



*Photo by Marcia Danner*

The Parsons Barn was an excellent example of the importance of ongoing barn restoration.

## Fall “Barn Plus!” Tour Report

On Tuesday, October 3rd, from 9:00am to 5:00pm, a busload full of barn enthusiasts enjoyed what we organized as a “Barn Plus!” tour in Isabella and Clare Counties. The tour showcased the usual sampling of exceptional barn restorations, and we also visited a steel siding manufacturing facility and two barns that now serve as event venues.

The tour started in Rosebush at Lifetime Metal Sales, where we had an informative tour. After heading to the Tobacco Ranch in Clare, the group had a wonderful lunch at the White Barn venue.

The last portion of the day’s journey was spent visiting three barns within three miles of each other. Perhaps most interesting—from the perspective of the MBPN’s mission—was the Parsons farm. The barn has two levels of cement floors and housed livestock on both floors at one time. It is ramped on the back side, so equipment could drive into the second level. A track for a feed cart and manure cart still circled the second level. The silo at the end of the barn is triangular with three rounded corners. No silo unloader will fit in it. The reinforced beams were unique to most people on the tour. Currently the first level houses beef cattle and the second level is storage for construction supplies. With a good roof, this barn will last a long time to come.

“After we went there, I realized that this was the most significant barn that we visited that day,” says MBPN Board President Tom Irrer. “This is an example of a barn that needs restoration... and preservation is being done. It’s an excellent illustration of what we hope others will do with similar barns.”

It takes a community to make events like this happen. My biggest reward is meeting new people, including barn owners and neighbors. We had a great bus driver – again, and the folks at Life-

time Sales were so much help. They even cleaned up the morning tables for me. Of course, we gave them all of the leftover donut holes! Thanks also to all of the volunteers and board members who helped with a variety of chores. We couldn’t do it without you!”

—Vera Wiltse, MBPN Program Chair

### Pre-Tour Board Meeting, Dinner, and Presentation Set the Stage

This year, the fall bus tour was preceded by a meeting of the MBPN Board and a dinner presentation. The meeting and dinner took place at an Amish farm in Farwell. Typically generous portions of Amish fare provided by Country Side Dinners included main entrées of chicken and meatloaf, rolls, mashed potatoes, salad, homemade noodles, gravy, vegetables, coffee, and two types of pie.

Following dinner, Past President and Technical Committee Chair Steve Stier made an informative presentation centered around the work of local retired barn contractor Frank Graham. Coincidentally, Frank worked on the last barn in this year’s fall bus tour. Steve and I have visited with Frank and collected photos and stories of three generations of barn building and repair in Isabella County and beyond.

All in all, the Board meeting was productive, the fall colors were in full swing, and the unique Michigan barns (and other stops) fully justified the special name for the event: the “Barn Plus! Tour.” We hope that you’ll join us for future tours.

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Scan our QR code with your  
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## President's Message

# Save It for Your Grandkids...and Theirs

Traveling through the countryside, we all enjoy seeing the results of barn owners who keep their old barns and farmsteads well-kept. As barn owners we are among the very few people in this nation able to privately own a big piece of history that you can see, touch, and even enter.

Forward thinking people in urban areas are taking steps to make their particular locations special and preserve their history. This is often done by preserving significant buildings or through public art. We, as barn owners, already have a special history. Many of us can say that our special pieces of history are right in our backyards.

While some of our children are sometimes not interested in these old buildings, these barns will become more revered by future generations as they become more scarce. Traditional barns, hand-hewn by those who settled our country, will never increase in numbers. Barns are an endangered species. As time goes on, they will be even more appreciated for the values that they represent.

I urge you to save your place in history by doing what you can to provide an historical perspective for your Grandkids...and for theirs.

On another topic, Vera Wiltse pulled off an enjoyable and informative two-day barn tour program. The pre-tour evening meal and presentation by Steve Stier were first-rate, and everything the next day worked out even better than she had planned. Everything worked out even better than she had planned. As I observe this week's Thursday rain I wonder how she managed to pull off such perfect weather.

Besides enjoying the great barns, we also got to interact on an individual basis with some of the most ardent supporters of the MBPN. It is from these types of people that we can learn about improving our organization through activities, volunteerism, or financial support through membership and our Endowment. If you can, take a moment and thank those who joined us for the program.

