



Giving old barns new life

University of Wisconsin-Extension
State Historical Society of Wisconsin
Wisconsin Trust for Historic Preservation

Ethnic history and beauty of old barns

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This is the first in a series of publications about historic barns and farmstead buildings, and why it is important that they be saved for future generations. This publication and the one that follows cover the history of barns and farmstead buildings in Wisconsin, basic styles of barns, the history of silos and other farmstead structures, farm buildings built by various ethnic groups, and the beauty associated with barns. Future publications will address a number of topics relating to the restoration and maintenance of historic farmstead buildings.

Reminders of history

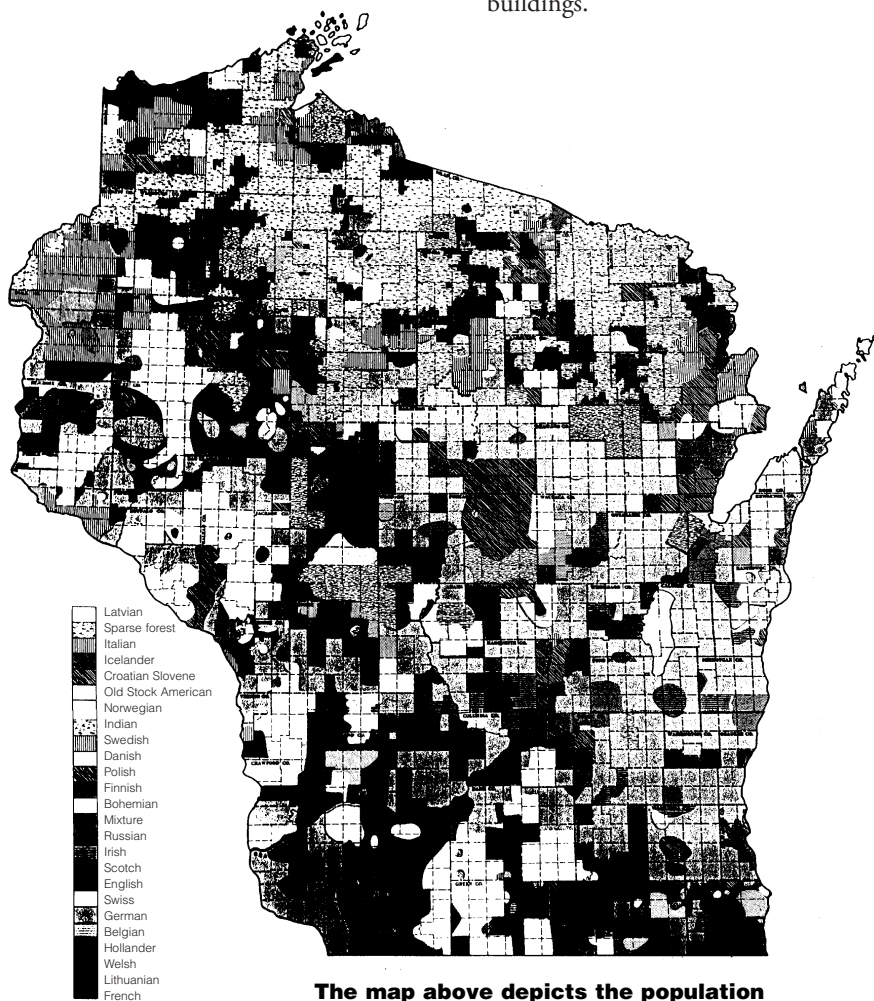
The barns of Wisconsin are silent reminders of Wisconsin's history, and a major source of beauty for the rural countryside. Barns are everywhere, along the interstate system, near major cities, snuggled against little villages, on dusty country roads that wind through the hills, on the banks of mighty rivers, and near gurgling trout streams. They are even found on Wisconsin's Madeline Island (in Lake Superior) and Washington Island (in Lake Michigan). Almost anywhere you go in Wisconsin you'll see a barn.

As recently as 1830 there were essentially no barns in the state. Northern Wisconsin was a vast forest land with giant pines and blue lakes. Southern Wisconsin was a combination of woodlands and prairies, where the giant bur oaks stood and big blue stem grass bent with the wind.

Settlement history

Jean Nicolet, a Frenchman, stepped ashore north of Green Bay in 1634. But Nicolet and the French who followed him were not farmers but explorers and fur traders. Later, some of them took up the plow and built farmsteads. The early French communities were located in and around Green Bay, Prairie du Chein and La Pointe on Madeline Island.

It was known that lead existed in southwestern Wisconsin before 1812, when miners came up the Mississippi River from Galena, Illinois. As word of lead mining in the area spread, Cornish and Irish miners began pouring into the region, following the



The map above depicts the population of Wisconsin in 1940 based on ethnicity.

