

Terry Johnson remembers an ambitious man coming out to strip his barn for scrap wood. He made it through a few rows of shingles on the roof then quit, saying it was too much work. "Every time we get a big wind storm I look out at the old barn and hope it's blown over," said Johnson. "Then I won't have to pay anyone to come do it for me."



# Deconstructing the Iowa Barn

**T**he Johnsons kept eight or 10 milk cows in the barn. They sometimes kept pigs, too, but cows suited the barn best. They milked the animals by hand. Later, they skimmed the cream and sent it to the local creamery for butter or ice cream, saving the remaining milk for the hogs.

That was 1950.

Farm life has changed radically since those days of hand-milking. Census of Agriculture data shows the number of farms, especially the

number of family farms, is steadily shrinking. Iowa has fewer farms, and fewer farmers who can make their living solely from their land.

Today, three of the four walls are almost entirely gone. A patchwork pattern of sunlight shines through the holes in the roof, and the second floor is no longer safe for the play the current owner, Terry Johnson, remembers occurring there.

The barn—previously the archetypical American farm's most important structure, often built before the house because of its essential role in securing the homesteaders' livelihood—is having a bit of an identity crisis.

Massive prefabricated steel structures that fit today's industrial-sized agriculture have replaced hand-built wooden structures as the functional building of choice, and farm owners like Johnson are left not knowing quite what to do with that crumbling building in their backyard.

"If you look at that side," Johnson says, pointing, "that corner's gone, and the next two posts are gone, that corner's gone, and yet that roof is still there. Why this whole thing hasn't fallen, I don't know."

Johnson, 66, has lived on his family's farmstead near the small town of Oasis, just off of



story by Maggie Anderson | photos by Whitney Warne

**“We can’t afford to make all barns museum pieces. Hardly any of us even have any use for them at all.”**

—Ilene Lande, farmer and scientist

the Herbert Hoover Highway between West Branch and Iowa City, for all but six of the last 54 years. Retired from his engineering job, he continues to farm his family’s 160 acres while living in the same house that his grandparents did. But Johnson says the barn just couldn’t withstand the changes in farming.

“This was a very usable barn when I was

growing up, and I still used it until about 1991,” Johnson says. “Once I quit raising livestock there was no use for it really, even for storage, because it was small. Machinery’s bigger now. It would have been nice to restore the barn, but there’s a lot of expense. If there’s not livestock, there’s not much use for it.”

“CULTIVATORS OF THE EARTH ARE THE most valuable citizens,” wrote Virginia landowner Thomas Jefferson, the founding father most often linked to strong support of agriculture, in a 1785 letter to John Jay, the country’s first Chief Justice. “They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bands.” In another letter, dated 1787 to James

Madison, Jefferson again expressed his views on agriculture: “I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural.”

Since the nation’s founding, Americans have always believed that the success of their country is intrinsically linked to the success of its farmers—and, Iowa Barn Foundation founder and President Jacqueline Andre Schmeal would argue, to their buildings.

“Barns are about people—the people who worked in them, the people who built them, the people who visited them,” Andre Schmeal says. “Just imagine Iowa without any barns. To me, they are our heritage, and they are



The inside of Lande's barn houses years of leftover storage items—old cans filled with nails and screws, piles of scrap wood, vintage signs and an old oar with no logical explanation.

symbols of hard work, the American dream, integrity.”

The Iowa Barn Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of Iowa's rural buildings, offers matching grants to owners who wish to restore their barns. Schmeal estimates the foundation has awarded roughly a million dollars to barn owners throughout Iowa since it began in 1997.

But some feel the Iowa Barn Foundations grants can be restrictive. Ilene Lande and her husband, John McNutt, live on a farm less than a mile from Terry Johnson's. Like Johnson, the McNutt farm has been in the family for many years. McNutt's great-grandfather, a stonemason, built most of the farm structures at the turn of the 20th century.

