

Livestock

The future of Grandpa's barn

By JAN COREY ARNETT

IT stands or leans, an aging giant. The animals may be gone or dairying has changed. Enormous round bales can't be stored in the mow nor behemoth equipment below. What is to be done with Grandpa's timber-frame barn?

The answers begin and end with eco-

nomics and personal values, balanced by sound information, imagination and engineering. The old barn may be able to continue its life on the farm, on what was once a farm, or in a new location.

Roger Bateson, of RJS Services, Prescott, has been repairing barns for 24 years. Roofing and siding are common repairs, but he also replaces foundations

and does major reinforcing. "Depending on the condition of the barn, repairing can save money over replacing. I have re-engineered barns for big equipment or for use as calf barns, workshops and other uses. People say, 'The barn's got to go.' People are so misled. The first thing is to get the hay, straw and junk out of it and see what you've got." Repairs done when they are



NEW LIFE: This 1870s barn was moved from Walker to its new home at Tillers International in Scotts.

minor, save money. Leaky roofs, missing siding and failing foundations spell disaster. Other problems are created by tree growth, bugs, rodents and shoddy work.

Mark Stitt, of Stitt Barn Preservation, Hesperia, has barns in his blood. At one time six family members operated barn businesses. Stitt agrees with Bateson. "Get the barn cleaned out and put in a floor. Then you really see the potential. A lot of times we can repair a barn for less money than to build a metal building. You get much more sidewall height in a barn." Repairs are more favorably taxed than new construction.

Stitt offers an essential caution. "People used to take out beams that supported the overhead structure so they could add a hay track. A barn must have load-bearing support to withstand the elements. If a barn is adapted for today's farm equipment, a haymow cannot simply be removed to gain space. The barn must be re-trussed, which may require adding metal I-beams."

Clare Koenigschnect of Fowler advises doing a little at a time with the most urgent needs being addressed first. Get references, and be clear on what is doable and how it will be done. Ask whether the contractor will be on-site with his crew and how large the crew is.

Scott Parsons, owner of Terry's Barn Restoration, Three Rivers, (founded by Terry Stitt), says a lot of his work involves replacing sills. He recommends adding a moisture barrier between the new sill and the foundation because wood absorbs moisture from the foundation. He is concerned about wrapping barns in steel. "I can understand the maintenance savings," he says, "but a barn has to breathe. Moisture has to be managed."

According to the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service's 2007 census, only 662,264 barns nationwide and a mere 21,368 remained on farms in Michigan. Off-farm barns were undocumented. The best hope for documentation lies with those who saved old photos.

When Omega Farms, Williamston, moved its cattle operation back to Michigan from Kansas in 2008, repairs began on 14 of the farm's 24 barns that had stood empty for 20 years. Co-owner Clifford Simmons II says, "The barns have more character than metal could ever offer. We have 14,000 visitors every year. These landmark barns are what we want them to see."

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■ In the August issue, a second article will explore new lives for old barns.

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