Mississippi River route. Mineral Point became the center of lead mining operations north of the Illinois border. By 1845 half of Mineral Point's population of about 1,500 was Cornish. Farming was a secondary activity for miners, a way to put food on the table. However, many descendants of these miners became full-time farmers when lead mining declined. Southwestern Wisconsin became a major agricultural center with beautiful barns and well cared for farmsteads.

We must not forget the Native Americans who had been here hundreds of years before the French arrived. We don't often think of Native Americans as farmers, but many of them were. They did not build barns or other farm buildings that we today associate with farmers and farmsteads. But they grew crops, especially corn and squash, and these they stored for future use. Today, the Oneida Nation, west of Green Bay, has a large farming operation.

Yankee settlers

It wasn't until Wisconsin became a territory in 1836 that settlers began arriving in Wisconsin with the goal of owning their own farms. Some of the first settlers came from New York State, but also from Ohio, Pennsylvania, Vermont and other states. These early settlers were called Yankees, and they settled primarily in the southeastern regions of Wisconsin. Soon the echo of ax against wood rang out as settlers felled the trees. The pungent smell of wood burning filled the air as settlers cleared the land, piled the cut wood and burned it. Some of the trees, the straighter and taller oaks, were saved for cabins, barns and storage sheds. Neighbors helped neighbors hew the logs and fit them together. The plowman's whip snapped over the backs of the struggling oxen as they pulled the wooden beamed breaking plow, leaving behind ribbons of black soil where blue stem grass had stood for hundreds of years.

Black farmers

Some of Wisconsin's early settlers were escaped and free slaves. A few of the early lead miners coming to Wisconsin brought their black slaves with them. Other escaped slaves arrived in the state by way of the underground railroad. In the early 1840s free blacks came to Calumet County and founded Chilton. A black man established the Town of Freedom in Outagamie County. The 1850 Wisconsin census listed 635 free blacks and no slaves. By 1860 and the beginning of the Civil War, Wisconsin's black population had reached 1,171.¹

Two rural black communities had been established in Wisconsin by 1870. One was known as Pleasant Ridge near Lancaster in Grant County, and the other was Cheyenne Valley in northeastern Vernon County. Both were created by freed and escaped slaves. In both instances, the black people integrated successfully with other ethnic groups that had settled in the area. In fact, one of the first integrated schools in the state was a one-room country school that operated in the Pleasant Ridge community. There is little evidence of the kinds of barns and other farm buildings constructed in these communities.

First immigrants

Soon immigrant groups began arriving in Wisconsin, a few at first, and then an avalanche. They first settled along the major transportation routes—the Mississippi River and the counties along Lake Michigan. Then, as more came, they moved always just beyond the fringe of the settlement, into the interior regions of the state. By 1840, what was called the frontier line formed a crescent with the high points in the southwestern and southeastern counties and the low point in the central part of the territory.²

As Fred Holmes wrote, “The Old World heard the gossip of cheap lands and freedom here in the Midwest. English, Germans, Norwegians, Hollanders, Irish, Belgians, Swiss and other nationalities crowded the boats to reach this land of promise.” Between June 1846 and December 1847, the population of Wisconsin increased by 55,000, a gain of about 30 percent.³

Wisconsin also encouraged immigrant settlement, not waiting for word of mouth to spread from early settlers back to their homelands. The state legislature established a Commissioner of Emigration with an office in New York. In 1853 another law added a traveling agent who was to make sure that the eastern newspapers knew of Wisconsin's “...great natural resources, advantages, and privileges, and brilliant prospects for the future; and to use every honorable means in his power to induce emigrants to come to this state.”⁴ And they came.

These early immigrants, a sturdy and venturesome group, spent 44 days on average crossing the Atlantic on sailing vessels tossed by rough waters, while enduring often overcrowded and filthy accommodations. With steamships, the crossing time in the mid-1860s was reduced to two weeks, and by the turn of the century the trip could be made in less than a week.

Upon their arrival in New York, many immigrants got on boats for a trip up the Hudson River to Albany. There they transferred to canal boats on the Erie Canal (which was built in 1817-1825) to Buffalo, New York and then by water, rail or wagon to their final destination. Once in Detroit, some took the Chicago Wagon Trail to Chicago. Others rode the lake boats until they arrived at Milwaukee, and later at several other Wisconsin lake ports such as Sheboygan or Manitowoc. A few immigrants came via New Orleans and up the Mississippi.