Finally, my wife Marilyn and I recently attended the Annual Capital Region Community Fund Community Leadership Reception. Our endowment fund of nearly \$160,000 is held there, and we wanted to show our appreciation and to stay up to date on the Community Fund's vision. Again, their big theme was placemaking. The idea is to create places that are significant and one of a kind. With the MBPN, we have been doing that with each barn that has been saved, either with or without our assistance. I think that all of our goals can be summed up as rural placemaking. Thanks for all that our members and supporters do in this regard. Keep up the good work!

—Tom Irrer, MBPN President



Tom Irrer



Photo by Keith Kehlbeck

MBPN members enjoy Amish hospitality in Farwell.

# Calling All Nominations for the 2024 Barn of the Year Awards



The MBPN's most prestigious awards, the Michigan Barn of the Year Awards, are presented annually to honor barn owners who have made the extra effort to maintain or restore historic barns. Photos and histories of all 108 barns that have been declared recipients of the Barn of the Year are found on MBPN's website at [www.mibarn.net](http://www.mibarn.net), either in the database (1997-2016) or in Annual Showcases (2017-2023).

2024 is nearly upon us, and we are now accepting nominations for the next barns to be considered for these coveted awards!

***Submissions will be accepted for a period of three months, ending January 15, 2024.***

The MBPN website has complete details and instructions for applying for the Award. An announcement and press release was also sent to Michigan newspapers to kick off our search for the 2024 Barn of the Year Awardees.

Last year's search generated 18 applications for the Award. We recently visited three of those barns to present Certificates of Appreciation for those barns declared "Great Michigan Barns." Their sto-

ries are presented on pages 4 and 5 of this newsletter, along with a personal story related to another worthy barn.

Despite the fact that Michigan's barns, symbols of our great agricultural heritage, are disappearing at an alarming rate, there is reason to be optimistic—a reason to celebrate. The Michigan Barn Preservation Network, a non-profit whose mission is to promote the preservation of barns, has honored over 100 restored barns since the program's inception 28 years ago. The prestigious Barn of the Year Award is highly sought after by barn owners who have made the extra effort to save a Michigan Barn. Is there a barn you feel is worthy of the Award? Encourage the owner(s) to submit their application for consideration.

— Keith Anderson, MBPN Awards Committee Chair

**Save the Date.** The Board of Directors met and selected **February 24, 2024** as the date of the Annual Meeting at which event the awards will be presented. In the meantime, the members of the MBPN Awards Committee will be diligently working to evaluate nominations. Stay tuned for updates!



## It's Membership Renewal Time!



With the new year nearly upon us, the Network reminds its members that we continue to need your support to pursue our organizational mission and programs. Your membership says that you are an advocate for preserving our old barns and the rural character of Michigan. With your financial support, MBPN has continued to bring together a network of people dedicated to sharing knowledge and a desire to preserve a crucial part of our rural heritage. Help continue that momentum by renewing today for 2024.

Dues are for the calendar year and your expiration date will appear on the newsletter mailing label. You may pay for more than one year if that is convenient for you. You may also want to consider supporting the MBPN with a Cupola lifetime membership. In recent years, many of our members have used this vehicle to support our growing Endowment Fund.

The most important thing to do is to renew your own membership. You may renew by mail by sending this form with a check to the address above or go to [www.mibarn.net](http://www.mibarn.net) and find the Membership page under the Support tab. You can pay with a credit card if you use this option.

Do you know someone who loves barns and who should be a member? Show them this form or send them to our website for more information.

If paying dues as an organization or business, please include its name along with two representative names. Correspondence will be sent to the address you list below.

1st Membership Name \_\_\_\_\_

2nd Membership Name \_\_\_\_\_

Business/organization Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_

Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

email \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ \$40 per year - Fieldstone (one individual)

\_\_\_ \$50 per year - Mortar (two individuals at one address)

\_\_\_ \$50 per year - Non-profit (two individuals)

Mailings will be sent to one address.

