

Keeping the Heart in the Home

JUDE AND FRED EILERS HAVE INGENUOUSLY REMODELED THE FLORIDA HOME THEY BUILT 45 YEARS AGO TO KEEP PACE WITH THEIR LOVE OF EARLY FURNISHINGS.

By Gregory LeFever



Photography by Jill Peterson

People say a house is a shelter but a home is where the heart is. People also tend to surround themselves with furnishings that please them, with things they consider beautiful. For many people, this creates a real conflict – the desire to keep the home and its many memories, versus living somewhere else that may now better match their tastes.



For countless couples, the problem is insurmountable. But for Jude and Fred Eilers, a mix of ingenuity, artistic vision and decorative courage has enabled them to rework their 45-year-old home on the outskirts of Tampa, Florida, to reflect their evolving preferences in style and furnishings.

Perhaps this has been possible because the Eilerses are not trend-chasers or followers, preferring to create an environment that matches their own likes instead of what the home-décor mavens say. You see their creativity and inventiveness especially in the blending of vintage 1800s architectural pieces into their 1960s house. There's also the occasional battered and tattered chair, cupboard or painting that reveals a love of the well worn. Then there's the sprinkling of English antiques that might raise eyebrows among American-only purists.

"My friends have wonderful taste, and everybody has what's important to them," Jude says. "A lot of people don't want anything that's made outside of this country. They want everything to be purely American, and I can appreciate that. But Fred and I love England. We've gone many, many times over the years and I love the history and I love the look. So we have some wonderful old European pieces mixed in with the American."

Previous page: The Eilerses created a striking atmosphere in their master bedroom by combining pieces salvaged from an early New Hampshire house with new woodwork. The result is this faux fireplace with its vintage surround, the raised-panel wall and two closets. The Eilerses obtained the early architectural elements from John & Deborah Melby Antiques of Maine. A two-drawer mule chest in original salmon paint stands below the early mottled Queen Anne mirror. The gate-leg table is probably Colonial Revival and the make-do sofa was built from pieces of a hired-man's rope bed in original red.

Top: An early English silhouette with a gold-painted background hangs above a fireplace mantel.

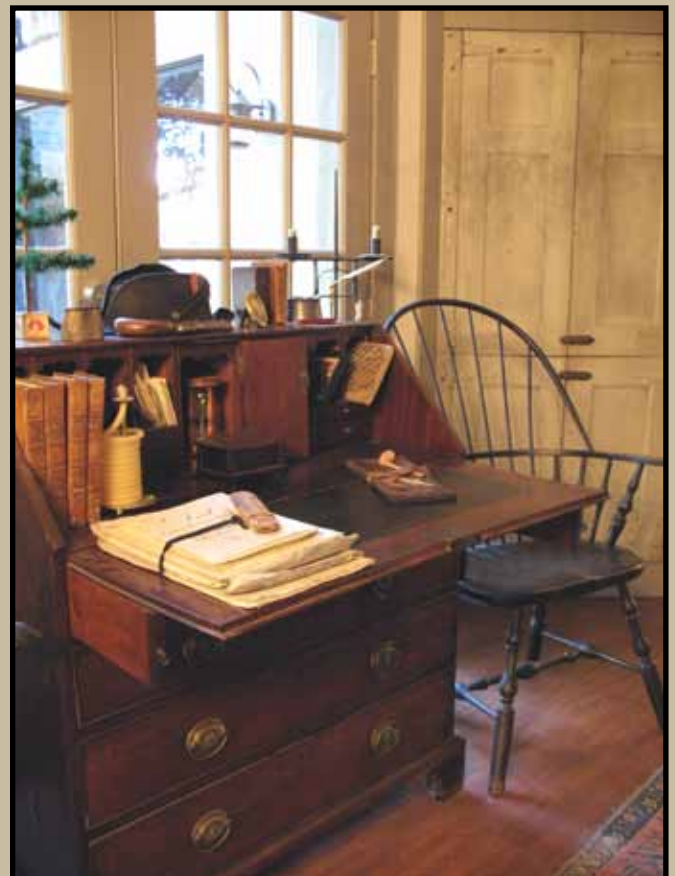




Left: The Eilerses bought the 19th-century rope bed in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The unusual vintage valance above the bed is all crewel embroidery and fit perfectly, Jude says. She stitched the crewel bell-pull hanging next to the highboy and above the chaise lounge, which are both reproduction Chippendale pieces. An early blanket chest is at the foot of the bed, and the blue box is square-nailed.