When the foundation on Lande's older barn began to give out, she applied for an Iowa Barn Foundation Grant to repair it. She withdrew when she found out she would have to shingle the roof with wooden shakes—the traditional material—rather than use the steel she preferred.

“Shakes are hideously expensive, a terrible fire hazard, and they don't last,” she says. “If you go up there every five years and swap linseed oil, they'll last maybe 25 years, whereas a steel roof can last for 50 years, and even if you don't do anything to the barn, a steel roof will protect it for a generation or two.”



In Lande's mind, there is a distinction between historical conservation and practical restoration. Her barns, she says, are interesting, but she wants to be able to use them—full-blown historical accuracy is not her top priority.

Lande, who has a Ph.D. in microbiology, runs a small biotech business out of her two barns, which now house a small flock of between 20 and 50 sheep. By injecting the animals with a protein that prompts the generation of antibodies, Lande manufactures antiserum in the sheep's blood. She draws the

▲ Amy Eagle's family has lived on this property for over 200 years. Her grandfather had three burros, which he tied outside the barn to graze. Instead, the animals grazed on the wood on the structure, stripping away as much of the barn walls as they could get their greedy mouths on.

blood and sends it to research centers, where it serves as a tool in experiments to study diseases and search for their cures.

“When I started this business, I was looking for something that I could do at home, with the facilities I had on site, without a lot of capital outlay to get them ready,” she says. “We can't afford to make all barns museum pieces. Hardly any of us even have any use for them at all.”

**DESPITE EFFORTS OF THOSE LIKE** Andre Schmeal and Lande to preserve or repurpose barns, the vast majority of Iowa farm structures simply sit like Terry Johnson's barn, dilapidated and slowly decaying.

Iowa State students Zach Brown, Dustin Harford, Nick Lindsley, John Wachtel, and Kurtis Wolgast are deconstructing such a barn

near Boxholm, Iowa, a town of about 200 people less than an hour northwest of Ames, for their senior project.

But in the process they are illuminating to the structure's history and the human activity that

occurred in the barn—in essence, preserving the barn through photographs, film, written histories, and personal engagement.

Lindsley says that the idea for the project

**There is a distinction between historical conservation and practical restoration.**



▲ New steel barns, like this one on Larry and Tami Murphy's farm, rise up in replacements of wooden livestock barns with a motorized door opener, plenty of storage space and an enormous tractor.



▲ Lande's sheep charged in and out of the building, staking their claim on the territory.

began when the group spent last spring abroad in Rome.

"We are looking at the barn as a ruin of Iowan culture, similar to the way aqueducts serve as a reminder of past Roman culture," he says.

With this basic idea established, Lindsley posted an ad on Craigslist for a farm building or corn crib that needed to be torn down. Andy Ross replied the next day.

Ross, a self-employed jack-of-all trades (he owns a towing company, tills gardens, has a team of horses for parades and is raising turkeys this year), bought his Boxholm farm in 1995. For the first five years he and his family lived there, Ross kept a small flock of sheep in the barn. In 2002, the structure sustained wind damage, and in 2004, when Ross noticed it had begun to lean, they stopped us-

ing it. The foundation was rotten, and the cost to fix it would be comparable to erecting a new steel building.

"We've been talking about getting rid of it for about five years," he said. "It wasn't really

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- Nick Lindsley, barn deconstruction artist

unsafe; it was just kind of in the way."

Rather than simply bulldozing Ross's barn, the students first carefully prepped for its demise. Treating it like an archeological excavation site, they scraped the layers of dirt and manure from the floor to reveal the tools and artifacts from the past.

"The way I approached this was very simi-

lar to the way I would have done it when I was a kid," says Watchtel. Everything they found was a treasure—tobacco tins, farm tools, whiskey bottles. As the group members dug, their understanding of the barn's original use grew, as did their kinship with the men once used it.

The group displayed their excavation spoils in a March exhibit alongside photographs and fictional writings that revealed the depth of the group's investigation into the barn's history (they researched the property at the Boxholm Museum and conducted telephone interviews with its original owners).

