

American landscape losing its old barns

By Dennis Cauchon
USA TODAY

The American barn is disappearing from the landscape. It may not evoke the nostalgia of a one-room schoolhouse or covered bridge. But for more than two centuries, it has stood as a symbol of hard work and a rural way of life.

These simple structures that dot the countryside are becoming victims of decay, suburban sprawl, changes in farming practices and a growing trend to use old barn wood in new "rustic" buildings.

"We call them an endangered species," says Jennifer Goodman, executive director of the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance. "Barns are disappearing so rapidly, I often find myself saying, 'Ouch. Lost another one' when I drive down rural roads."

Nobody knows how many old barns exist. The Midwest once had 10,000 barns painted with Mail Pouch Tobacco advertisements -- a free paint job in exchange for ad space. A few hundred remain.

One-fourth of the barns listed in the 1997 *Field Guide to New England Barns and Farm Buildings* are now gone. Thomas Visser, the book's author, says his home state of Vermont loses about 1,000 of its 30,000 barns a year to fire, collapse and the bulldozer. The few hundred barns that survive from the 1700s are most vulnerable. "Many have been coasting for a century with very little maintenance," he says.

Steve Stier, who restores barns in Michigan and wrote a manual for identifying barn styles, says, "When an old barn falls, we lose more than a building. We lose a sense of place."

The accelerating demise of the American barn has prompted efforts to save some of the old structures. Michigan and New Hampshire have begun surveying the barns in their states.

Last year, the National Trust for Historic Preservation put a barn for the first time on its list of most endangered places -- the 1850s Miller-Purdue barn near Marion, Ind. The giant barn, once part of Purdue University's agriculture program, has three gables and five cupolas. But its ceilings are too low to accommodate modern farm equipment.

"We're not going to let it fall, even though its useful days have passed it by," says farmer Wayne Townsend, who now owns the building. He says the vacant barn will eventually undergo the \$35,000 to \$65,000 of work it needs.

"This is the dilemma farmers have," Townsend says. "We have to look at the bottom line. Good management dictates that it should come down. But if we don't preserve things like this, our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be the lesser for it."

Part of this renewed interest in barns stems from the rustic look featured in the designs of Martha Stewart and Ralph Lauren. PBS' *This Old House* and the upscale catalogs of Plow and Hearth, Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware.

But this popularity might be speeding the demise of traditional barns as they're dismantled for their timber. The big prize: wood that is strong and straight with a tight grain that cannot be replicated today. This wood came from trees that grew for centuries before being harvested in the 18th and 19th centuries.

A hand-hewn barn beam measuring 10 inches by 10 inches adds authenticity to expensive houses being built from Idaho to Vermont. Other barn wood is milled into flooring or paneling that costs two to five times more than new wood.

The demand for old-growth wood is so great that salvage dealers

Nation



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How many old barns still stand? The barn above in Bridgewater Township, Mich., was built in 1919. In the same town, restorationist Steve Stier visits the barn at the Parker Farm, bottom. "When an old barn falls, we lose more than a building," he says. "We lose a sense of place."



This rural symbol is crumbling from decay, suburban sprawl, changes in farming practices and the popularity of the wood in fashionably "rustic" buildings

are knocking on doors and taking out newspaper ads offering to tear down obsolete barns. The most valuable barns for timber are at least 100 years old -- the same barns that preservationists would like to save.

John Killebrew, owner of Barnbusters of Waverly, Ill., has taken down about 200 barns in his career. "When I got in the business 20 years ago, there were thousands of barns around for me to choose from," he says. "There's nothing left. I have to go to Pennsylvania to find anything."

When he started, farmers let him tear down their barns for free. Some even paid to have them removed. Now, there are sometimes bidding wars for the right to demolish an old barn. Old barns have become so scarce that Killebrew has switched businesses to selling antique hardware on eBay. "People pay top dollar for this stuff," he says.



Preserver of history: Marshall McLennan, a professor at Eastern Michigan University, surveys the status of the 77-year-old Parker Farm barn in October.

Historians hope it's not too late to salvage barns

"The greater the market for old barn parts, the more endangered old barns are," Vermont author Visser says. "The sad irony is that people who buy these antiques are the same ones who love old barns. They don't realize they are contributing to the demise of what they love."

Many people in the barn salvage business also are active in saving old barns. They only take down barns that are beyond repair or scheduled for demolition. The best antique barns are often removed whole and shipped elsewhere to give life to an old building.

"I used to feel defensive about carting away my state's history," says Ken Epworth, owner of The Barn People in Windsor, Vt. "Not anymore. It's better than a barn rotting on a dirt road in New England."

Epworth recently finished rebuilding a barn in Oakville, Calif., in the heart of Napa Valley, that had stood in Meriden, N.H., since 1770. It took five weeks to load the barn on four flatbed trucks. It took four weeks to rebuild it. The barn is being remodeled into a visitors' center for Nickel and Nickel winery.

