



MI BARN

PROMOTING APPRECIATION, PRESERVATION, AND REHABILITATION OF MICHIGAN BARN, FARMSTEADS, AND RURAL COMMUNITIES



Photo by John Cole

Michigan barns in spring provide a wonderful addition to the Michigan landscape. The Fitzpatrick Barn is one of photographer John Cole's neighbors in Clare County.

2026 Annual Conference: Celebrating MBPN's Impact on Michigan Barn Preservation!

Nearly one hundred barn enthusiasts from across the state gathered at the 2026 MBPN Annual Conference and Member Meeting on March 14th. This year, the Conference was again held at the AgroLiquid headquarters in St. Johns. The conference was a celebration of the MBPN's impact and influence in today's Michigan rural ecosystem, and it included welcoming new faces as well as celebrating longtime Network participants.

In addition to a fascinating schedule of presentations (see pages 4-6), the event was the platform for our annual recognition of Barns of the Year and Great Michigan Barns—which were represented at the conference by families and stakeholders responsible for their preservation. The award winners are celebrated elsewhere in this newsletter (see pages 4 and 5). While preparing to hand off the Barn of the Year program to Board member Ruth Stahl, Emeritus Board member Keith Anderson once again led the BoY evaluation and awards process (presenting the recipients and their barns at the conference with his usual flair and expertise).

As we move into the summer and fall of this year, the Net-



Photo by Keith Kehlbeck

Annual Conference participants enjoyed a day of informative presentations at the AgroLiquid headquarters.

work celebrates 30 years of fidelity to its mission. Gatherings like the Annual Conference remind us of all we share with each other while we pursue outcomes so important to Michigan's history and future!

— Keith Kehlbeck

Officers

Tom Irrer, President
tomirrer21@gmail.com
(989) 640-1868
St. Johns

Dave Prout, Vice President,
Proutdl@gmail.com
(989) 560-1070
Grand Ledge

Clare Koenigs knecht,
Treasurer and Past President
Membership and Finance/
Endowment Committees
clarek13@gmail.com
(989) 593-2351
Fowler

Vera Wiltse
Program Chair
vera@wiltse.com
(989) 465-1216
Coleman

Board and Volunteers

Steve Rademacher
Nominations
rademachersteve22@yahoo.com
(517) 202-1443
Fowler

Keith Kehlbeck
Communications Chair
MIBARN Editor/Coordinator
keith@k2consulting.net
(269) 317-3771
Marshall

Laurie Sisco
Barn Tour Chair
laurelsisco@gmail.com
(810) 252-0457
Lapeer

Ruth Stahl
Awards Committee
ruth@stahleventbarn.com
(231) 878-4961
McBain

Beverly Monroe
monroeachers@yahoo.com
(231) 824-3391
Manton

Doug Benoit
DouglasWHC@gmail.com
(248) 249-2926
West Bloomfield Township

Fred Johns
fbjohns@mac.com
(313) 686-7529
Northville

Scott Stone
smstone555@comcast.net
248-506-4959
Ferndale

Steve Stier,
Emeritus, Barn School Founder
& Technical Committee Advisor
stephenstier@gmail.com
(517) 648-2933
Empire

Kristine Ranger
Emeritus, Calendar Chair
kmranger11@gmail.com
(517) 974-5697
Houghton Lake

Julie Avery, Emeritus,
Communications and Finance/
Endowment Committees
averyj@msu.edu
(517) 927-1958
Empire

Keith Anderson
Emeritus, BoY Awards Chair
klanderson42@gmail.com
(616) 540-6701
Sparta

Tammis Donaldson
Emeritus, Technical &
Communications Committees
tammis@ekocite.com
(248) 561-4248
Royal Oak

Communications

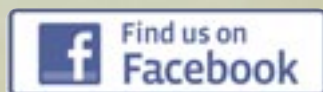
Marcia Danner
Webmaster and Editor
marciadanner@comcast.net
(248) 891-3750

Robert Slocum
Newsletter Design
bob.designworks@gmail.com
(269) 425-0486
Battle Creek

www.mibarn.net



Scan our QR code with your smart phone and visit the MBPN website!