Lower left: The Eilerses built the corner cupboard in the bedroom using a vintage door from an early Pennsylvania German home. Jude calls the slant-front desk her "rescue desk" and it displays a stack of old deeds. The 1840s pistol lying on top of the desk is a percussion model. The Windsor chair is a Colonial Revival reproduction.

Lower right: The early washstand still wears its original blue paint. Jude collects samplers, and this one is among her favorites, dated 1767 and featuring exceptionally tiny stitching.



“We have pieces we enjoy,” she continues, “and I believe every single piece that we’ve brought into our home has a story. It’s as if a lot of them came here for a visit and then stayed.”

Changing Tastes

Jude describes her home as “sort of a rustic contemporary.” She and Fred are natives of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and had been married a half-dozen years when the University of South Florida hired Fred in 1967 to teach biology. “We designed the house that year and did most of the work ourselves,” she recalls. “We were just kids and we decided to raise our family here.”

Originally totaling 1,650 square feet, they’ve expanded the house over the years to its current 3,200 square feet, adding a large family room, a combination art studio and guest room, and extending the master bedroom.

“Like everybody else, we started out with walnut Danish Modern bedroom furniture, a pecan dining room set with lighted china cabinet, and oak in the kitchen area with a pie safe,” Jude explains. “I don’t know what prompted the change in our tastes, but we began going to auctions here and buying older pieces and selling off our newer things – nothing was really planned.”





Previous page: The living and dining room are combined in the Eilerses home, with the dining area dominated by the early 1800s scrub-top refectory table and large Welsh cupboard. The living room features a stretcher-base table, all-peg construction, an early English joint stool, and a candle stand in old red paint. On the table in front of the wingback is one of Jude's oldest finds, a 1690s German book made of vellum.

Left: The Eilerses found this early fireplace surround in Nashville, and Fred expertly modified it to fit the working fireplace in the living room. Above the fireplace is a portrait in serious disrepair that's one of Jude's favorite pieces, and she's named the unknown woman in the painting "Matilda" after her friend Tilly Walker, who sold Jude the painting. Other early pieces include the bluish-green box trunk and the gray box with domed lid sitting on the mantel. The ladderback chair has black-over-brown paint and unusually tall finials.

While their evolving tastes may not have followed a plan, it's evident the seeds of this fondness for vintage furnishings were planted many years earlier.

Loving the Old

Jude and Fred met in 1957 while freshmen at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and

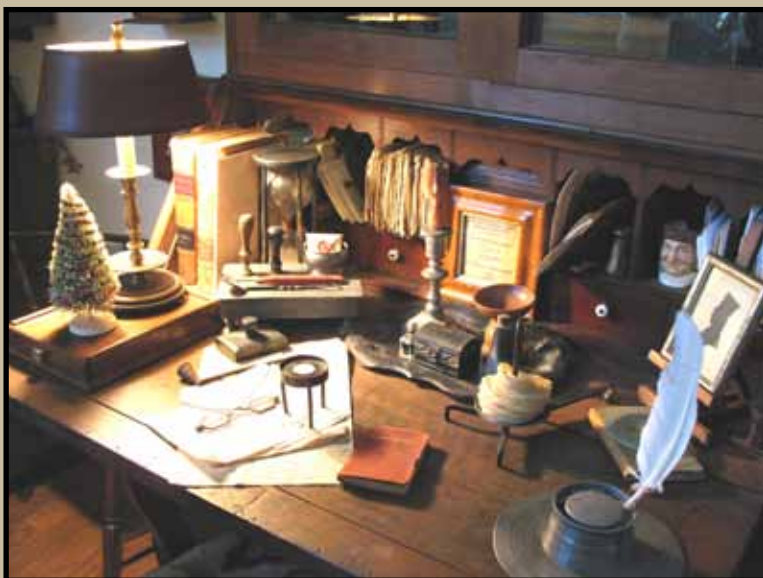
were married following graduation in 1961. He got a research assistantship at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and she taught school in nearby South Lyon. "We didn't have much money, but we enjoyed going to barn sales where we'd buy smalls, mainly kitchen smalls," Jude says.