After cleaning, the students began destructing the building piece by piece. By mid-March, they had dismantled most of the side paneling,

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ing dusty power-pop, the indie underground has finally caught up. A glut of new fuzzed-out pop purveyors like Times New Viking and Vivian Girls sing about the saccharine love and bitter breakups that comprise Miracles of God's material. Dusted Magazine once decried Miracles' "crunchy, clipped, over-modulated digital production" and now that's a compliment. Despite prior complaints, it's the messiness of both the music and the subject matter which make the group interesting, and more importantly, enjoyable.

Miracles of God double that pleasure with a pair of new releases. *No Refunds* is an odds 'n' ends collection built from songs left over after departure of bassist Clayton Shuneman. *O' What a Wonderful Day* is a proper full-length LP of songs written after the departure of Shuneman. The new line-up now includes Alex Body on Fender Rhodes and synthesizer.

Miracles bury delicious melodies and hook-laden choruses beneath layers of overdrive and analog hiss. *No Refunds* is a superlative example. Half of the record was taped at the Picador in the fall of 2007, and amid the ambient audience noise and reverberations of the venue the punk-bitten, rave-up of "Calling My Name" is still a stone-cold classic, ridding a heavy stream of power chords and bursting with falsetto coo's. The peaked-out hiss on the basement recordings that comprise the other half of *No Refunds* doesn't mask their infectious energy and quality tune-smithing. Though the lyrics of "Faith" are indecipherable, it's impossible to hear without try to yell along.

When you can make out the lyrics it becomes clear that Miracles of God are dealing more subtly with inter-personal relationships. The group is still clings to the tropes of Spector-produced kitsch, but their girl troubles and successes are imbued with disarming humor. Songs like "Room 4-2" off *O' What a Wonderful Day* exemplify the comi-tragedy of loneliness: "There's room in this bed for two... this is a king-size dilemma I'm in / I need a queen who can jump right on in / and double my twin."

The group cracks wise about relationship troubles and hides behind layers of feedback and overdrive. But beneath the roar of guitars and laughter are still well-balanced pop tunes built around good old fashioned heart-break and classic chord progressions.

*John C. Schlotfeldt is a graduate of The University of Iowa who wears blue jeans to spite George Will.*

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leaving the roof to float on the building's bare bones. Looking upward, bits of sky were visible through the gaps in the roof's shingles—planned to create an appealing pattern of light on the floor. ("We know it's got to come down, but before we do that, we're playing," Watchtel says. "There are lots of possibilities.")

They peeled it apart like an orange, arranging the boards on the ground in order, the skin broken but the original shape still discernible. They cataloged each piece, marking it with a piece of white tape and a number/letter code.

As of late April, the barn still stood, though it was more skeleton than enclosure. The students intend to keep their promise to completely dismantle the barn, but right now they are focused on finishing up their individual projects before graduation.

They are tackling myriad topics: spatial re-

### At the same time that they are killing the barn, however, they are reincarnating it.

lationships, historical discovery, the barn within the landscape, the barn as a container, interior space versus exterior space. But Mitchell Squire, an Iowa State University architecture professor and the group's advisor, says that the students' physical engagement with their subject is perhaps the endeavor's most important aspect.

"The amount of labor that they have had to engage brings them into parallel with the kind of labor that existed around this barn in the first place," he says.

Wolgast says their labors have given a voice to the barn, personifying it.

"From the beginning," Wolgast says, "I've kind of seen this as if we're almost prolonging the death of this barn."

At the same time that they are killing the barn, however, they are reincarnating it. Their deliberate dismantling has led to a detailed history of the barn that would have been lost had it simply continued to decay unprovoked.

"All that we've accumulated has become a sort of memory and life story of the barn, which is in essence the preservation of the barn," Wolgast says. **lv**

*Maggie Anderson is an Iowa native who has lived and worked in Iowa City for the past five years. She is currently the marketing and media manager for The University of Iowa Museum of Art.*

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