President's Message

30-Plus Years of Volunteering



Tom Irrer

Tempis Fugit ("time flies"), as the saying goes! The MBPN had its beginnings in 1991 when MSU Extension professionals organized regional barn rehabilitation workshops to encourage people to preserve traditional barns. More than 800 people attended those workshops! Recognizing the interest that had been generated, a group formed the Network in 1995, and the new non-profit held its first conference in 1996 during Agriculture and Natural Resources Week at the Kellogg Center in East Lansing.

In the intervening thirty years, we have managed to have an extraordinary impact on barn preservation in Michigan. What started with a small group of barn enthusiasts has made a difference! Dozens (hundreds?) of barns that otherwise would be gone have been saved, restored, and repurposed with the guidance and encouragement of the MBPN and its volunteers.

Like many nonprofits, the various functions of the Network have been managed and accomplished by dedicated volunteers and a working board. Of the group of pioneer Network founders, I would like to recognize three long time Board members who were instrumental creating our MBPN. For over 30 years, they have taken active leadership roles with MBPN.

Vera Wiltse started as our first President, and she has continued to keep our affairs in order ever since. Steve Stier has used his technical knowledge and skills in convincing many owners to save their barns and has been a strong leader in the philosophy of barn preservation. Julie Avery wrote our very first front-page article, and she has used her communication skills for over 30 years to promote our mission and has served on our Board for most of that time. We owe the continued existence of the Michigan Barn Preservation Network to these three individuals!

Going forward, we have a new set of challenges and opportunities. It would be great to find volunteers to carry on our administrative tasks. As our organization matures, we might need to look into using some type of paid staff along with a central office location. Our endowment could offer limited funding but we still need volunteers to perform many tasks within our organization. Challenges—and opportunities—await!

We owe the success of MBPN to individuals like Vera Wiltse, Steve Stier, and Julie Avery. Looking to our future, new leaders will emerge. Recently, new members have joined our Board, and I feel that they will bring fresh ideas. Our entire Board of Directors will need all the help that we can get as we transition forward from the leadership that has led us for the past 30 years.

In the meantime, thank you to all who made the 2026 Annual Conference and Member Meeting a success. Special thanks and appreciation goes to retiring Board member, Richard Harvey, who orchestrated the wonderful presenters for the conference, and to Emeritus Board member Keith Anderson, who has incomparably led our Barn of the Year Awards program in recent years..

With gratitude for our history, appreciation for present efforts and accomplishments, and a healthy embracing of the challenges the future presents, I remain steadfastly optimistic for our mission and the important role the MBPN has and will play.

—Tom Irrer, MBPN President

Save the Date: Join us on October 9th for our annual Fall Barn Tour. This year, the Network will continue its exploration of Lapeer County barns in Michigan's Thumb. Our travels will be based in the North East portion of Lapeer County, starting in Imlay City. Mark your calendars now, and stay tuned for more information!

Rick Collins Delivers the Keynote...and Introduces His Company, Firmitas, to Michigan Barn Lovers

Rick Collins is a structural timber expert, preservationist, master carpenter, and journey worker timber framer. An accomplished speaker and consultant with clients throughout the Midwest, Rick is committed to the preservation and continuation of our built and natural heritage.



Photo by Keith Kehlbeck
Rick Collins explains innovative approaches to the Manhattan Round Barn restoration.

