

History of the Willowhaven Center

The Willowhaven Nature Center building is unique in that it was once a 1900's cattle barn located 250 miles away in Iowa. Thanks to master restorationist Bob Przewlocki and his company Preservation Trades, Inc., the barn was dismantled, transported and re-assembled on the new Whispering Willows Park. Preservation Trades, Inc. and the Bourbonnais Township Park District helped give this old barn a new lease on life as an updated educational facility.

A Story of an Iowa Farm and a 1903 Barn

Located in Jones County, Iowa, in the southeast quarter of Wayne Township Section 13, is a farm owned for five generations by the Folker family. This farmland was originally surveyed in 1837. The United States government sold the land to the family of Robert Barnhill for \$1.25 per acre. The original Entry/Patent shows the sale was made in 1853, when Franklin Pierce was president.



The farm, deeded in 1871, was bought and sold between the Barnhills and their children until 1892. In 1892, Mrs. M. K. Barnhill, living in Sangamon County, Illinois not far from relatives of the Folker family, sold the farm to Mr. Harm Folker. Mr. Folker and his brother had emigrated from Germany to the area and already owned property nearby. One of Mr. Folkers' sons, Tobias, married in 1900 and lived on the farm until Tobias' son, H. W. G. Folker, married in 1925 and assumed responsibility for the land.

The longest tenure on the farm was by H. W. G. Folker, born in 1902 and residing on the farm until his death in 1996. In 1995, he and his wife, Byrdena, celebrated 70 years of marriage with their five daughters. "Bill", as he was often called, practiced soil conservation and objected to the application of chemicals to the land. His passions included his land, his purebred Angus cattle, genetics, exotic birds, unusual trees, and flowers. He especially liked Dutch tulips, which bloomed around the time of his birthday on May 2. Mr. and Mrs. Folker also had a great interest in producing and enjoying good, healthy food as reflected in their extensive gardens.

One of the buildings on this family farm was a large barn built in 1903. This barn was constructed of old growth yellow pine without the use of nails, most likely built by local woodworkers and neighboring farmers. The children who lived on the farm have fond memories of the barn, including the excitement of swinging on a long rope hung from a beam, jumping into the loose hay, climbing to the top beams when bales of hay were stacked, and finding new litters of kittens hidden in corners of the barn.

The major function of the barn was its use as winter storage of harvested crops which fed the animals during the winter months. Horses were first used to help harvest these crops and bring them into the barns. This involved preparing the soil and planting the seeds in early spring. The staple crop for feeding the animals was hay, which usually needed three cuttings per growing season. One or two horses would pull the plow, planter, mower, rake, or wagon through the fields during the growing and harvesting season, guided by the farmer who was walking or riding behind.

Once at the barn, a mechanism known as a fork lift would carry a portion of the loose, dry hay from the wagon adjacent to the barn, up to the top of the open hay mow door on the barn, and follow a metal track to a designated location in the loft of the barn where the hay was dropped and leveled for storage. The power to pull the hay up to and into the barn was provided by another team of horses who was being led, guided by calls from the person who operated the forklift. That was called teamwork; many individuals were always needed to accomplish such tasks. Later, tractors did the work, hay was baled on the field, and self-powered elevators brought baled hay into the barn. Today, computer generated information is available to the farmer while driving large machines that minimize manpower.

Another important role of the barn was to shelter the animals from the elements. In summer, they grazed in the pasture; in winter they were protected from inclement weather by being sheltered in the barn. It was typical of the prairie style barns that one of the side bays was a milking parlor for the dairy herd and the other side was for the draft horses.



The section of the barn known as the milking parlor is where the cows were herded into their stalls every morning and night. The cows were milked by hand and fresh milk was poured into a "separator" that separated the cream into one container and the milk into another. The cream was kept cool in water tanks and picked up by local haulers and transported to a nearby creamery that made and sold butter and other dairy products. The family's dairy made milk a staple beverage and ice cream a special treat. Later on, with the advent of electricity to rural areas, most dairy farms were run by machine. However, machines for milking were never used on this farm because the farm converted to growing crops and beef cattle before electricity became available.

In the late 1990's the buildings on this family farm no longer provided any real service to the farm operation. The family worked with the farm manager and farm operator to remove some of the smaller buildings to create more workable area of farmland and remove deteriorating old structures that become a liability and hazard. It was the owners' desire to recycle and reuse as much material as possible. The Folkers family arranged with Mr. Bob Przewlocki of Preservation Trades to survey the barn and locate an interested party. As a result, it was most rewarding to the family when the opportunity for another use for this barn was found. The dismantling and reconstruction of the barn was an exciting project for all those involved.



The donation of the building to be used as a public Nature Center is one which H. W. G. would be especially proud of. He truly loved the land, which exemplified his care and conservation practices. We know he would be delighted to see part of his legacy continue for future generations.