German settlers

Many of the early log barns in Wisconsin, the half-timbered barns, and the bank barns that are so prevalent today have German roots. Even though many immigrant groups were settling in Wisconsin by the 1840s, the Germans soon became the largest group. (Before 1900, more than five million Germans came to the United States. Another two million arrived in the early 1900s.)⁵

By 1850, 12 percent of Wisconsin's population was German. Although they scattered throughout the state, the largest numbers of Germans were found along Lake Michigan and in the central counties. One of the largest groups consisted of 800 men, women and children who landed in Milwaukee in 1839.⁶

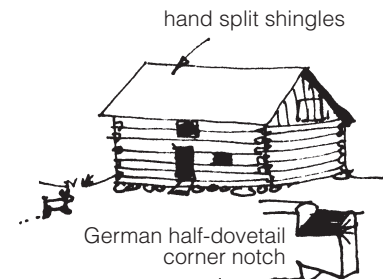
The German immigrants came in waves. Peak periods were 1845–1855, 1865–1874 and 1880–1894.⁷ Germans brought their knowledge of building with them from their home country. With the need to construct usable buildings quickly, many German settlers built log structures. The Germans usually preferred oak for their log buildings and erected logs to the eaves, closing the gable end with board and batten siding. Germans tended to hew only the inner and outer surfaces of the logs. The tops and bottoms of the logs were left to follow their natural con-

tour. The Germans usually hammered triangular-shaped blocks or strips between the interstices in the log walls, and plastered lime mortar over the blocks to make the walls weather-tight.⁸ Of course oak logs were readily available; indeed in many instances trees had to be cleared from the land before it could be farmed.

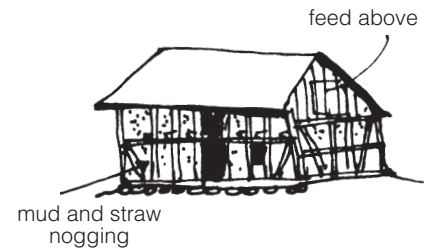
Some Germans built houses, barns and other buildings following a "half-timbering" construction approach. Half timber barns were built of heavy timbers, often white oak. They were mortised, tenoned and then pegged together with wooden pegs. No nails were used in building the barn's frame. Between the timbers, the spaces were filled with nogging, to form the walls of the barn. Nogging took many forms. It could be kiln-fired brick, clay and straw on wood slats, or even stovewood. Different from the more typical wood frame barn where the timbers were covered with wooden boards and thus not visible from the outside, the timbers of a half-timber barn were often visible in the outside walls. A few of the earliest half-timber barn roofs were thatched; later ones were covered with hand split or sawed shingles.

Many German immigrants were familiar with half-timber construction which was known in German as *Fachwerk*. From the Middle Ages on, half-timbering construction had been popular in much of Europe.

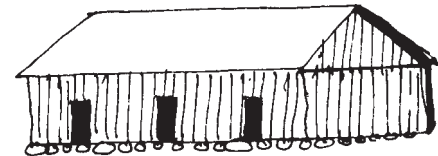
Germans also brought with them their knowledge of bank barns. A typical bank barn had two floors, with the cattle housed on the first floor, and the hay stored on the second floor. The barn was often built against the side of a hill, or a bank was built up to the barn so the farmer could haul hay directly into the second floor of the structure. Some of the earliest bank barns in the country go back to the 1700s when Germans settled in Pennsylvania. Many German bank barns were constructed with a forebay.



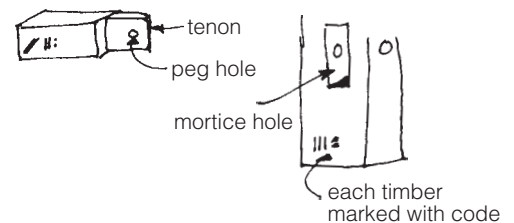
A typical German log structure, circa 1850–60.



A German log or half-timber barn designed to house both cattle and feed.



An expanded half-timber barn with brick nogging covered by boards.



Half-timber barns were built without nails, using tenons and mortices.



Lutze house barn, c. 1847, Saxon German, near Cleveland. Note half-timber construction.

The forebay is an extension of the upper part of the barn and extends beyond the stable wall on the side of the stable that is exposed. The forebay provided some protection for the doors and windows on the exposed side of the barn.

Irish

With the potato famine in Ireland in 1846, great numbers of Irish fled their home country, many of them finding their way to Wisconsin. Irish were soon found in Brown County, near Manitowoc, around Holy Hill in Washington County and in Waukesha, Dodge and several other counties. After the 1850s, Irish also settled in northwest Wisconsin, in Polk, Erin Prairie in St. Croix County, and in Pierce County. By 1900, the Irish were the second most prominent ethnic group in Wisconsin. They had settled in all of the southern counties, with the largest number in Milwaukee County. Many Irish did not come directly to Wisconsin but often lived in other states along the way, working their way west. Some first worked in the lead mines; ancestors of these early miners now farm in the areas around Benton, Shullsburg and Darlington in southwestern Wisconsin.

