**Chasing Barn Dreams**

By Mary Jo Youngbauer, FOMB Board Member

**Part 1**

I think I was born in the wrong era. I want to be a farm kid, always have. I have no clear idea *why* I have this desire, but it’s always been there. It’s not like I didn’t have a great childhood. I grew up a true country kid, playing Pocahontas in the swamp grasses and making mud pies. But I wasn’t on a farm.

Maybe it’s in my DNA. After all, both my parents grew up on farms. My paternal grandfather’s barn was located in West Rock, Minnesota. My maternal grandfather farmed in North Branch and then Rush City, Minnesota. I don’t have any memories of either of these farms when they were “alive”. However, there is a photograph of me in my little rubber boots, sitting in a chair in the aisle of the barn watching my grandfather milking. So maybe my farm obsession comes from my early childhood experiences, influencing me even though I have no memory of those times.

Whatever it is, I’ve become more and more aware of this peculiarity of mine as I get older. To be fair, as a child, I was far too busy trying to locate the best mud for mud pie baking to worry about why there was no barn and no cows at my house. What brought it to light for me first was the news that my maternal grandfather’s barn had reached a point deemed no longer safe and would be torn down.

My parents and I trudged back through the abandoned barnyard to reach the admittedly iffy structure to have “one last look.” For me, it was really “one first look” since I’d never bothered to go in the barn since the cows were sold, and don’t remember the barn before that point. I always knew the barn was there, but had never explored it. One of those things you see every day but never really see. As I walked through the door to the old milkhouse and then into the barn proper, my eyes opened to a new passion.

I will never in my life forget those yellow, handwritten, not-quite-perfectly-square , and now covered in cobwebs, nametags posted above each cow’s stantion. Bessie. Nelly. Nancy. As my mother looked at these names, I could see her remembering the cows that went with them, as if they had just left the barn yesterday. The barn was like a whole new world to me, and I was intrigued. To see the ghost of how things worked. To imagine how the atmosphere would have been with the barn full of steaming cow bodies. And it was during that visit that I felt the desire to have a barn of my own take hold.

After that, I began to see those barns I had seen so many times before, but never looked at. Look at how that one is really tall. And that one is so long, what was it used for? Why does that one have those funny things on the roof? And then I heard (and by heard, I mean read on Facebook) that my other grandfather’s barn had been torn down. Wait, when did this happen and *why* did no one tell *me?* So, like a thief in the night, I borrowed a truck and drove over to the farm.

I came around the corner of the highway and could see the gaping hole where the barn should be. In the setting sun, I could see the barn in a pile on the ground, looking so very sad. As the light faded, I turned the headlights on and faced them to the rubble pile. I got my hammer out and climbed gingerly onto the wreckage to see what I could salvage. I found the old wooded pulley with a rope still attached (jackpot!) and a cream can (must have that). And I squirreled away a truckload full of barn boards that I would use for…well, I’d use them for something! By the time I was done, it was well past dark, and I really did feel a bit like a thief. But I got a piece of the barn to keep for myself.

Being now bereft of any of my family’s barns, my thoughts turned more and more to “*someday, I will have a barn of my own and it will be great.”*  I could make it into a library, with those amazing sliding wooded ladders going up and down the walls of the hay loft. Or maybe I could get some goats, or horses, or…alpacas! They could all live in my perfect dream barn.

And so, finally came the day when I was ready to start looking for a house of my own to buy. I made my “wish list” and of course it included a barn. But as I looked, it became quite apparent that I could either have a nice barn or a nice house, but that the properties with both were too far outside of my budget. And, as my mother says, you have to live in the house. I fell in love with a 1902 updated farmhouse with all the old-farmhouse charm (and a beautiful new foundation). It was in the country, on a dead-end road, and had acreage. All it was missing was the barn. Well, I could always find the perfect barn to move, right?

And so began my search for my dream barn. Tune in to the next newsletter for part 2 of my story.

**Part 2**

When you are searching for your perfect barn, there seems to be a candidate every direction you turn. How do I pick one that I really want? They are all so amazing, and they all should be saved! I didn’t really believe that I would be moving a barn on to my property any time soon, and so my search was more of a passive one rather than an in-depth one. And I let my mind wander, imagining what different barns would look like perched in my yard. I certainly did not bother worrying about any of the details. After all, it was just a dream, right?

I threw my idea out there to a few different barn owners at different times, never really thinking I would get serious consideration. And I didn’t! Most often, the person I was talking to looked at me like I had absolutely lost mind. It was the same thing the first time I floated the idea to the man who came to fix my sewer when the pipe froze and broke two winters ago.

“You don’t want that barn.” That’s what he told me, standing in my kitchen. In my mind, I’m shouting “Yes I do!” but I just let it go. However, I did slip a note in the envelope when I paid the bill. “I’m serious about the barn. Call me if you change your mind.” No call. The next winter, my sewer woes continued and Mr. Sewer Man was back. This time my whole mound system was frozen, so we needed to pump each time the tanks got full. Which meant that Mr. Sewer Man (aka Mr. Barn Owner) was at my house frequently. Each time I mentioned the barn again. Just a little nudge. Not really believing it would go anywhere.