"People in Vermont take barns for granted. They shrug their shoulders at 200-year-old barns," he says. "In California, people pull over in their cars and say, 'Cool.'"

A large barn has been a landmark in the Penacook section of Concord, N.H., since Henry Rolfe, the first white settler, built it in the 1700s. The barn remained in the family until eight years ago. Then the new owner sold it because it blocked the view from his ranch house and was costly to maintain. "I had no idea people loved the barn so much until I sold it," says John Zobel, an administrator at a local church. "If I'd known it was so old and unique, I would have tried to keep it in the area."

"I've already resold it to a subcontractor looking for a museum-quality barn. He sold to someone else," says Robert Betcher of Newbury, Mass., who bought it from Zobel.

Local officials want the current owner to swap the barn for another one less noteworthy, but negotiations have gone nowhere. The owner reportedly wants to ship the structure west for use as an art gallery.

Betcher doubts the town can keep its barn. "It's almost impossible to find a barn that good. ... Look, things change. I used to be a fisherman."

Old barns are expensive -- often costing buyers \$300,000 to \$500,000 to be shipped and reassembled. Epworth says. That doesn't include the cost of converting it into living space.

"Millionaires are the only ones who can afford this stuff," says Terry Lowder, who's dismantling an 1888 Gothic church in Henry, Ill. He has shipped barns and their parts around the world, from New York to Australia, to movie stars and Internet millionaires.

"I feel bad when I see a farmer shove a big oak tree into a barn and burn it," Lowder says. "These old barns are valuable to me. But to the modern farmer, they're an eyesore, a hazard and a tax liability."

Their recent popularity, though, didn't start the disappearance of old barns. The construction of more than a million houses per year for the past decade has swept away farmland and barns even in areas that are still largely rural.

"Farmers are in a tough spot," says Barbara Pahl, head of the Denver office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "Land is where their wealth is. When someone offers \$6,000 an acre, what are they supposed to do?"



Photos by Jeff A. Kowalick for USA TODAY

Stier: The Michigan resident has written a manual about barn styles. Including barns that survive on defunct farms, there are about 3 million of them in the USA. But that number is deceptive.

Gary Garczynski, president of the National Association of Home Builders, says growth restrictions in suburbs have forced development in rural areas farther out from cities. "People are trading dollars for distance. By moving farther out, they can get more house for the money," he says.

Even on working farms, old barns are often obsolete because of changes in technology. Dairy barns no longer have wooden floors with basements to catch a cow's waste. They have cement floors that are holed clean. Or take the example of hog farms. The nation had a million hog farms in 1967. Today, there are about 85,000. A barn isn't needed on a farm that gave up on pigs or on a mega-farm that has 50,000 or more hogs.

"You can't convince farmers to add a new roof and paint a barn just to make it look cute," Pahl says. "The barn has to have a use."

The key is the roof. The collapsed barns that dot the countryside often were ruined by leaky roofs and water damage. A new roof on a 100-foot-long, 19th-century dairy barn can cost \$30,000 -- more if structural work is needed.

Ellen Prindle of Warren, Conn., recounts how she wanted to save a barn on her property that had been featured in the paintings of Eric Sloane, a landscape artist and author of several books on barns.

"The contractor said it would cost \$50,000 before the first cup of coffee," Prindle says.

She built a new barn, instead. It was cheaper. "I couldn't do service to the old lady, to my regret," Prindle says. The barn was sold and disassembled but has not been rebuilt.

Those who do restore an old barn often have to pay higher property taxes because of the improvement. Some landowners get rid of the structures by letting volunteer fire departments burn the barns for training. Others give away barns to salvage dealers who want the antique wood and hardware.

Some just bulldoze them. "We've had people tear down perfectly good barns for tax reasons. It was heartbreaking," says Elizabeth Muzzeo, who is coordinating a survey of New Hampshire barns for the state.

Earlier this year, the New Hampshire Legislature approved a break on property taxes for people who preserve barns. The law, the first of its kind, takes effect in 2003.

In trying to figure out how many barns exist, the National Trust uses the number of farms as an indicator.

The United States had 6.5 million farms at the peak in 1920. There were 2.2 million farms in 2000. Including barns that survive on defunct farms, there are roughly 3 million barns across the nation.

But that number is deceptive. Barns constructed after World War II are usually built with lightweight poles and metal siding. The design is inexpensive and functional.

Barns haven't attracted the preservation fervor of old bridges, schools and lighthouses. Those were public structures, belonging to the community. Barns are privately owned. As a result, the designs vary. Early barns were rectangular boxes based on the English barns. They were often painted red because oxide-pigmented paint was the cheapest in the 19th century. Farmhouses got fancier white paint.

There are stone barns, too. And round barns from 19th-century utopian movements. And barns built on slopes -- grain went in the top; livestock entered below on the other side.

The common barn, perhaps, has been taken for granted. "I don't want barns to become something children only see in a book," Pahl says. "The race is on to see if we can save the American barn or if it will be erased from the landscape."