A long-time cultivator of creative energies within the US timber framing trade, today Rick focuses his energy as a consultant and a subject matter expert, adding to the efficiency, and context of a project by grounding process with practicality and linking community with place. His keynote address at the MBPN Annual Conference and Member Meeting focused on one of Rick's restoration projects: the Manhattan Round Barn in Illinois, a 20-sided, 100-foot diameter barn that is being converted into a community center and park venue. It was originally built in 1898 with wood salvaged from the

FIRMITAS

1893 World's Fair (Chicago Columbia Exposition).

In examining the Manhattan Round Barn project, Rick described a repeatable, data-driven approach to diagnose and repair round/polygonal timber buildings using 3D scanning, density drilling, and engineered shoring. Depending on scope, such scanning is highly cost-effective and yields 3D models, AutoCAD drawings, and Matterport fly-throughs for planning and fundraising. The emphasis is on safety, upfront information, and value engineering: scans and density testing reduce onsite labor and guesswork, enabling cost-effective, code-conscious repairs.

In his presentation, Rick also discussed timber framing and common failures associated with projects like this one...and how he dealt with challenges. Among other aspects of the project, he discussed shoring, lifting, value engineering, density drilling and diagnostics, and safety, teams, and delivery plans. All in all, the presentation demonstrated how modern technology and approaches are transforming today's approaches to timber framing and barn renovation. While much of his work is done elsewhere in the Midwest, for example Illinois and Iowa, he is very much interested in expanding his business into Michigan.

— Keith Kehlbeck

Conference Presenters Show the Way

Annual Conferences and Member Meetings always include a variety of important topics for attendees. This year's gathering was no exception. After the morning's business meeting, **Bob Kovacevich** started the day's presentations with an explanation of how he and his wife Kathy preserved and transformed a Michigan Dairy Barn into an AirBnB. Today, they are the owners and operators of the Barn House AirBnB in Plainwell, Michigan. The barn originally was part of a dairy farm established in 1878, and it had multiple dairy farm owners prior to Kathy acquiring it in 1992. Through a labor of love and determination, the barn was transformed into a home over the next 30 years. Great care was taken to preserve the natural beauty and beam work of the barn. The barn then started another evolution into the AirBnB that exists today. The presentation showed the evolution of the barn house, often made with limited resources. The barn was disassembled by a crew of Amish and moved to a new location. Radiant floor heating was included in the remodel, and conduits for electrical were run through interior walls and along the beams, so the exterior of the barn was not disturbed. The "supreme goal" was to preserve the beauty of the barn structure. The funds raised through the AirBnB are used entirely for preserving the natural beauty of the barn.



Bob Kovacevich

Following a short break, **Gary Howell** led a lively discussion on various legal issues related to barn preservation, including tips regarding property taxes and credits for restored barns. A farmer and lawyer, Gary has served as a tax assessor, municipal attorney, and state legislator. During his presentation, Gary noted that agricultural buildings are exempt from building permits, so township records often don't track them. Old barns are given a flat, low taxable value because



Gary Howell

they are often ancient structures (1800s to early 1900s). New additions like patios may have taxable value, but their impact depends on use (e.g., livestock operations). Maintenance and repairs on old barns do not increase tax liability. Taxes cannot be increased just because a barn looks better or is painted; restoration or maintenance does not trigger tax penalties. Proposal A was adopted by Michigan voters in 1994 and cut property taxes approximately 50%. Proposal A caps annual taxable-value increases to inflation or 5% maximum (currently 2.7% in Michigan). Properties owned since 1994 often have taxable values about one-third of what they'd be without the cap (this varies by township).

Patrick Ingalls, president of the Michigan Flywheelers Museum near South Haven, spoke about the museum's history and current projects. The 80-acre site is dedicated to the restoration and preservation of antique gas/steam engines and tractors and includes Olde Town, a 1920s era community where the restored Stephenson Barn is located. Named a "Great Michigan Barn" in 2024 by the Michigan Barn Preservation Network, it serves as the main building for exhibits, educational workshops, classes and programs as well as a rental facility. The museum hosts three major events every year - Farm History Day in May, Garden Tractor Show in June, and it's largest event - the Antique Engine and Tractor Show in September.