Scandinavians

The first Norwegian settlers in Wisconsin came in 1838 and settled in Jefferson and Rock Counties. The Koshkonong colony in southeastern Dane County was founded in 1838. The Lake Muskego settlement of Waukesha and Racine Counties began in 1839. Other major settlements soon appeared in Vernon and Trempealeau Counties. The Coon Valley and Coon Prairie settlements in Vernon County once claimed to have the most densely settled Norwegian area in the state. As early as 1848 a number of Norwegians also moved to Winnebago County. In 1850 another large group moved to Waupaca and Portage Counties.⁹

By 1850, 70 percent of the Norwegians in the United States lived in Wisconsin. They concentrated in the area from Madison to the Illinois state line, but by the 1940s, every county in Wisconsin had a Norwegian settlement. Similar to other immigrant groups, Norwegians first constructed log barns as well as log homes and other farm buildings. The Norwegians tended to build their log structures with snug, tight-fitting joints requiring a minimum of chinking material. They flattened their logs inside and out with their broad axes. Norwegians cut the log ends in a full

dovetail corner notch, and fitted them one over the other locking them together. They also used wooden pegs to make the log structure even more sturdy. Holes were drilled into two logs and they were joined with a wooden peg which helped prevent warping when the logs dried. The gable ends of some of these log buildings were log all the way to the peak.

Rather than having a few larger log buildings, the Norwegians built several log structures in the farmstead. These might include a chicken coop, animal barn, a feed storage building, granary and workshop, besides the cabin where the settlers lived.

Later, when the Norwegians began building frame barns, they often constructed them with gable roofs that were long and steep. A few of the earliest ones used sod; the later ones were roofed with cedar shingles.

Other Scandinavians also settled in Wisconsin. Danes arrived in the 1840s and settled around Racine which became known as the most Danish city in the United States. Soon, Danes were found in Brown, Dane, Waushara, Winnebago, Dodge, Adams, Oconto, Portage and Polk Counties. The Danes clustered mostly in the eastern and central counties of the state.

An early group of Swedes settled on the shores of Pine Lake in Waukesha County in the early 1840s. Another group settled near Lake Koshkonong in Dane County but were overshadowed by the larger Norwegian settlement in the same area. The Swedish community of Stockholm in Pepin County dates from the 1850s.¹⁰ However, the largest numbers of Swedes came to Wisconsin after the Civil War and settled in the St. Croix Valley in northwestern Wisconsin, on cutover land. In the early 1900s, Swedes made up more than 75 percent of the population of Burnett and Polk counties. The Swedes, like the other Scandinavian groups, often constructed log barns.



Norwegian bank barn, near Stoughton.



The Finns were the latest Scandinavian group to settle in Wisconsin, although Finnish people had come to the US as early as the 1680s. Many of the Finns, like the Swedes, followed the loggers in northern Wisconsin. The first Finnish settlements in the state began in the 1870s and 1880s, just south of Superior in Douglas County. The peak Finnish immigration occurred in 1905. By 1900 there were 2,198 Finns in Wisconsin; by 1910 the number had more than doubled to 5,724.¹¹

Most of the Finns coming to Wisconsin wanted to farm, and do some logging in the winter. Many proceeded to wrest a living out of this stump strewn wilderness, facing poor soil, long winters and short growing seasons. Imagine the challenge of clearing land that was studded with pine stumps, many three feet across. Those Finns without enough money to buy land first worked in Upper Michigan's copper and iron mines, in iron mines in Iron and Marinette County, Wisconsin, and in Minnesota's Mesabi Iron Range.

The Finns were excellent builders of log buildings, using hewn timbers carefully fitted together and dove-tailed at the corners. Some of their log barns were of two-story construction, with cattle housed on the ground

floor and hay stored above. The Finnish log builders were fussy. They would tediously lift a hewn log into place, check it for fit, take it down, remove a little more wood, and then lift it into place again, until the fit was perfect. This lifting up, checking for fit and taking down process might be repeated several times.

Finns also constructed hay barns of logs, leaving the logs round, and placing the logs some distance apart so the hay could dry easily. These crude log structures were built in the hayfields, making it handy to harvest the hay, but also providing a source of cattle feed if by chance fire destroyed the farmstead barn.

Some of the later Finnish barns in the area were of frame construction, but with steeply pitched roofs that gave the appearance that they were too tall for their length and width. Rather than build large farm buildings, the Finns constructed several smaller ones, an approach similar to the Norwegians. If a farmer needed another building, it was relatively easy to construct a log structure, compared to purchasing sawed lumber and hiring a crew to erect a frame building.

One cannot leave a discussion of the Finns without mentioning the Finnish sauna, a special little building associated with Finnish farmsteads where the family enjoyed steam baths.



Finnish hay barn, originally Douglas County. Moved to Old World Wisconsin.



Swedish log barn, on Madeline Island.

Icelanders also settled in Wisconsin; an early group came to Washington Island after the Civil War. Although many of them were commercial fisherman, some of them became farmers and built barns and other farm buildings on the island.

