



SINCE 1841

# WOODLAND

HISTORIC CEMETERY & ARBORETUM



## Dr. Levitt Ellsworth Custer

Dentist, Balloonist, Inventor  
1862-1924

### Dr. L. E. Custer: Dedicated to His Profession

By E. J. Spencer, D.D.S.

*This article first appeared in the March 1964 issue of the Ohio Dental Journal*

" The dentist who brought most plaudits to Dayton in the profession is best known for his inventions and is fondly remembered as the spark plug of any meeting in which he had a hand.

Like all great individuals, Dr. Levitt Ellsworth Custer had

**Dr. Levitt E. Custer,**  
**DENTIST.**

Preservation of natural teeth by latest approved methods. Strictly first-class work guaranteed.

89 W. High St., over Straley's Grocery.

some underlying philosophies which would serve any dentist well today, just as they served him more than seven decades ago.

He often said he observed the fundamental principle in any enterprise—“strict attention to business.”

This from a man who kept waiting patients in fear of sitting down in his office where he combined his electrical knowledge and interest in devices that were literally shocking more often than not.

This from a man who usually had his cornet at hand when he attended dental association meetings the country over and liked nothing better than to parade up and down the hotel halls in the wee hours blaring “There’ll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.”

This from a man who invented a porcelain oven that was to enable any dentist to make porcelain fillings and crowns, a process which had previously been limited to less than a dozen dentists the world over. [...]

"Dr. Custer was born June 18, 1863, at Perrysville, Ohio. His father, Isaac Newton Custer, was a dentist. He attended public schools in New Philadelphia and Westerville before entering Otterbein University, from which he was graduated in 1884.

As a youngster, he worked for a jeweler and in his father’s dental office. His savings for his college training came from a year (1878-79) he spent playing cornet with a river circus band traveling from Cincinnati to New Orleans. Before entering the Ohio College of Dental Surgery in 1885, he taught music and school at the Boys’ Industrial Farm at Lancaster.

As he completed his junior year at dental school, a written examination was required for the first time. Custer’s paper so pleased the faculty that he was given a scholarship for the next year, thus inaugurating the gift of a junior prize for the best general examination.

At graduation, he received two gold medals, one for the best general examination and the other for best attainments in mechanical dentistry. He also received first honorable mention in operative dentistry."

## But Dr. Custer's success rate was not 100%

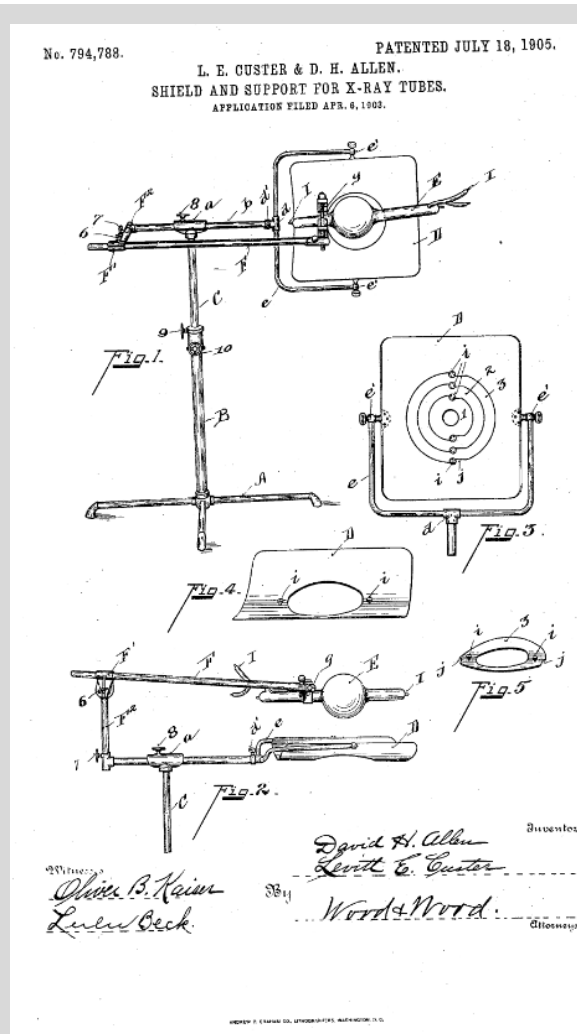
"He once told Dr. Burton Lee Thorpe, who had asked him for the essentials for success in young men in dentistry;