Patrick Ingalls

— Keith Kehlbeck

Six Barns Receive MBPN's Top Award for 2026

Barn of the Year has been the most coveted recognition by MBPN for the past 30 years. Year after year, barn owners and others nominate barns for the award, wishing to honor our state's most recognizable symbol of our great agricultural past.

The Barn of the Year Program annually honors existing Michigan barns that support the ongoing mission to preserve our agricultural heritage exemplified by its barns. Nominated barns must be in-use, either for continued agricultural use or adapted for other uses.



Barns must retain their overall appearance—both in their interior and exterior barn characteristics. Nominations are open to the public, reviewed and determined by MBPN Awards Committee members.

There were nine (9) nominations submitted for consideration for this year's Barn of the Year Award. Those nine barns are spread throughout our state from the far western reaches of the Upper Peninsula south to the Indiana border. From those, six barns were selected for the annual award. Recognizing that all preserved barns are worthy of recognition, the remaining three barns have been declared "Great Michigan Barns." All awards were presented during MBPN's Annual Conference held this year in St. Johns on March 14.

—Keith Anderson, BoY Awards Chair



In the Category of Continuing Agricultural Use

Evans Lake Pleasure Farm Barn
Tipton, Michigan
Lenawee County
Owner: Kristi Cymes

This beautiful historic barn sits at the top of a hill overlooking Evans Lake in the Irish Hills of Southeast Michigan near the Old Sauk Trail. Built about 1875 (150 years ago), this 30 x 60 foot, gambrel-



roofed barn, during much of the past century was part of a farmstead widely-known as a 'summer resort,' which brought folks across Evans Lake for fishing boating and lodging, ergo, its name, "Evans Lake Pleasure Farm." Seriously debilitated when acquired by Kristi and her husband 25 years ago, it underwent a 20 year-long restoration effort to produce what is seen here. Still in use for its original purpose, it houses horses, hay storage, and farm equipment.



In the Category of Private Adaptive Use

The Bicentennial Barn
Maple City, Michigan
Leelanau County
Owners: Scott and Tamara Stone

This barn, found within the confines of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, dates back to about 1915. A timber-framed bank barn with a gambrel roof, it measures 30' x 45' with two massive 12' foot doors on both front and back. For the past 50 years, this iconic



barn has been known as the "Bicentennial Barn" since the original painting project honored the nation's 200th birthday. The barn showed signs of deterioration when the current owners acquired it only two years ago. Following a significant restoration effort to the barn's structure and its murals, it has been prepared for the celebration of the nation's Semiquincentennial—the 250th anniversary of our independence.



In the Category of Family Adaptive Use

Kangas Family Farm Barn
 Ontonagon, Michigan
 Ontonagon County
 Owner: Nancy Kangas
 Applicant: Diane Kangas (daughter)

This barn is 99 years old, built in 1927, but the farmstead on which it was built has been in the same family for 120 years. It is currently under the stewardship of the family's 4th generation of Finnish immigrants. The barn is unique for its curved interior framing supporting



the entire curvature of the roof, and built from hemlock timbered from the 160-acre property. It was, and still is, isolated in the wilderness of the far reaches of the western Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Originally housing a herd of Guernsey dairy cattle, through successive restorations and regular maintenance across the generations, this beautiful barn today has had a makeover to envelope the family's farm "toys," a workshop, a loft for family gatherings, and a showcase for antique equipment from its farming days.



In the Category of Commercial Adaptive Use:

The Casnovia Barn
 Casnovia, Michigan
 Kent County
 Owners: Sunni & Gunnar Nyblad

Another barn whose "before and after" presentations are truly astounding, this is the type of barn that many observers, including some barn contractors, would have likely called unsalvageable and given up on. This striking, massive cinderblock structure with its soaring gothic-arched, shingled roofed barn, measures 180 feet long. By standard



measures, it is not an 'old' barn, built just 68 years ago. For half its life, it served as a successful dairy operation, but then fell into disuse. When the Nyblads acquired it nine years ago, it was largely considered unsalvageable. Undeterred, they took on the massive undertaking, including replacing the upper floor, expanding the dormers and restoring the roof—dangerous and extremely labor-intensive work. Today, that heroic project, at enormous cost, has resulted in a fully restored community venue, serving as a gathering place for weddings, celebrations, and local events.