And then it happened. I was standing in my garage getting the latest frozen sewer report and he casually says, “So you really want that barn?” Uh, yeah. Calmly, I answered “Of course.” “Well ok, you can have it.” Holy smokes! Did that really just happen? Am I imagining this? All I could squeak out was “Are you serious?” He gave me the ‘you’re nuts’ look and said, “Yeah. I don’t know why you want it but if you really do, it’s yours.”

My mind exploded. So much to do! Was it even possible to move it? Was it in good shape? I’ve never even been inside of it, I’ve just driven by it a million times. I did not sleep that night at all. I was running through all the possibilities and trying, and failing, not to get my hopes up. After all, I had a long way to go before this barn was actually mine.

Thankfully, I have excellent resources as a Board member on the Friends of Minnesota Barns group. Fellow Board member Jay Schmidt met me at the barn. I needed to know the answer to the burning question: Can it be moved? As I first stepped inside “my” barn, I fell hopelessly in love with it. No longer could I hold back my excitement and hope. If this didn’t work out, I would be heartbroken. I held my breath as I asked, “Well, what do you think Jay?”

He thought it could be done. Phew. Exhale. Jay suggested bringing in a house-mover that he knew to take a look at it and give me a better idea of cost. Right, could I possibly afford this? I’ll need a new foundation, and the cost of moving it, and fixing it up…yikes, I just encountered a new hurdle that could make my plans crumble.

The hardest part all the way along was the waiting. Waiting for the next appointment, for the next answer. I went to the bank to see what I could finagle out of them. I went through a home equity line application and pre-approval, only to be denied at the last minute. I only bought my house two years ago; just not enough equity there. Hopes are crushed. But, like an angel, the banker says “You might qualify for a premium loan.” Ok, what is that? In the end, I was approved and had a number in mind of what I could spend on this project.

Next up, Mr. Barn Mover. He makes the trip to the barn and meets with Jay and I. We do the walk through and I’m getting more and more discouraged. The barn was not made to be moved, he tells me. It is built differently, braced up after the fact and that makes it much more difficult. His words start to blur as I stop listening because I’m realizing it’s not possible. On top of that, I heard from the electric company that they would charge me $11,000 to move the lines between the barn and my house (a short 4 mile trip). That pretty much puts the kibosh on it.

The barn mover says he will shoot me a cost estimate in the next week or so. I set up a meeting with the electric company to find out exactly why they think it should cost so much. And then I anxiously wait, my dream barely flickering.

When I meet with Mr. Electric Company, it’s evident that no one had actually been out to measure the height of the lines along the route. A couple of the “really important lines” are actually high enough to travel underneath. So, Mr. Electric Company agrees to give me a new estimate. When I get the numbers back from him and from the barn mover, I’m above my budget. I start listing the things I own that I really don’t need anymore and could sell: snowboard, treadmill, scrapbooking stuff. As I’m discussing this with my partner Ben, he offers to help me make up the difference without having to liquidate my assets. I hate hate hate borrowing money, but I decide I may have to give in. After all, this is my barn we are talking about!

Ok, so what’s next? Mr. Concrete. I don’t even know what I need. Foundation? Slab? I go with what the experts suggest, a floating slab. Need to decide on a site, strip the sod off, get sand hauled in and spread, and then concrete. Sounds simple enough. However, I did not account for Mother Nature’s sudden decision to rain buckets every other day. A little over a month later, I finally have a concrete slab.

And that’s where we are as I write this. I expected to be able to wrap up my story in this second installment, but it’s looking like I’ll need a third article. In the next newsletter, I will hopefully be telling you about the perfect, absolutely non-stressful, and extremely smooth process of moving the barn itself. Keep your fingers crossed; I need all the help I can get.

**Part 3**

The thing about making your dreams come true is that it always takes way more work and stress than you imagined it would. But in the end, it’s all worth it. Looking out the window as I write this, it’s -18°F but the barn is as beautiful as a hot summer day. Yep, the barn made it safely home, making my dream come true! It was, and still is, an adventure and quite the story to tell.

When I left off the last article, I was in the middle of juggling contractors, electric companies, and cement trucks. While I would not say that it all went smoothly, we did get the barn moved successfully! It was a day that I will never forget, of that I am sure. We got started bright and early on a cool fall day after a night of rain. The barn mover was there first, and got the barn (which was waiting patiently on wheels) hooked up to the truck that would tow it. In the previous weeks, the barn mover had separated the top story of the barn from the lower walls. The lower walls were scrapped due to rot (and by scrapped I mean I made many pretty crafty projects out of the salvaged wood this winter and still have a nice stack for the future). Through the magic of cribs (layer upon layer of wooden blocks) and jacks, the upper level of the barn was lowered and set on massive steel beams. Then, the wheels were rolled under the beams and just like that you have a barn on wheels!