\_\_\_ \$100 per year - Contractor or business

(indicate 2 names representing the business)

\_\_\_ \$1000 Cupola - lifetime membership (one or two individuals at one address)

\_\_\_ Donation to General fund - Amount \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ Donation to the Endowment fund - Amount \_\_\_\_\_

*Send completed form and check or money order to:  
MBPN, P.O. Box 614, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48804-0614*





# Great Michigan Barns



Every year, many exceptional Michigan barns are nominated for the Barn of the Year Award, and 2023 was no exception. All nominated barns have stories...and they enrich us by telling those stories of tradition, family, diversity, and pride in our history. For those barns nominated but not awarded, we routinely recognize their exceptional stories with Certificates of Appreciation as "Great Michigan Barns." Here are the stories of several of those most recent recipients and their barns.

-Keith Anderson, MBPN Awards Committee Chair

## A Great Michigan Barn – Helsen

Oftentimes, we are startled by the transformation of a barn we thought hopelessly lost, to a restoration that returns it to its earlier glory days. Nowhere has that transformation been better demonstrated than in West Michigan's Ottawa County in rural Sullivan Township near the Village of Ravenna.

John Helsen took over his parents' farmstead in 2017. The barn's survival was not assured. Because of the barn's connection to his family's history, however, John was determined to preserve it and return it to its original purpose. The restoration project included raising the entire structure for installation of a new concrete-block foundation, replacing a sizable quantity of missing horizontal boards and topping it off with a new coat of barn-red paint. Today, John raises beef cattle in the new lower level and stores baled hay in the upper level.

In September, Keith Anderson, Awards Chair, paid a visit and presented John Helsen with a framed "Certificate of Appreciation" on behalf of MBPN for his efforts in restoring his family's iconic barn.



Keith Anderson and John Helsen with a framed "Certificate of Appreciation" from the MBPN for the Helsen family's iconic barn.



Photo by ?????



Mike and April Petersen receive their "Great Michigan Barn" certificate from Keith Anderson.

## A Great Michigan Barn: Frugthaven – Greenville

When Mike and April Petersen acquired this large, gambrel-roofed barn in 2019, they dubbed it the "Large Barn at Frugthaven Farm." Measuring 35 x 75 feet, it housed both dairy and apple operations in its heyday, but now needed significant restoration. The Petersens fell in love with the barn and wanted to share it as an event space for weddings and celebrations. Consequently, they enlisted the expertise of Chad Stitt and his American Heritage Barn Preservation team. Renovations began in 2020 and were completed in 2021—including lifting the barn and pouring a new foundation. Today, the Petersens farm 100 acres of apples and use the barn as a wedding and event venue. It sports modern additions of heat and airconditioning, which allows the barn to be used in all seasons. In addition to wedding-filled weekends and Sunday church services, the weekly summer concerts and the Cidery Room draw large crowds. A late September Art Show showcased the work of local artists.

MBPN declared the barn, located just west of Greenville on M57 in Montcalm County, a "Great Michigan Barn" and presented Mike and April a Certificate of Appreciation for the preservation of and adaptive use of the "Large Barn at Frugthaven Farm." On hand to present the award in September was Keith Anderson, MBPN's Awards Chairman.



*Ed and Regina Grubbe receive a framed Certificate of Appreciation for their work in rehabilitating the family's barn.*

## A Great Michigan Barn: Meadowbrook Barn – Rockford

When Ed and Regina Grubbe acquired his family's farm property in 2018, the barn was in need of extensive repair. In the family since his grandparents bought it 90 years ago, the structure was important as a reminder of his family history and as a testament to the craftsmanship of the period during which it was built.

Ed is quick to acknowledge the excellent restoration work provided by Chad Stitt and American Heritage Barn Preservation. Work started in the Spring of 2022 and was completed within six months. Oak lumber milled from timbers located on the property was used to repair missing exterior boards and a new upper level floor. Ed's mom grew up on the farm, and now in her 90s, she "couldn't be happier with how it turned out," according to Ed.

"Meadowbrook Barn," located on the outskirts of Rockford in Kent County, was declared a "Great Michigan Barn" for 2023 by the MBPN. In September, Keith Anderson, Awards Chair, visited the barn and presented Ed and Regina Grubbe with a framed Certificate of Appreciation for their work in rehabilitating the family's barn.

## Another Great Michigan Barn – Loudenslager

Finally, the following story was written by Marilyn (Loudenslager) Thelen, longtime member and staunch supporter of the MBPN. Her family's barn is located in the tiny town of Burr Oak in St. Joseph County way down close to the Indiana border. Her story is testament to the importance of barns to a family's legacy and our agricultural history.

