

Have barn, will travel

Bringing barn home a labour of love for Gregg Adams

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Not many people look at a barn and fall in love. Gregg Adams did.

In fact, the University of Saskatchewan veterinarian loved farmer Walter Stevenson's barn so much, he decided to make it his mission to some day move it to his own farm. Tuesday was that day, as the 40,000-kilogram barn was picked up and driven down Highway 5 to its new home three kilometres away.

"At first, Walter thought I was crazy," said Adams, 49. "But after a couple of years of trying to convince him that I really wanted his barn, he said if I could clean it out and find a mover, then he'd talk to me."



CREDIT: Gord Waldner, The StarPhoenix
 Some people thought Gregg Adams was off his rocker for wanting an old barn

After getting rid of 40-odd years worth of accumulated junk -- the barn has not been used since 1964 -- Adams found Dennis and Ryan Sawitsky of Sawitsky Building Movers of Wakaw to take on the challenge of moving the 68-year-old structure.

The father and son team spent 30 hours last weekend jacking the barn up off its concrete foundation and building a custom trailer through the base of the barn using five steel beams.

"This is the biggest barn we've ever moved, and we move maybe five or six every year," said Dennis Sawitsky.

The 20-metre long, 10-metre tall and nine-metre wide hip roofed barn is a well-known landmark about 10 kilometres east of Saskatoon along Highway 5. Words in faded white paint promoting Saturday night dances face the road, harkening back to days of cowboys, country hoedowns and illicit booze.

Ruth Betker still remembers the fiddlers belting out their tunes on Saturday nights at her father's barn during the '50s.

Ludwig Drager, or "Louie" to his friends, built the barn in 1939 for his draft horses, according to Betker. Every Saturday night around 7:30, Drager would

open up the second floor of the barn to his neighbours and the party would begin.

"And what a time it was," said Betker, 86, who now resides in Saskatoon. "The lads used to bring their cases of homemade beer and go drink them behind the barn. They kept the Mounties busy, let me tell you."

Betker's brother Floyd set up a hamburger stand next to the barn, and her stepmother would sell pie and whipped cream to the revellers. Local musicians would bring their fiddles and guitars to entertain the crowd.

When it wasn't being used as a dance hall, Betker's brothers used the second floor of the barn to hold wrestling matches.

"They'd have to practise these dirty holds so people would think they were tough," she said with a laugh.

Although he never witnessed a fight, neighbour Harry Fleury says there were a few brawls at the barn in the 1950s, and police tried to shut the dances down more than once.

Drager decided his dances were popular enough to warrant investing in another venue that still exists today just a kilometre down the road from the barn -- the Manhattan Ballroom.

Drager was born in Russia in 1889 and came to Canada seven years later.

He married Flora in 1913, and the couple had four children together, one of whom was Betker, before Flora of tuberculosis in 1925. A year later, the 37-year-old Louie married his second wife, Auguste, who was just 18 at the time. They had 10 kids.

Walter Stevenson has owned the barn since 1963 when he bought it from Drager, who died in 1976.

For a rural community recovering from the Depression, events such as Drager's Saturday night barn dances gave people some much-needed respite from their daily hardships.

Betker says her father was known as a benevolent man who gave generously to his neighbours during the Depression. One winter during the 1930s, Drager gave some of his neighbours \$10 each to buy flour, sugar and salt for the winter. At the height of the Depression, many of Drager's neighbours didn't have enough money to feed their cows. Betker says her father would take what milk his own skinny cows could produce and give it to the nearby farms. If people couldn't repay money they owed him, Drager offered them work.

"That's how the barn was built," said Betker.

And built well it was. Apart from a few cedar shakes that were blown off the roof in a July 1996 storm, the counter-weighted windows, hardwood floors and fir tongue and groove lap board siding are still intact.

Adams says he's had his eye on the barn for a long time. He and his wife have always had a penchant for exploring old farmsteads, and when he saw the old Drager barn, it was love at first sight.

"I've dreamed about getting this barn for 15 years," he said. "This is the ultimate in recycling, if you ask me."

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