We thank all of the applicants for 2026 Barn of the Year, and are proud to include the latest recipients of the award in our pantheon. This is the 30th year the Network has presented "Barn of the Year" Awards. Over that time period, 122 barns from across Michigan

have been recognized for their unique qualities and/or preservation efforts. For photos and stories of barns previously recognized as Barn of the Year, visit our website mibarn.net.

2026 Barn of the Year Awards recipients continued on next page 6

Photos by John Cole



In the Category of Commercial Adaptive Use

The LakeStar Barns
 Manistee, Michigan
 Manistee County
 Owner: Adam L. Dontz

This is another extraordinary story involving a multi-generational Centennial Farm Family and that incorporates two historic barns—one a Jamesway-system dairy barn dating to 1941 and the other a Quonset-style barn originally used to store hay and constructed in the



early 1950s. Ten years ago, the great grandson of the farm's founder began a comprehensive multi-year restoration of the barns which had become blighted after not having been maintained for nearly 17 years. While still maintaining much of the original fabric of the two barns, a modern venue with modern day amenities has been created. The 40' x 90' Quonset barn hosts lavish weddings, but great care was taken to preserve the original exposed timber framing. The dairy barn has been transformed into a 'dairy cottage' accommodating overnight guests, but still retains the original stanchions and gutter system.



In the Category of Non Profit Adaptive Use

The Buchanan School Farm Barn
 Buchanan, Michigan
 Berrien County
 Owners: Buchanan Community Schools
 Applicants: Monica Luke & Melissa Frost

This traditional timber-framed, gambrel-roofed former dairy barn dates to the early 1900s. At first glance, this is another quintessential "big red barn." In fact, it has become much more—a teaching tool for the future



generation. In 1973, the barn and property were acquired by the Buchanan School system to build a middle school on a portion of the property. In the following year, the Buchanan School Farm was established. (In addition to the barn, a one-room schoolhouse was moved onto the property and added as a living-history museum for the students and community). Ongoing maintenance has kept the barn in pretty good condition, beautiful enough for photos, but still rough enough to keep its original dairy-farm look. Students use the barn as a centerpiece for field trips, learning to be competent stewards of the land and giving them a physical connection to Michigan's agricultural past and future.

New Board Members Bring New Perspectives to MBPN

At the Annual Conference, three (3) new Board members were elected. The trio will add depth and experience to the board as it moves forward in 2026 and beyond. Welcome!

Dave Prout was born near Rosebush and was working at the family farm at the great age of seven! The big barn was his favorite place to be. In 1962, a terrible tornado leveled the barn, and he has been looking for his dream barn ever since. He recently purchased 20 acres and would like to make plans for that structure now. He is delighted to be part of the MBPN board and hopes to contribute his expertise to help build the Network's endowment. Dave has subsequently agreed to serve as the Network's Vice President, having been elected at the most recent Board meeting in April.

Fred Johns' grandfather and namesake, Frederick Stuart Bloom, founded Bloom Engineering Company in 1934 with the core principle of solving customer problems. His legacy of innovation and dedication to solving problems continues to inspire my professional and personal journey. With 36 years in the automotive, chemical and metal industries, he has built a unique experience set in product development, manufacturing, sales, operational excellence, strategic planning, and business transformations. This has enabled him to lead teams through complex challenges and deliver impactful results.



Dave Prout



Fred Johns



Scott Stone

Scott Stone is a retired metallurgical engineer who worked in that field in various management and technical positions for over 34 years. He retired in 2023. Scott and his wife Tamara purchased an historic farm property in Leelanau County in late 2024. The centerpiece of the property is the Bicentennial Barn (c 1915) which underwent significant restoration led by Scott last year and was ultimately selected as Barn of the Year for Private Adaptive Use for 2026. Scott has experience serving on various technical and other boards over the years and looks forward to participating with the MBPN.