Welsh

The first Welsh immigrants came to Wisconsin in 1840. John Hughes and his family of seven settled in Genesse, Waukesha County. By 1842, 99 Welshmen lived in the Waukesha settlement.¹²

Welsh also settled in Racine County in 1840, and in Columbia County in 1845. Soon Welsh immigrants were found in Winnebago, Fond du Lac, Waushara, Sauk, Jefferson, Rock and La Crosse Counties as well. Many of them became excellent farmers, with an endearing love for the land, their animals and their farm buildings. They were excellent carpenters and stone masons, constructing barns with beautiful stone walls, with an emphasis on aesthetics as well as usefulness. After the wheat growing era in Wisconsin, the Welsh became excellent dairy farmers, caring for large herds of cattle on the rolling lands of Waukesha County as well as in other parts of the state.



Welsh barns, near Wales.

Swiss

In the early 1840s, the first Swiss families settled in Wisconsin, in the Town of Honey Creek and elsewhere in Sauk County. Their legacy includes some fine stone buildings.

In 1845, Swiss agents came to Green County and made entry for 1,200 acres of land. In August of that year, more than 100 Swiss immigrants settled in the Little Sugar River Valley. The land was divided among the heads of families, and the group began farming.¹³ They brought with them their knowledge for making Swiss cheese. To this day Green County is a major producer of Swiss cheese in the country. The Swiss also brought their knowledge of bank barns, and their skill for building them. One feature that is distinctive of many of the Swiss barns in Green County is the pent roof that juts out above the windows and doors on the exposed side of the first story of the barn. The pent roof provides a place where cattle can get out of the rain on stormy days, as well as weather protection for the doors and windows.



Swiss barn near New Glarus. Note pentroof above the windows.

Other early immigrants

Other immigrant groups arrived in Wisconsin as well. Several Dutch families settled near Sheboygan starting in the 1840s. Soon they were also found in Brown, Milwaukee and Fond du Lac Counties, although the numbers were never large. Likewise, Belgians located east of Green Bay to Casco and then north to Sturgeon Bay. They built farmsteads of logs, including barns, homes and other farm buildings. They also built some distinctive red brick dwellings that are readily seen in the area.

Bordering the Belgian community to the South, and stretching through Kewaunee and into Manitowoc County is a large Bohemian settlement. Some of their barns, often unpainted, were of frame construction. More typically, their early barns were of double-crib log construction.



Luxembourg stone barn near Port Washington.



Ross-Dutch barn at Gibbville.



Bohemian stone barn, near Random Lake.



Bohemian barn, c. 1914. Near Kewaunee. Note square field stone silo.



Bohemian barn near Francis Creek. Has been moved to Door County.



Detail of overhang on Bohemian barn.

English came to Wisconsin, directly from the British Isles or sometimes transplanted from New England. By 1850 nearly 19,000 English had settled in the state. But rather than settle in tightly defined communities, true for several of the other ethnic groups, the English tended to disperse. By 1850 there were English in all of the southern counties in Wisconsin, with the largest numbers in Grant, Lafayette and Iowa counties.

Italians

As we recite the various ethnic groups that settled in Wisconsin it is easy to overlook the Italians. Most of them came to the US after 1900. By 1930 some 4.7 million Italians had settled in the United States, making it one of the largest ethnic groups to come across the ocean. By 1930 the only country to send more immigrants to the US was Germany, which by that year had sent about 6 million immigrants to this new land.¹⁴

Many Italians came to Wisconsin as craftsmen—they labored in the granite quarries in Redgranite and in Montello. They worked as barbers, bakers, musicians and cobblers. They settled in Madison, along lower Regent Street, and in Hurley, Kenosha and Waukesha. They settled in the rural areas as well, and some farmed. By 1940 some 32,000 Italians had settled in the state.¹⁵

The major rural Italian settlements were in Barron County, near Cumberland, in and around Genoa in Vernon County, and around Pound in Marinette County. The Marinette group brought with them their love for Italian cheese and their skill in cheesemaking.



Polish

The Poles were another immigrant group that came relatively late to the state, but then came in large numbers; in fact, the Poles became the third largest ethnic group, exceeded only by the Germans and the Norwegians. A large number of Polish settled in Portage County, in and around Stevens Point, and in northwestern Waushara County. In the 1940s, half of the farm population in Portage County was Polish. Another major settlement was in northwestern Brown County, in and around Pulaski. But Poles could also be found in the communities of Beaver Dam, Berlin, Princeton, Green Bay, La Crosse, Manitowoc, Marinette, Menasha, Superior and Thorp.

The Poles took naturally to farming. A good thing, too, for many of them bought land that others did not want—a disadvantage in coming late to the state. Many Poles found themselves on sandy, droughty farms, where crop success depended on the amount of rainfall received each year. Yet, the Poles stuck to it. Many became excellent vegetable farmers; several Polish families became the nucleus for the large potato industry that is today so important to Wisconsin's Central sands.

But many Poles were also dairy farmers, and they built barns. Like so many of the other immigrant groups, the Poles began with log barns, some of which can still be found in the Pulaski area. Some also built larger, frame barns with stovewood walls (A description of stovewood construction is included below).



