense of humour.

My sincere condolences to you Nora and to the rest of your family.

Brad Paton

— Brad Paton

Don was, and still is, my North Star.

Love, Ted

— **Ted Harrity**

My sympathy to your family. I don't know Don; the obituary was shared to me by my friend Wanda Harron because of my great interest in Saskairie. My son camped at Air Cadet winter outdoor camps at Saskairie. Our Estevan running/walking group members have enjoyed Saskairie. My dog & I hope to make our first trip there this summer. What a wonderful life Don lived! His story is beautifully written. Such an inspiration for us to go out & do & create & take in all life has to offer us. What a blessing he is to the world.

— **Audrey MacMurphy**

Deep condolences to Nora, Glenna, Laura and the Stewart family. I met Don a few times through Frank Stewart and found him to be a real gentleman. What a lovely tribute to Don!!

Valerie Ross-Dressler, Calgary, AB Canada

— **Valerie Ross-Dressler**

I was surprised and saddened to hear of Don's illness and death. We had been out of touch for many years but I have fond memories. I will be praying for the family in their grief.

God bless,

Jack Katzberg

— **Jack David Katzberg**

Dear Nora,

Daughter, Marnie just sent me Don's obituary. I am so sorry to learn of his passing. Upon reading I realize that I didn't really know much about Don. What a great man and what great achievements in his wonderful life. Together, you had so many wonderful adventures. I will always remember your thoughtfulness in the card you sent me after my marriage with Fran broke up. Thank you and blessing to you and your wonderful family.

Mark

— **Mark and Heather Roper**

sorry for ur loss the girls are sad to hear of Don's passing...

— **Melanie Brass**

My deepest condolences to Nora and family. As the current Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science at the University of Regina, I would like to express our greatest appreciation for Dr. Stewart's dedicated service and contributions to the Faculty.

— **Phillip Choi**



<https://www.myalternatives.ca/obituaries/stewart-don-wilfrid-donald>

Printed on June 3, 2026