### Our Barn; A gift for the generations

In 2023 I submitted an application for the Barn of the Year contest. The Loudenslager barn did not receive the "Barn of the Year" designation, but the experience of putting together the application allowed me and my family to see the barn through a new lens.

Growing up on the farm, the entire family was involved in the farming operation. We put hay in the barn in the summer and threw hay down from the hayloft all winter to feed the cows. We spent countless hours in the barn milking cows. During that time, we never knew how to "read" the barn and learn its rich history. Completing the application provided an opportunity to see the hand-hewn beams and to observe the concrete and stone foundation. We learned the barn has graced the farm for well over 200 years, and it has evolved over that time to meet the changing needs of the farm operation.

It also became clear that this barn was a source of pride for my parents. My father carefully maintained the barn over the years, shoring up the weak points, repairing the roof and eventually, as funds were available, siding and roofing the barn to allow it to stand tall for years to come. He also found ways to remodel the barn, giving it a useful purpose when it was no longer needed as a dairy



*Marilyn Thelen is pictured on the right. Her mother, Jane Loudenslager, pictured in the middle, lives on the family farm.*

facility. The barn was a labor of love for our parents.

The ultimate gift we received was a compilation of the stories, history, and pictures that made up the application. This is a wonderful narrative that can be shared and passed down through the generations. I shared the application and the certificate with my mother, and she is very proud of the barn and its designation as a "Great Michigan Barn." Thank you for the opportunity to walk through the barn's history with my family and celebrate its rich story.

—Marilyn Loudenslager Thelen

Photos by Keith Anderson



Photo by Keith Kehlbeck

Steve Stier presents a retrospective on the preservation work of Frank Graham.

## Tribute to Frank Graham, His Brothers, and Father

Many barn people in Michigan have noticed there are a huge number of “round roof” barns in the Clare and Isabella County areas. What you might not know is that these barns exist today because of the Graham family. Father William Graham (1900 -1968) built his first barn at age 19 and continued building gambrel and round roof barns in the area through 1968. Along the way, he taught his sons Dean, Ben, and Frank about the hard work that goes into building such barns and the “ins and outs” of well-built barns that will last. When asked, son Frank could not even guess how many barns William had built over the years. Many were round roofs, even though Frank preferred gambrels.

By the 1960s, the barn work had changed from building to repairing, and Frank took up the challenge. His specialty became repairing the many round roof barns in the area, designing his own special equipment, tools, and methods needed to straighten



Photo by Steve Stier

Frank Graham in his element.

roofs that had begun to settle and sag. Frank consulted with owners and mentored many in the area who worked with him. Frank has continued to consult on barn repairs, and he routinely shares his knowledge and experience with any who seek it.

If you see round roof barns in this area that are straight with metal roofs, it is very likely that Frank Graham and his crew worked to make it as close to perfect as possible. Two trademarks of their repairs are corrugated metal gable end fascia, rather than cut and overlapped, and a slight crown in the ridge produced by cutting rafters slightly longer going toward the center, so it would look straight even if it sagged a bit.

Frank is a farmer, a 4-H leader, a school bus driver...and an expert barn repair person. He is a true gentleman and a hero to all barn lovers.

—Steve Stier, MBPN Technical Committee Chair and Past President

## Fall Board Meeting and Strategic Planning: Looking to the Future with Optimism

In addition to the recent Board meeting that occurred in conjunction with the fall bus tour, a dedicated group of board members and volunteers took time on November 1st to meet for a Strategic Planning session at Board President Tom Irrer’s farm office in St. Johns.

The last Strategic Planning effort was made nearly seven years ago, and, as with all organizations, the MBPN is seeking to update its planning to incorporate new opportunities and approaches moving forward.

This time, the work—which involved day-long discussions and outlining—was facilitated by Dave Ivan, State Specialist at Michigan State University Extension. The agenda included:

- Introductions
- Organizational Timeline/Activity
- Mission & Vision
- Review of Current Strategic Plan
- Activities
- Consensus
- Action Plan(s)
- Reality Check

The end of the day produced an outline that will be translated into our next written strategic plan.