"I began the practice of dentistry in Springfield, Ohio, in 1887, with meager equipment. Spent my spare moments, of which I had many at first, in making an electric engine and other appliances, which I am still using today. I would have located in Dayton from the beginning, as that was my preference, but a dentist by the name of Elson, having heard of my attainments at the dental college, offered me a partnership [...] I soon found him to be of the quack type and immediately took steps to sever this association with him and start up for myself. The larger part of his practice had been shifted upon me and when I left him in August, 1888, the majority of these patients followed me, and from that day to his I have been busy every minute. It’s an ill wind that blows nobody good. [/] I always felt that I would have succeeded in any location for I observed the fundamental principle in any enterprise, namely, strict attention to business. This included keeping up to date the literature of the profession, attendance at the dental association, and acquaintance with all things professional which would be of the greatest benefit to my patients. I was continually studying and experimenting with electricity at all odd moments. My fees have increased with my experience."

There’s nothing wrong with that advice and rewards are the same for today’s dentists [...].

"I always paid a great deal of attention to the best means of saving all teeth and became known as a dentist who does not extract teeth. The people of this city had to be taught that ‘ulcerated’ teeth could be saved. If I had to choose my career again, I would not select the practice of dentistry today as a remunerative profession, however, but if I were about to begin practice again, I do not know of anything that I would do differently from what I

have done. The principal point a young dentist should observe in order to build and maintain an ethical practice and win the esteem of his community is to pay close attention to his profession, choose clean associates and live within his income. Attend dental societies and keep busy either in his laboratory or with the literature of his profession."



"It was his combination of dental dedication and a keen interest in electrical devices that was to make Dr. Custer best known in his profession. Of all his inventions his electrical porcelain furnace was probably his foremost.

Until Dr. Custer introduced an oven in 1894 that would permit fusing of dental porcelain under careful control, less than a dozen dentists in the world used this type filling. Previous methods called for a coal or coke oven, about the size of a medium sized book case, which required six to eight hours of stoking before it was ready for use. Then—and this was what limited the field of practitioners—care had to be taken to avoid 'gassing' the porcelain and to maintain temperature control that assured durability of the filling material.

Dr. Custer's oven, on the other hand, was about the size of a single book and brought about a purity of heat and perfect control. Prosthetic dentistry was revolutionized.

The first invention by Dr. Custer to win wide use among dentists was the first electric gold annealer, produced in

1890. Previously, dentists passed gold through the flame of a spirit lamp to make it annealable.

In 1893, Dr. Custer introduced a carbon arc light that brought the dentist 6000 degrees of heat so he could melt and work with platinum. Before this invention, only refineries were able to obtain the temperatures of 3600 degrees necessary to salvage platinum scrap. This method is expensive for the individual dentist.

Also credited to Dr. Custer's inventive ability was the first electric cabinet, the first electric match, a right angle handpiece, a celluloid and chamois disc (this was bought by the S.S. White Company), an electric warm water device, an electric casting device and an interrupter for X-ray.

His keen interest in electricity brought him a fine library of books on the subject. And he contributed much to scientific literature. His textbooks, papers and recorded addresses totaled 46 before 1910, according to a bibliography published by the Dental Summary.

Dr. O. B. Kneisly, in articles in the April and June, 1952, bulletins of the Dayton Dental Society, gave thanks for having had an opportunity to learn many of Dr. Custer's dental methods using electrical appliances.

Dr. Kneisly also wrote of Custer's assistance to other dentists. "To the young practitioner who was lucky enough to come under his observation, and who could take his gibes and tricks, he was a father confessor who would help solve difficulties and cheer the lagging heart when the going was rough."

Those tricks to which Dr. Kneisly alluded were legend. Dr. Custer had his office filled with

mechanical contrivances with electric motors seemingly everywhere. Ceilings, walls and cases of drawers were loaded with gadgets of every kind."

"Touch anything and you dropped it quickly—if possible..."

Not all were for the patients' comfort, exactly. Many a patient would never sit down in the anteroom again after being exposed to one of Dr. Custer's "hot" seats.

"Sit down and you rose again promptly," Dr. Kneisly related, "touch anything and you dropped it quickly—if possible..."

Once a person had fallen for one of his pranks, Dr. Custer would roar with laughter and refer the "victim" to "that sign on the wall." Then the person would read the sign he had not noticed before; "Stand. Touch Nothing." The sign went unnoticed because it was above the door frame, seven feet from the floor.

Custer's friends knew him as "Lizzie." While he and most colleagues referred to him by that nickname, Dr. Kneisly said that they never learned why nor what it meant.