— Keith Kehlbeck



Quick Takes



Tom presenting plaque to Vera at the conference

President's Award.

At the Conference, President Tom Irrer took the opportunity to present the prestigious President's Award to two MBPN stalwarts and founding members—Vera Wiltse and Steve Stier. Vera has served in many roles over the years and most recently has organized our annual conferences as Program Director. Longtime head of the Technical Committee and Past President of the MBPN, Steve was unable to attend this year's conference due to health issues, but was warmly recognized for his many contributions to the Network over the years.



Laurie Sisco, Ruth Stahl, and Vera Wiltse greeted Conference attendees at the registration table.

A favorite Conference activity for attendees, the live auction again raised funds for the MBPN treasury.



Conference attendees Al and Mary Polkowski are proud of their efforts to preserve and restore the "Bates Family Homestead" in Macomb County, continuing the 191-year legacy of Founder Ezra Bates (farming & livestock). Al is a U.S. Military Veteran, and the Historical Society of Michigan has awarded Mary a "Michigan Heritage Home" award for the c. 1835 Bates House.



The lobby of the AgroLiquid headquarters was once again filled with depictions of past Barn of the Year Award recipients and the Network's promotional displays.

Photos by John Cole



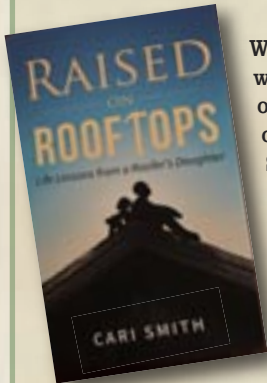
P.O. Box 614
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48804-0614

Spring 2026, No. 113

www.mibarn.net

Share, reuse, recycle this newsletter

Life Lessons From a Roofer's Daughter



What if the most powerful lessons in life weren't taught, but lived? That is the premise of a wonderful new book—written by our own Clare Koenigsknecht's daughter. Cari Smith is a writer, veteran educator, wife, and mother of three boys. Raised in mid-Michigan and trained in writing through the National Writing Project, she brings an honest, funny, and faith-filled voice to the everyday chaos of real life. Her passion lies in helping others see the meaning in their memories—and encouraging them to

write their own. Cari joined us at the Annual Conference, introduced by her father, the MBPN Treasurer.

In her book, *Raised on Rooftops: Life Lessons from a Roofer's Daughter*, Cari tells deeply relatable stories that span the roles of daughter, wife, and mother. Organized in three sections, the book moves from rooftop projects to dinner table confessions, bedtime routines, and quiet moments of unexpected clarity. Through humor, humility, and hope, Smith captures the beauty in the mundane and the sacred in the everyday. From childhood summers spent hauling shingles and hammering nails, to adult years navigating motherhood, grief, and growth, *Raised on Rooftops* is a heartfelt memoir that explores how legacy is built—not just through words, but through work, laughter, and love.

The stories span the gritty and the tender, from hammer



Photo by Keith Kehlbeck

Cari Smith talks about her book, while MBPN Treasurer Clare Koenigsknecht looks on.

mishaps and driver's training to parenting challenges and funeral reflections. Cari shares moments of laughter, tears, embarrassment, growth, and legacy-building—often from atop a roof or amid the chaos of family life. Her father's teachings, from how to swing a hammer to how to live with purpose, serve as the emotional spine of the book, shaping her worldview and inspiring her own journey as a mother, wife, and teacher. The book is an

invitation for readers to reflect on their own foundations, familial bonds, and the small but profound lessons found in everyday life weaving together anecdotes that are at once touching, humorous, and deeply relatable.

For more information, visit www.carismithauthor.com. Her book is also available on Amazon.

— Keith Kehlbeck (with excerpts from Amazon.com)