Polish barn, near Pulaski.



Polish stovewood barn, near Pulaski.



Polish stovewood barn near Pulaski.

Amish

One of the latest groups to move into Wisconsin, generally coming from Indiana and Ohio, were the Amish. They continue to move into Wisconsin. Amish in the United States have their roots in the German-Swiss Anabaptists of the 16th century. It was William Penn, a Quaker, and the recipient of a large grant of land in the British Colony (Pennsylvania) who invited Amish people to come to this country to live among the Quakers. The first Mennonite group (less strict religiously than the Amish) came to this country in the late 1600s. The first ship load of Amish left Holland in 1727, settling in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.¹⁶

Later, Amish families pushed on west, into Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin and into Canada. The first Amish in Wisconsin arrived near Medford (Taylor County), in the 1920s, taking up farming on cutover lands. Soon other Amish moved to Wisconsin. Today there are Amish communities in Columbia, Marquette, Green Lake, Sauk, Vernon, Monroe, Portage, Waushara, Eau Claire, Clark, Dodge, Rock, Green, Buffalo and perhaps additional counties.

As farming technology changes, the Amish mostly continue with older practices. They rely on draft horses for field power. They have no electricity or telephones; they drive to town in horse-drawn buggies, and they depend on a one-room school to provide education for their children. They also live together in tightly knit communities, with strong adherence to their religious beliefs.

In many communities, the Amish bought existing farmsteads, removed electrical wiring, barn cleaners and other modern conveniences and began farming. As the Amish communities expanded (and they tended to have large families), additional farmsteads were constructed. The Amish built new barns and houses, again following building strategies that were commonly used before the middle of this century. They continue to hold barn raisings (they call them frolics), a building approach that most of today's farmers remember only dimly if they remember at all.



Amish barn, near Cambria.



Several styles of roofs were used in building Wisconsin's historic barns. An early style used was gable, south of Spring Green.



Barns and agricultural change

As Wisconsin moved from wheat growing to dairy farming in the late 1800s and early 1900s, a new style of barn appeared. Little log barns, so prevalent during the settlement years, were either torn down, remodeled or forgotten as new, larger barns appeared. Three-bay, frame barns became places to store hay and house dairy cattle. The new dairy barns were built often a hundred feet long and longer, most with gambrel roofs, and huge mows where the hay crops were stored for the ever-hungry dairy cows confined to their stalls on the floor below. It became far more difficult, with the appearance of the larger, frame dairy barns, to associate them with particular ethnic groups. The farm may have been owned by Norwegians but the barn builder was German. The plan for the barn may have come from the College of Agriculture at the University of Wisconsin. Was it a German barn or a Norwegian barn? The question became irrelevant.

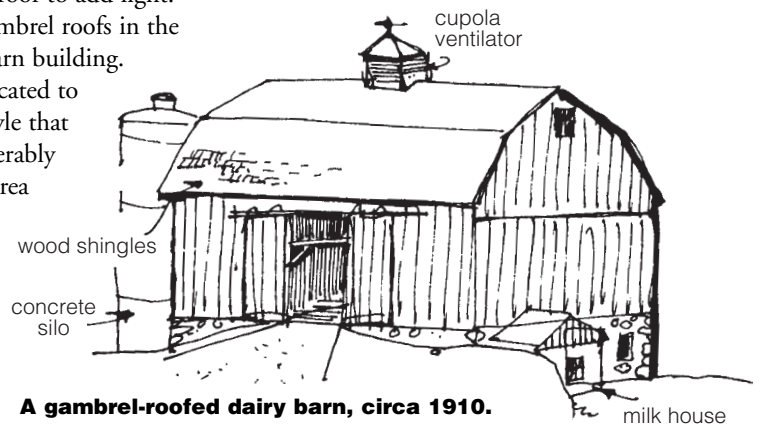
Aesthetics of barns

Barns are counterpoints to rolling land and broad skies. They are focal points in a land of undulating hills and far reaching valleys. Many are truly works of art, each one with a character of its own; each one making a special, artistic statement. Destroy an old barn and the beauty of the countryside is destroyed as well.

Looking at an old barn up close we can begin to see the dimensions of its beauty. Barn roofs come in an assortment of shapes. The early barns, and many more modern ones as well, had simple gable roofs. The early log barns had gable roofs; so did the first frame barns. Occasionally a dormer was built into the roof to add light.