As a musician, prankster, or just a jolly fellow, Dr. Custer brought much gaiety to dental meetings, especially those of the Ohio Society. There are still many men who met him as the prime promoter and active officer of the Mystic Order of the Fleas. For a quarter of a century, that organization flourished with only a hotel bathroom as headquarters and meeting place. Ritualistic work, it was recalled, took place at the "altar," and initiations were said to result in "quite a stink." No doubt fortunately, there was no book to outline obligations, so details cannot be reported since they were the secret of the only active officer the Mystic Order of the Fleas ever had."

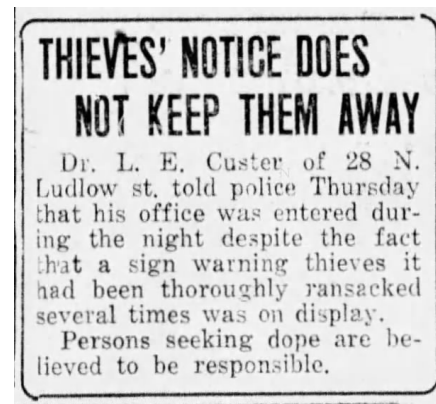


Images (above & below):

Dr. Custer kept his characteristic sense of humor, even when things did not go his way. When his house was robbed, Dr. Custer posted a sign in the front yard reading:

"Notice: To thieves - This residence has already been properly ransacked."

Alas, it doesn't seem to have worked.  
*Dayton Daily News, 1922*



## Cloud chasing was Dr. Custer's hobby

"Dr. Custer's real hobby was ballooning, or "cloud chasing" as it sometimes was called. He was involved in owning a operating several balloons, the largest of which would carry five passengers. Often Dr. Custer and another dentist with a similar interest, Dr. Plinney Crume, sailed balloons over the Dayton area, taking off from the Miami river bank near the Dayton Gas Company works, Gas for the balloons was piped from the nearby works."



**Image:** *The Dayton Herald*, 07/13/1913 page 1. Dr. Custer was responsible for pathfinding and acted as pilot on the lead balloon for this race in Kansas City, 1913.

## Custer's son was also an inventor

"Dr. Custer had one son, Levitt Luzerne, who also had an interest in ballooning and became an early aviation fan with Dayton's Wright brothers. The son, who died in 1962, was also an inventor. He developed vehicles for handicapped persons and amusement park devices. The son also flew the balloon in which a small printing press was mounted, small size copies of the Dayton Journal were printed and then "distributed" as the balloon flew from Dayton to Indiana. They carried mail on that flight in 1906, which was posted after they touched down in Indiana—probably the first instance of air mail."

## Custer member of first Dental Board

"Dr. Custer did not shirk any political responsibility in his profession. In 1892, Governor William McKinley appointed the first Ohio State Dental Board, and Dr. Custer was named a member along with Drs. Grant Molyneaux, J. E. Silcott, Grant Mitchell and Clare Smith.

He was elected president of the Ohio State Dental Association in 1896, the first Daytonian to be so honored by the state society. He was president of the Dayton Dental Society for the 1916-17 term.

When the Annual Clinic Meeting of the State Association was held in 1955 in Dayton, Dr. Wilbur Adair, Chairman of the State Museum and History Committee, collected and restored many of Dr. Custer's original inventions, working models and devices for a display. After the meeting, the entire exhibit was presented to the Museum at Bainbridge, Ohio.

Earlier, through the efforts of Dr. Kneisly and Dr. Ed Mills, Dr. Custer's library had been given to the State Association's library."

"Dr. Custer's contributions to the dental profession are to be found in most any practitioner's office even today, a century after his first and decades after his death. And there are still many dentists living who learned professional lessons firsthand from the son of a dentist who combined all his energies into furthering the profession."

Dr. Custer died January 3, 1924, leaving his wife, Effie Zimmerman Custer, and his

**RETIRED DENTIST OF CITY SUCCEUMBS TO FATAL HEART ATTACK**

**Dr. L. E. Custer Victim Of Heart Attack At Home**

Death of Dr. L. E. Custer Unexpected Because of His Previous Good Health.

**ACTIVE IN CIVIC AND PUBLIC HEALTH WORK**

Funeral Services Will Be Held at Woodland Chapel Saturday Afternoon.

Dr. L. E. Custer, 61, retired dentist, of 23 North Wilkinson street, died suddenly at his home, Thursday. Physicians said his death was due to heart trouble which he was known to have.

Although Dr. Custer suffered from a stroke of paralysis four years ago, from which he never apparently recovered, he appeared to be in good spirits Thursday, when he made a visit to the office of his son, L. Luzern Custer, head of the Custer Specialty company, Franklin street, and after he returned home.