—Julie Avery, MBPN Vice-President and Endowment Committee Member



Photo by Julie Avery

Board members and volunteers gather to update the MBPN Strategic Plan. Pictured (top row) left to right: Vera Wiltse, Steve Stier, Marcia Danner, Clare Koenigsknecht, Keith Anderson, Julie Avery, Tom Irrer. Seated: Kevin Kirk, Kristine Ranger, Richard Harvey.

# 2024 MBPN Calendars are Coming...

One of the great successes of the Michigan Barn Preservation Network in recent years has been the annual calendar we produce each fall for the coming year. The calendars, filled with iconic photos and stories of Michigan barns, provide valuable visibility and marketing for the organization. For a number of years, the late Jim Mulvany spearheaded this important effort, and board member Kristine Ranger has now assumed the mantle of producing the MBPN calendars.

The MBPN calendar program wouldn't be successful without the generous contributions of sponsors who help underwrite the production costs for the calendar.

## Here are the 2023 advertisers:

*We thank each sponsor for their support of the MBPN and its programs!*

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*The 2024 calendar will showcase an even more extensive list of MBPN supporters, and we thank them all!*

For the 2024 calendar, the cover and story are going to feature the famous Octagon Barn's 100th Anniversary. A recently report provided some details about an early fall gathering that included the Octagon Barn as a focal point of Fall Family Days in Gagetown: "A crowd of Thumb Area residents estimated at 15,000 turned out at the Octagon Barn on Saturday and Sunday, September 9th and 10th for the 2023 Fall Family Days in Gagetown.

Outside of the historic barn, vendors were selling hand-made



Photo by Kristine Ranger

*The Thumb Octagon Barn celebrates 100 years in 2024.*

crafts, used books and toys, and food. The daily antique tractor parade attracted large crowds. Inside the unique, 99 year-old restored barn, animals waited in their stalls to be petted, and the entire upstairs is a museum of early farm tools to explore.

The MBPN was a featured fixture on the barn's main floor with its model timber frame barn and assortment of antique barn-building tools. A group of area students assembled the barn prior to the festival under the direction of Paul Deo and Jared Sorensen, who along with MBPN stalwart Rose Putnam, are major organizers of the annual festival.

On hand, along with their wives, to help promote MBPN were President Tom Irrer, and Board members Kevin Kirk and Keith Anderson."

—Kristine Ranger, MBPN Calendar Chair and Keith Kehlbeck

## Quick Takes

### Looking for New Board Members

Do you have what it takes to be a Michigan Barn Preservation Network board member? The MBPN is currently looking to add board members, and that new board member may be you!

The National Council of Nonprofits reports that entire books have been written about the art of cultivating, identifying, asking, and nurturing a strong nonprofit board. For organizations like the MBPN, we start with asking what do we need to advance our mission right now and in the future? A board member with financial expertise? Connections in the community? Someone familiar with the MBPN's mission and vision? More diversity in terms of age, gender, geography, race, or other attributes to help establish a broader base of understanding and experience? Any or all of the above? Perhaps it simply requires someone who shares our passion for our rural heritage and our love for old barns.

Serving on a charitable nonprofit's board is about more than just being elected – it requires continuous learning about those served and being an advocate for the mission, making decisions that are in the best interest of the organization, ensuring prudent use of the Network's assets, and looking ahead to help us plan for the future.

We currently have a diverse and dedicated group of board members, many of whom have been active for years in the MBPN. But we always need to encourage new participants at this level, and we hope we "cultivate" those individuals who may be ready to accept an invitation to become an ambassador and advocate for the MBPN. If you are ready to become one such individual, please let us know. Take our word for it: try it, you'll like it!

For more information, contact Steve Rademacher, Nominations Chair.

### Endowment Committee Welcomes Recent Contributions

The Endowment Committee—consisting of Julie Avery, Clare Koenigsknecht, Tom Irrer, Vera Wiltse, Brad Brogen, and Kevin Kirk—wants to thank two past MBPN board members for endowment-related contributions that have occurred during this past quarter. Carole and Jerry Damon became Cupola Members, and Evelyn and Carol Johnson provided a \$1000 endowment gift. Many thanks to these individuals for their continued support!



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[www.mibarn.net](http://www.mibarn.net)

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### *Images from the 'Barn Plus!' Tour*



*Tour attendees pose together with the Concordia Hills barn in Farwell in the background*



*The Parsons Barn with its unique concrete double silo*



*Touring the fully restored Tobacco Ranch Event Venue in Clare*