Following a brief stint in Ohio - where Fred had temporary teaching posts at Ohio Wesleyan University and Oberlin College there and where they continued combing the countryside for antiques - they moved to Tampa when Fred landed his South Florida professorship teaching genetics and microbiology. There they raised their two sons, Jeff of Laguna Hills, California, and Mark of Tampa.

The nearly half-century in Tampa offered several trips to Colonial Williamsburg and Europe, many days spent in Florida auction houses and at the big shows in Nashville, plus making friends with some of the finest antique dealers in the eastern United States. "I've come to love everything that's old," Jude says. "I love early furniture, baskets, crocks, samplers, quilts and coverlets, and my latest love is the architectural pieces."

Focus on Folk Art

Along the way, Jude also pursued her lifelong interest in art -- "I've done art since I was a little kid" and minored in it in college - establishing a reputation as a folk artist. "This was in the 1980s when folk art was so big," she recalls. "I designed wooden pieces such as Christmas items, shore birds and tavern signs." She sold her creations to shops around the country, even including the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City as well as to individuals.



Above: The tall walnut secretary from the late 1800s is filled with leather-bound books. A rack for clay pipes and a silhouette adorn the wall to the left of the secretary, while on its right is a half-stock percussion long rifle, probably from Ohio, and an 1823 English sampler with unusual vertical dimensions.

Top left: The top corner cupboard is a circa-1790 English piece from Renninger's Antiques in Mount Dora, Florida, while the bottom cupboard is oak but of unknown origin. To the left of the cupboards is a country Queen Anne chair with rush seat and Spanish feet. The low-back Windsor is likely from the early 1800s with a saddle seat and distinctive design. A make-do repair with a strip of metal holds the arm piece together.

Middle left: This counter desk holds a number of Jude's leather-bound books and old letters, along with a horn cup filled with turkey feathers. In front of the desk is a treen container with lathe-turned lid and base. The portrait is English, probably from the mid-1800s, and came from Maxine Craft Antiques in Sarasota.

Left: A vignette of the secretary's desk area shows a wax jack for heating the wax to seal documents. A little three-legged magnifying glass for reading maps stands near a large pewter inkwell designed for storing quill pens. The letters on the desk date to the 1790s.

Eventually she moved on to painting wall murals in the style of early-1800s artists such as Rufus Porter. Her first was in the Bradenton, Florida, home of good friend Mary Frost (featured in the Summer 2012 issue of *A Simple Life*) and she has two in her own home. "I ended up doing quite a few murals in people's homes, but there are only a few left because houses get sold, the murals get painted over, and that's the way it goes. Still, it was a wonderful undertaking and a lot of fun."

Below: The Eilerses dining area features a large, 19th-century Welsh cupboard ideal for displaying Jude's collections of vintage pewter and Blue Canton plates. The pewter is a mix of early American and English. On top of the cupboard are several demijohns, colorful glass containers used for centuries to store and ship bulk liquids. The tall-case clock is English. The Windsor chairs surrounding the refectory table are reproductions from Lawrence Crouse Workshop, and the centerpiece is a display of Jude's stone-fruit collection, including a rare half-apple piece.

Today Jude satisfies her artistic drive with smaller, more manageable projects. "I'm doing little silhouettes and small portraits, things I can handle and do on my own time," she says, selling them here and there when the opportunity arises but focused more on the simple joy of creating them.

Creating New with Old

The couple's love of early furnishings, Jude's skills as a folk artist, Fred's woodworking ability, and the ongoing expansion of their 1960s house all converged a few years ago to create the house's most extraordinary architectural features.





In their master bedroom and kitchen, the Eilerses have ingeniously taken pieces salvaged from early New England homes and married them to newer woodwork to create period-looking walls, hearths, closets, cupboards and a pantry. The old pieces still display their centuries-old finishes to create an atmosphere otherwise impossible to capture in a contemporary house.

Working with antique dealers John & Deborah Melby of Eastport, Maine, and Mary Elliott of Pepperell, Massachusetts, the Eilerses obtained architectural elements from New England homes that had been torn down, including fireplace surrounds, raised-panel wall sections, and doors, all with original finishes and in varying degrees of crookedness and disrepair.