*DR. L. E. CUSTER*

son: Representatives of national and state dental associations attended his funeral in Dayton."

Dr. Levitt Ellsworth Custer, his wife Effie, and their son Levitt Luzern Custer are buried in section 113, lot 338 at Woodland Cemetery.

## Upcoming Events!



### Tree Tour 5/8 @ 10am

With over 3000 trees and 165 native species, Woodland Cemetery is accredited as a Level II Arboretum.

We have 25 species of Oak trees and have 10 current or former State Champion Trees. Join tour guide Kay Linden as he gives you an enlightening tour of the Arboretum at Woodland Cemetery.

Meet at the Eichelberger Plaza at the main gates of the cemetery. Parking is available inside the gates. Please wear comfortable walking shoes and bring a water bottle if needed. Tours will launch rain or shine, except in the event of thunder or lightning.

All tours require a reservation and there is a suggested \$5 donation. All donations support the Woodland Arboretum Foundation which focuses



### Bird Walk 5/11 @ 9am

In late April and May several species of beautiful birds pass through the Dayton area; some decked out in bold plumage on their way to breeding grounds in Canada, while others stay to "set up house" in the States. Though small, these birds have often travelled here from hundreds of miles away—some as far as Argentina!

"On last year's walk, we saw 36 different species. I expect to see several different species of Warblers, Flycatchers, Vireos, Orioles, Thrushes, Tanagers, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak," says Amanda Lawson, an Ohio Certified Volunteer Naturalist, who leads this Bird Walk. "We'll also see our year-round residents, like chickadees, nuthatches, cardinals, and woodpeckers. Maybe even a Red-tailed or Cooper's Hawk!"

on the restoration, preservation, horticultural and educational projects needed to keep Woodland a cultural resource for Dayton and Ohio.

Click [here](#) to register!

“Woodland is like a green island in a sea of concrete—the abundant and diverse species of trees and shrubs are exactly what birds need to rest and refuel for their journey.”

Amanda Lawson has been a nature person since she was a kid. She is a current volunteer with Five Rivers MetroParks and is also a member of the Bird Brigade.

Don't forget to check the weather and wear your walking shoes. Cameras and binoculars welcome!

Click [here](#) to register!

## Share Your Story With Us!



Here at Woodland, we love to share stories of those who rest within our grounds.

It is most often thanks to family members or newspaper articles that those stories reach us, which allows us to include their loved ones in features like this.

Does your relative have a story we should be telling? Let us know by sending an email to [ashimp@woodlandcemetery.org](mailto:ashimp@woodlandcemetery.org)

## Come Visit Us!

### Volunteer opportunities

Woodland is seeking volunteers to give presentations to community groups on subjects such as local history, notable biographies, and trees.

Not into public speaking? Consider getting involved with our horticulture team, or assisting with special events & research projects.

\*If there is something you'd like to see



here at Woodland please reach out to us & suggest it!

**Tours & More:**

We welcome walkers, runners, and wanderers -- leashed dogs & school groups.

**Register for a guided tour:** visit the Woodland Cemetery website! Learn about fascinating Daytonians resting peacefully in one of America's oldest rural garden cemeteries!

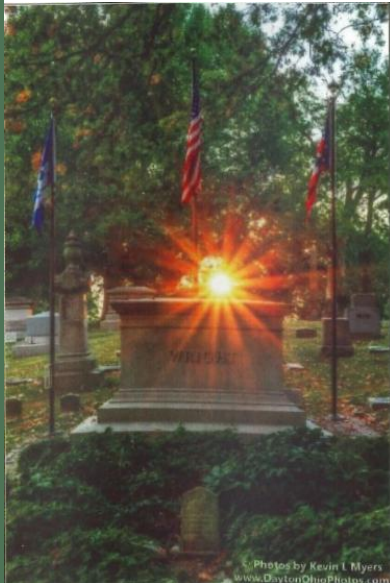
Or check out our **virtual tours!** (if you really don't want to go outside)

**Office Hours:**


Monday-Friday  
8am-5pm

If you need help finding where someone is buried, need directions to a particular area, or have questions about pre-planning or funeral services, Woodland's Staff is here to assist you!

**DONATE ONLINE!**



Photos by Kevin L. Myers  
www.OnlyForOhioPhotos.com



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Committed to providing dignified and caring funeral services and burial options to families of all faiths since 1841.

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woodlandcemetery.org

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For information call 937-228-3221 or e-mail [info@woodlandcemetery.org](mailto:info@woodlandcemetery.org)

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