Next came gambrel roofs in the history of frame barn building. A bit more complicated to construct, but a style that allowed for considerably more hay storage area under the roof than a gable roof design. Then came the arched roof,

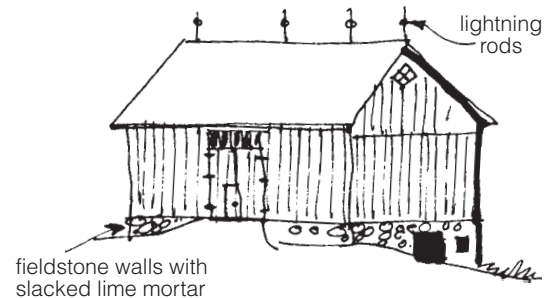
with laminated rafters and an internal structure quite different from the gambrel- and gable-roofed barns. Of course there were many other styles of barn roofs. Occasionally we find hip, salt box, monitor, and various other combinations of roof styles. As barns were enlarged over the years, we may find a gable roof barn with a gambrel roof addition. Attached to the gambrel roof addition may be a further arched roof addition. No matter what roof design, all make a pleasing sight, particularly when they are framed against a clear blue sky, are covered with a fresh coat of snow, or merely stand in contrast to the other buildings that surround them. The barn is almost always the dominant building in the cluster.



A gambrel-roofed dairy barn, circa 1910.



Gable roof with a lean-to on each side, east of Mineral Point.



An 1880s dairy barn built into the side of a hill and equipped with a basement and lightning rods.



Wooden cupolas were found on many of the old barns, some of them with elaborate wood carvings.



Arched roof, near Couderay.



Gambrel roof, one of the most popular roof styles found in Wisconsin, near Washburn.

Cupolas add beauty to a barn's roof. Usually one cupola was placed in the center of the roof, although on larger barns we can find two or more. Cupolas came in various shapes. Some had simple gable roofs, others had elaborate, many-sided roofs. Some were octagonal, some square, some rectangular. Many were unadorned. Others were extremely ornate, with louvered windows, wood carvings and various designs. All had a practical purpose beyond the artistic—they provided ventilation for the storage area below.

Lightning rods and weather vanes also adorned many old barn roofs. They, as the cupolas, were first practical and second decorative. Lightning rods, fastened along the top of the roof, were connected by a cable which, in turn, was anchored into the ground. Being taller than the barn, their job was to attract lightning and then send the jolt harmlessly earthward.

Many lightning rods had variously colored glass bulbs attached to them. There was a practical reason for them, too. If the farmer noticed a broken bulb, chances were good that lightning had struck the barn, or a neighbor kid had shattered it with his .22 rifle. Weather vanes often served double duty. They were lightning rods and they showed the direction of the wind. For farmers, wind direction was an indicator of upcoming weather. A glance at their weather vane each morning gave them the information they needed.



The first-story walls of bank barns, the most common type of barn in Wisconsin, are often beautiful structures. Hundreds of old barns, especially those built around the turn of the century, had field stone or quarried rock walls. If the barn was located in the glaciated area of Wisconsin, then the wall was likely made of field stone. In the non-glaciated area it was probably quarried rock.

Field stone walls were built 24 or more inches thick, and eight feet or so tall. Beyond building sturdy, practical structures, the stone masons knew how to blend color and shape into a pleasing tableau, often not admitting or even knowing that they were creating art as well as building a wall. The massive barn wall, with its array of shapes and colors—browns, blacks, reds, grays—contrasted well with the straight lines of the barn boards and the red color they were usually painted.

Occasionally we find a brick wall, and more recently cement block, cinder block, or poured concrete walls. In some parts of the state, particularly in the northeast, it is still possible to find barns with stovewood walls. A farmer, usually without the means to build a stone wall, went to the woods and cut 24-inch lengths of cedar or tamarack wood. He then corded up the sticks, placing mortar around them to form a wall. Many believe that farmers who built stovewood walls were ashamed of them, an indication that they couldn't afford a more substantial wall. So as soon as they had the money these farmers covered their stovewood walls with clapboards. As it turned out, the clapboards helped preserve the stovewood and kept out drafts and rodents. Today we find several beautiful examples of this rather unique building approach in Wisconsin.



Salt box roof, east of Hollandale.



In the non-glaciated areas of Wisconsin, many barn walls were constructed of quarried rock.



Where field stones were readily available, they were used.



Occasionally, the entire barn was constructed of quarried rock.



The old historic barns built in the late 1800s and into the 1900s had elaborate systems of wooden posts, beams, and braces, all fastened together with wooden pegs, shown here and above.

Of course the color of the barn itself adds to its beauty. Many were painted red because red oxide paint was cheaper than other colors. Some writers suggest that farmers in the state who came from New York and New England brought with them the idea that a barn ought be red, but many barns were also painted white, and often not painted at all.¹⁷ Traveling around Wisconsin it is not difficult to find green, brown, black, yellow, white and unpainted, naturally gray barns. But most are painted red.

To add additional decoration, many farmers painted designs on their barn doors, especially on the large doors that opened into the hay mows. If the barn was red, white squares, a white X, circles and other designs were painted on the doors. A few barns were painted with red and white vertical stripes. It is also not difficult to find barns with murals painted on their sides and ends; scenes vary from a lakeside picture on a barn near Bayfield to a picture of the Mona Lisa wearing a Bucky Badger T-shirt on a barn west of Gilman. And, many barns were once used as billboards advertising everything from Gold Medal Flour to Bull Durham tobacco.