“We were in the process of enlarging the master bedroom and I knew we could build these pieces into the new structure,” Jude says, describing the bedroom’s vintage fireplace surround, raised-panel wall, and two doors now attached to closets.



Top left: The server table beneath the mirror is an early piece with wide boards on both its top and sides. Its original black finish with mustard striping also marks it as a rare item. Fred found it in a junk shop years ago and bought it for \$16, which makes it all the more special.

Above left: Another favorite Christmas decoration at Colonial Williamsburg is stacking glass cake plates. Here Jude has replicated the decoration with cake plates and assorted crystal she’s collected over the years.

Above center: A faux cake made of wax by Jude’s friend Pat Whitmore still appears delectable.

Above right: Jude describes the subject of the early 1800s portrait as “the most dour-looking fellow you’ve ever seen,” yet Fred paid \$125 for it at an auction in St. Petersburg – and when the Antiques Roadshow appraisers came to Tampa, they said the portrait was worth \$2,000 or more.



Fred constructed new woodwork wherever it was needed to make the vintage pieces fit. "Fred's work has been phenomenal," Jude adds. "The fireplace surround we got for the kitchen was very old and just held together with brackets. It was really crooked and he put it back together so it was straight and then built the walls around it. He's very handy with that sort of thing."

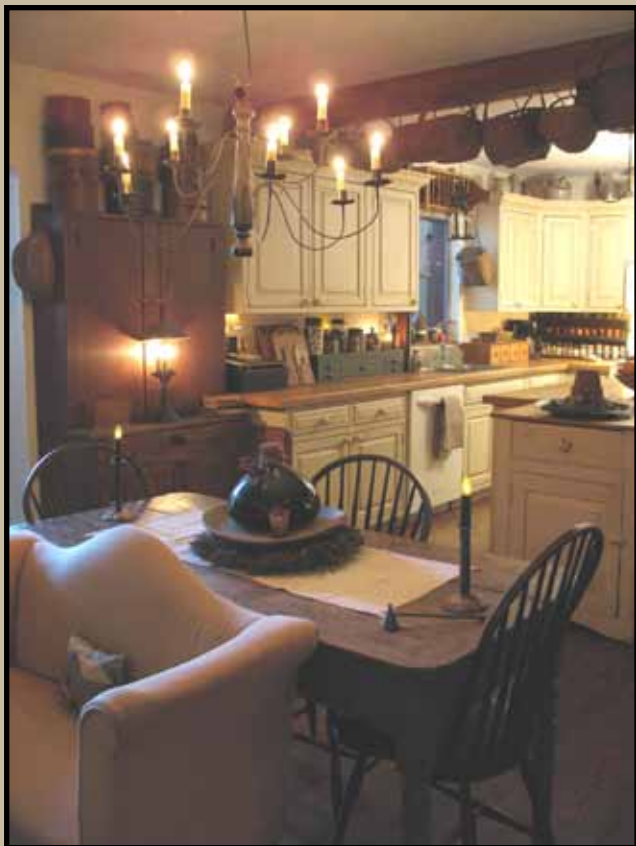
In some places, Jude matched new paints to the old finishes to create a cohesive appearance, in other places she painted new wood and then used her skills as a folk painter to give the new wood an aged appearance. The Eilerses used the same approach - combining vintage architectural elements with new wood and period-matching painting - on a functional pantry Fred built using an early yellow door and wall Jude obtained in Nashville.

"I feel we've given these old pieces a new life," she says, "and I'm very, very happy with the way it's all turned out."



Top: This 1800s pantry shelving holds Jude's collection of salt-glaze crockery, treenware and wood boxes. She bought it from Mary Sparger of Sparger & Sparger Antiques. Sitting on top of it are two cupboards, one with unusually wide drawers and the other a vintage apothecary cupboard. Next to the shelves is a dry sink in its original orange-red paint.

Above: An early wood box with original red paint and a small keg.



Yet another example of the couple's determination are the 12-inch pine floor boards they installed in parts of the house. "Because of the high water table, many houses in Florida are built on concrete slabs, including this one," Jude explains. "We wanted wood floors but people said it couldn't be done. So we literally glued and weighted them down with heavy things like concrete blocks and engine parts until the glue dried. It's been seventeen years now and everybody said it wouldn't work, but it has."

