



A Missouri Citizen  
Jim Austin, DVM  
Independence

“I come from a North Dakota farm family. In retrospect, my mom and dad were very community-involved, so it is only natural that I started doing these things when I was very young”.

Dr. Austin’s mother and father were both 4-H leaders and his brother and sister were 4-H Club participants. When he was seven years of age, and the minimum age was ten years, his parents not wanting to leave him out, allowed him to participate without credit. His father was County Fair Board President for as long as Jim can remember and later went on to become a member of the State Legislature in the North Dakota House of Representatives.

“I had excellent role models. I grew up with this as my heritage. From the time I was little it was normal to know that I would be going to college. It was never if but only where. My parents would have to borrow money for all three of us kids to advance our educations. My father had an eighth grade education and my mother finished high school and 6 months of ‘normal school’ to be trained to be a rural elementary school teacher. There was absolutely no way that their kids would not have the opportunity for college.”

Jim graduated from North Dakota State University in 1959 without a major. He did, however, have three minors--agricultural journalism, animal science, and chemistry. In his senior year of college, he applied for admittance to the College of Veterinary Medicine at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas and felt fortunate to be one of sixty selected (only two from North Dakota); K-State granted his Bachelor of Arts and in 1963 his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degrees.

Upon graduation, he came to Independence, MO. to assist in a veterinary practice where the doctor was recovering from a heart attack. After six months he accepted his active duty obligation to the US Army and became a 1st Lieutenant. He established refugee camps in Vietnam during most of his military duty. In January of 1967, he returned to the same Independence, MO practice, Schondelmeyer Animal Hospital. One of the first things that he did was to become a charter member of the Sunrise Optimist Club and went on to serve as secretary / treasurer of the Sunrise Optimist Baseball League.

In 1973, he was named President of the Greater Kansas City Veterinary Medical Association and has remained a member ever since. He is now a lifetime member. Dr. Austin practiced as a veterinarian for 41 years and stated he loved every minute of it. He was fortunate to have many loyal employees. One of his receptionists retired after 23 years and two others after 15 and 16 years. He was a member of the

American Veterinary Medical Association and his clinic was honored by selection to the American Animal Hospital Association.

He was a member and on the Board of Directors of the Independence Chamber of Commerce. While on that board, he became one of five members of the Santa-Cali-Gon Fair Board. This was the start of his heritage preservation activities. Harry Waggoner, last heir of the Waggoner-Gates Milling Company family had just died the previous year. In 1967, the Chamber of Commerce discovered that the Waggoner-Gates property had become available for sale. Rod Choplin, a legal representative of the heirs, made arrangements for the Chamber to look at the Waggoner House. They were going to see if it was in adequate condition in which to store wooden pallets. Rumor had it that the house was in terrible shape. On the day of their visit, the dining room table was covered with cut-glass china as one of the heirs was taking inventory of some of her inheritance. All of the furnishing in the mansion were from the turn-of-the-century. The house was in much better conditions than expected, so Jim and Rod helped start a fund to raise money for its acquisition. The representatives of many organizations of Independence raised \$280,000 and gave \$250,000 to the city which, with a matching state grant, was used to purchase the home and five acres of grounds. The remaining \$30,000 was given to the Bingham-Waggoner Historical Society to purchase furnishings for the house.

This property has become the Bingham-Waggoner Estate and is open to the public for tours as well as for private parties and weddings. Dr. Austin is now a volunteer in charge of the rentals of the mansion and grounds. Many volunteers decorate the home for Halloween and in the Christmas season they place three to five trees and holiday decorations in every room of the 26-room mansion.

Twenty-eight years ago the Bingham-Waggoner Historical Society established a fund raising project called "Pig Pickin'-Chicken Lickin' Feast". It is held annually on the grounds. Dr. Austin has been in charge of this activity for twenty-five of the twenty-eight years. The Society also hosts a yearly Doll Show, Fashion Show, Trails Breakfast, Antique & Craft Fair, Valentine's Party, and Halloween Spooktacular. The home is open for tours from April to October and December.

When asked why he does so much in the community, Dr. Austin replies "Because I have fun doing it. I wouldn't do it if all these things weren't fun for me."

"Fortunately I have a very, very tolerant wife and daughter who also get involved in many community organizations."

"Just the look at the reaction on kids' and adults' faces when you tell them that the original six-room house was built in 1852 by a saddle and harness maker utilizing slave labor is a great reward. That doesn't mean a thing to them until you add that electricity, Custer, and Lincoln all came later."

Dr. Austin plans to remain in Independence. "Well, I think my wife will just dig a hole in the backyard for me. We have been here since we married."

Dr. Austin's wife, Judy, was a teacher and a stay-at-home mom. Their daughter, Jolie, is an Independence middle-school English teacher.

In 1994, two bulldozers were at the Chicago & Alton Depot ready to tear it down, so that the railroad company would no longer be responsible for any accidents or damage on the abandoned property. However, they had no demolition permit. The Depot had been declared an historic site the year before, so someone cautioned them to wait. A group, including Dr. Austin, was given a year's time to move the Depot. They were successful in relocating it alongside a train track about one and a half miles away.

Jim has done fund raising for the Depot by putting together special Amtrak and bus trips, two per year. The 2009 fall trip to Albuquerque, N.M will be the 28th such excursion. They started as day trips and now some involve nearly a week. Chocolates are always included.

In 1980, he received "Citizen of the Year" award from the Independence Chamber of Commerce, the Community Builders Award from Independence Neighborhood Councils, and in 2005 he received the W.Z. Hickman Award for the Historic Preservation and Distinguished Service and in 2006, the Missouri Municipal League gave Dr. Austin the title of Independence Outstanding Leader Award.

He also served on the Jackson County Extension Council, was a Cub Scout Leader, Webelos Scout leader, past president of the Bingham-Waggoner Historical Society and Sunrise Optimist Club. He also participated in Y-Indian Guides with his late son and Y-Indian Princesses with his daughter. He was instrumental in getting the Osmonds to come to Independence Day Celebration for the Independence Chamber of Commerce and was a charter member of Sunrise Optimist Club, Bingham-Waggoner Historical Society, Independence Animal Emergency Clinic and Friends of Chicago & Alton Depot.