On a windy day in April, standing inside an old barn is like standing in the midst of a great orchestra. As the wind blows around the corners and shakes the side walls, the barn talks back in squeaks and creaks and moans. In the huge expanse of the open barn, the sounds echo back and forth, creating an audio beauty that few have heard.

There is also the beauty of space for in no other place in a rural community can we sense such immensity of enclosed openness as the hay mows of the old barns. Without admitting to the enjoyment of it, many a farmer stood silently in his empty barn in spring, simply absorbing the beauty of the space, and the vastness of it.



Visual beauty abounds inside the barn as well. The timbers in the old frame barns, many of them 10 x 10 inches, stretched across the wide expanse of the hay mows. Jutting toward the roof were smaller timbers, all elaborately tied together with braces. The interiors of the old barns were built entirely of wood, from the huge supporting beams to the wooden pegs that held them together. The barn was a single wooden entity. Before sawmills were widely available, the beams were hand hewn with adzes and broad axes. As the timbers aged, no matter if sawed or hewn, they took on a yellowish tan cast that changed colors slightly as the light inside the barn changed.

There was also beauty in the craftsmanship of the early barn builders. Rather than building the barn by installing the upright posts one at a time, and attaching the beams to them, the heavy framing sections, called bents, were formed on the ground. A bent was a complete unit of framework, fully braced and extending from the sill to the point where the roof was attached. In some of the taller barns, the bents were erected in sections.

Barns builders went to great lengths to measure, cut the mortises to receive the adjoining members, and fit the framing pieces together. There was no electricity and all work was done with hand tools, including drilling holes in the timbers to receive the wooden pegs that held the bracing pieces to the timbers and posts. It took a master barn builder and his crew one to two months to make the barn ready for the barn raising. On the day of the barn raising, the farmer invited his relatives, neighbors and friends. By day's end what began as a naked first-story wall now had standing on top of it a beautiful barn, complete with framing, roof and outside boards. It is still possible to witness a barn raising if one happens to live near an Amish community where many of the old ways of building barns are still followed.

Why save the old barns?

For those who own them, old barns can often be remodeled for other uses, saving the money required by new construction, and providing a practical reason for preserving these structures.

But there are other reasons for saving the old barns that go well beyond the practical and the economic. Barns and other farm buildings are reminders of the state's ethnic history, of the emigrant families who came by the thousands to scratch out a living in the Wisconsin frontier. The Finns and Swedes who settled in the north, the Germans and Swiss who settled in the south. The Norwegians who settled in the south and west. The Polish who settled in central Wisconsin. The Belgians, Bohemians and Dutch who settled in the northeast—to mention a few.

The barns of Wisconsin are also reminders of the state's agricultural history. Soon after settlement, wheat was king, but by the 1870s it had lost its throne and the state was in a time of agricultural transition, not knowing which way to turn. Enter the lowly dairy cow that required daily milking and feeding, 365 days of the year, and a comfortable stable to provide shelter from the long, cold and snowy winters of the north. The big barns began appearing, most of them bank barns and the majority of them rectangular in shape, 36 feet wide and 50, 60 or more feet long.

In the 1980s and 1990s, agriculture continued changing as dairy herds became larger, and technology encouraged new ways of harvesting and storing hay and silage for the cattle. Economic conditions forced farmers to expand their dairy herds and the size of their farms, switch from dairy farming to other enterprises, or go out of business. With several periods of great economic stress (the early 1980s for example), thousands of dairy farmers sold their herds and

their farms. Fewer, but much larger dairy enterprises emerged. Many of the old barns became obsolete, no longer so vital as they once were to the livelihood of the dairy farmer who built them. New types of barns appeared. Some were single-story, steel structures. More recent barns are built like greenhouses and covered with plastic or with canvas. So the old barns become agricultural history wrapped up in a building with a cupola on the top.

The history of Wisconsin farming is expressed in a barn. In our haste to propel ourselves into the future, it is easy to overlook our history. But we cannot know where we are going unless we know where we have been. Barns can tell us.

For a rural community, barns provide a sense of continuity. They are visual reminders of where the community has been and what it has been doing. On a more personal level, farm families, those currently living on the land, and those who have moved away keep their connections to the land through the old buildings. The barn often links farm people to their family histories. They are reminders of the stories associated with caring for cows and making hay, of draft horses and calf pens, of frozen silage, and the rain pattering on the barn roof on a warm July day.

Another reason for saving the old barns is their beauty. There is a natural blending and contrasting of color and shape as farm buildings often stand next to a woodlot, and are surrounded by hillsides of green alfalfa and tall corn. The beauty of shape and color, of relationship and perspective.

The barns of Wisconsin are of the land. They are built on it, and they are from it. They are reminders that all of us are of the land as well.

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