I have to mention the dust. I could have assumed that it would be a little dusty in an old barn, but I could not have imagined how long it would take to get the taste of 100-year old manure dust out of my mouth. After the owner of the barn got his belongings out of the barn, there was still plenty of “garbage” to get out before we could start the barn-on-wheels process. I spent several hours forking out old hay, which was fine until I got towards the bottom of the piles. That’s where this ancient and prolific dust had been hiding. When given the chance to fly, this dust did not waste time. There was no avoiding it. But I did say I wanted a “real” barn-the kind with real animals and real manure…and real 100-year old manure dust!

The morning of the move, as we waited for the electric guys to come so we could start on the road, the owner and his family members started to trickle in to watch the show. As naturally happens in the country, the stories about the barn started to be shared. Such a wealth of information and so very interesting! I think they apologized several times, thinking their memories of the barn boring to me. Quite the contrary! Those stories are the personality of the barn. It was like getting to know someone on a first date. A bit of history here and an explanation of something I had wondered about there. And the feeling of anticipation to make our own new memories together!

The electric company arrives and I’m mixed with the emotions of wanting to stay and hear more stories, not wanting the barn to fall to pieces on the road, and extreme excitement that this day is actually here. I know it’s a little cliché, but I needed to pinch myself to remember that I was not dreaming. The procession down the road was headed by an electric company truck working on the lines in front of us, then the truck with the WIDE LOAD sign and lights, then the barn, a follow up truck with lights, and the electric company putting the lines back up after we passed. I rode along perched on the back of the front WIDE LOAD truck, video camera in (shaking) hand, trying to decide between watching through the camera’s LED screen or to watch it live (which resulted in terrible camera-man-ship).

As we bumped along the road at about 5 miles per hour, people started lining up at the ends of their driveways to watch the spectacle. I guess, how often do you see a barn go by your driveway? Our route was pretty simple, south a quarter mile, east about 2 miles, south another half mile, and then into my long driveway. Part of it was paved and part of it was gravel. I thought it was a fairly smooth road…until the barn was bouncing over every crack in the pavement. I expected it to implode upon itself at every jolt, but somehow it held together. There were two moments that I will sheepishly call “panic” on my part-the first coming at the railroad tracks. There were heart-stopping groans and creaks from the barn as the tires fell into each rut of the tracks. The second occurred minutes later while turning south. The barn mover has nerves of steel because he seemed confident the whole time. I, on the other hand, nearly went to pieces. It turns out making a 90 degree turn with a barn takes a wide road and talent. We did not have the wide road, but thankfully the barn mover had the talent to make it work. One tire of the trailer under the barn was off the road completely, the barn was tilted frighteningly to the side, and the other side of the barn was nearly scraping the road surface.

But we made it. One mailbox and one road sign were the only victims of the move. The barn made the four mile trip in a little over 3 hours. The barn itself seemed to give a little sign of relief as the trailer backed over the slab. The cribs were reassembled under the barn and she (all barns must be “she”s right?) sat down comfortable to await her new lower level walls.

This process included many swear words, pinched fingers, and long days of trying to make an un-square building fit on a square slab. Thankfully, my dad likes a good challenge. He quickly converted from “this is a really insane idea” to “this is kind of fun”. He lined up new posts under the spot where the old post was cut off, and doubled it with a 2 x 4 on either side. The barn was growing legs! The biggest change came when the siding went on and it suddenly looked like a real barn again. I’ve got one of those Mr. Ed split doors, and the front doors have the big X’s on them. We were in the middle of getting the finishing trim boards on and hadn’t made it upstairs to fill in the holes (the big hay loft door was missing, plus there was a cutout on each side of the barn that I wanted to put doors on) when we got 16” of fresh snow in November.

The hay loft doors face west, the same direction that the snow blows at my house. With the forecast looking imminent for major snowfall on the next day, I spent several dangerous hours trying to close up as much of the big hay loft opening as possible with whatever I could find. Think extension ladder leaning against 100-year old posts next to large opening at least 25 feet off the ground…I did a pretty good job, if I do say so myself. After all, I got most of the opening closed up (except the very top, but not much can get in up there anyway) and I didn’t fall out of the barn! The next day, I was quite proud of how little snow made it inside-just a bit that got sucked in through small holes in the siding!

This chilly winter, I’ve been planning the spring’s activities: finish up the trim, close up the big hay loft opening, make doors for the smaller openings, pound the loose nails on the old siding, and paint the barn (red, of course!). I think my mother is correct: she told me that you forget the pain of childbirth because otherwise you’d never do it again. Those long, stressful, and sometimes painful days of getting the barn home and rebuilt don’t seem so bad any more and I’m blissfully ignoring how much work remains. It rather catches my breath each time I see the barn from a new angle-through a different window in the house, or as I turn around from an investigative walk around the property. It seems like it belongs there.

Visit our website ([www.friendsofminnesotabarns.org](http://www.friendsofminnesotabarns.org)) to see some pictures of the barn move and rebuilding. Thanks for reading my story and I hope you enjoyed it!