'That Hunting Instinct'

Jude has been on countless antiquing jaunts in the past fifty years, some with Fred and many others with her friends whose tastes also have evolved over the years. "Some of my friends are much more into the primitive look than I am," she says. "Probably the most worn-looking things I have are the architectural pieces we've incorporated into the master bedroom and kitchen. All of my tables are old, and some of the cupboards are really old. And I love it all."



Among some of Fred's favorite items are tall-case clocks and antique firearms, and he's made some incredible finds. There's an early serving table in the couple's dining room, stately in its unusual black finish with mustard-colored striping. "Fred found it years ago in a junk store and got it for sixteen dollars," Jude laughs. Another time he paid \$125 at auction for an early portrait of a gruff-looking man. The Eilerses had it appraised when PBS's *Antiques*

Top: This view of the kitchen shows the unusual scrub-top table that dates from the early to mid-1800s as indicated by its wide boards and pegged construction. On one side, the table displays early mustard paint, while its other side is gray. A stepback cupboard, also from the mid-1800s, stands along the wall in its original red.



Middle: The view through the glass door of this hanging cupboard in the kitchen reveals an assortment of treen cups, horn cups, a sugar cone, wallpaper-covered cardboard boxes, a felt Santa and other Christmas items.

Left: Jude has a collection of breadboards, shown stacked beside a small box of drawers. The glass jar in front contains numerous broken clay pipes, mostly from the 1700s and fished from rivers in England where men had tossed them. Though Jude began buying them years ago, clay-pipe fragments such as these are now highly collectible.



Roadshow came to Tampa and they learned it was worth a couple thousand dollars at least. Jude is one of the original group of longtime friends who frequent the region's shops and shows – especially the Heart of Country and Tailgate-Music Valley antiques shows in Nashville – and they occasionally convene at each other's homes to share their love of early items that they know are becoming harder to find.

"It's been a wonderful relationship," Jude says. "Even though we don't see each other very often, it's fun and it's inspirational and it keeps us going. Your house can fill up, but you still have that hunting instinct – you want to keep finding these wonderful things, and there's always something new waiting around the corner."

And for Jude, "something new" is usually something old. A battered portrait of a woman from the early 1800s, maybe even earlier, hangs above the living room fireplace. "It's in pretty bad shape," she admits. It had belonged to a Wisconsin friend, Tilly Walker, who planned to have it repaired but Jude bought it from her first.

"My friend Tilly said, 'You're not going to leave it like this, are you?' and I said, 'Oh, absolutely!' Maybe it was us going to England and seeing those old, moldering buildings and furnishings – all of which I love – but I wanted to keep the painting just as it is. So here I am in my contemporary house, surrounded by these wonderful old things."



Opposite page: Using early New England architectural pieces and woodworking know-how, the Eilerses have created a remarkable setting at one end of the kitchen. The mantel and surround are vintage pieces from Maine dealers John & Deborah Melby, and the walls are from Mary Elliott, a Massachusetts dealer. Fred added new wood where needed to create a cohesive wall, while Jude skillfully matched paint colors and painted the trompe l'oeil bricks in the faux fireplace. The early table here displays its mustard side. Note that the variation in the wall color is due to sun striking part of the wall – it's actually a gray-blue color.

Above left: Fred used an adz to hand-carve the mantel of the working fireplace in the family room.

Above middle: Powder horns and a possible bag hang from the mantel. The lantern is likely from the early 1800s.

Above right: A decorated feather tree adds holiday cheer to the family room.



Left: Jude has incorporated several children's items into her combination art room and guest bedroom. The bed is an early rope model with a trundle bed beneath it. The mule chest has three drawers and a lift-top, and Jude describes it as "very rough and worn but with a real personality."

Bottom left: A collection of old skirts and other clothing are displayed in the guest room, as well as several samplers.



Above right: A counter desk displays a variety of smalls in the guest room. Of the two cupboards, the hanging one is older than the corner cupboard, and may have been a built-in during its earlier days, as indicated by its gray front and red sides.

The image in the background of this page is a portion of one of Jude's wall murals in the home.

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