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A Future for Flint Hills Barns

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ONE SWIFT RAIN
Katie Twiss

A FUTURE FOR FLINT HILLS BARNs

Considering the way they are romanticized in countless books, photographs, and paintings, it might seem that there is an inexhaustible number of Kansas barns. Take a closer look at your collection of barn calendars and you may find the same handful of barns featured year after year. Although a few iconic barns still dot the landscape, Kansas barns are following the path of the nearly extinct way of life they represent. Fortunately, a few dedicated Kansans are working to overcome challenges to preserve these irreplaceable icons of the golden age of agriculture.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century barns were built for one principal purpose – to provide efficient hay storage. From nearly the beginning, Kansas farms and ranches were larger than the national average, evolving from subsistence farms to cash operations that required a great number of horses and great quantities of hay, both housed in large barns.

In the Flint Hills, abundant native materials, an undulating landscape, and deep-pocketed investors aligned to create a number of notable stone bank barns. As the name suggests, bank barns were nestled into a hill, or banked, allowing for two levels – an exposed basement and first floor – to be accessed from grade. In addition to being an inexpensive native material, stone had the added advantage of being fireproof, an important attribute in a region where prairie fires were essential to sustaining native grasses.

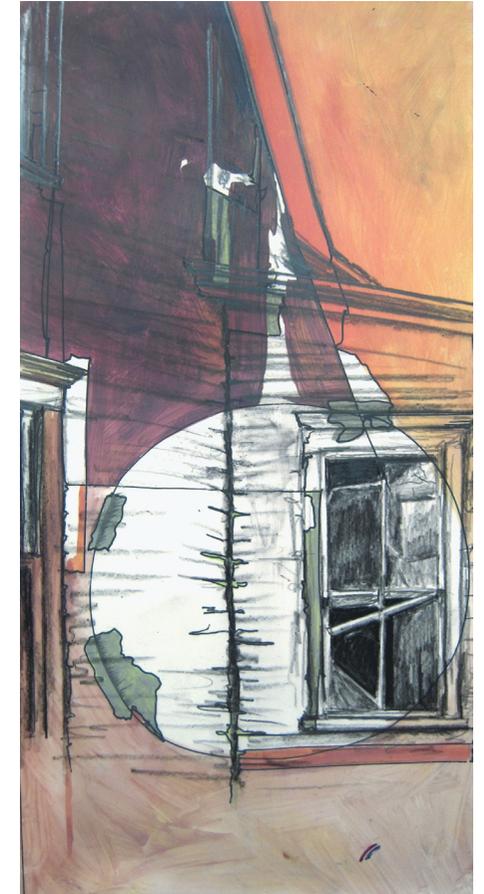
Two extant early Flint Hills examples of stone bank barns include the Sauble Barn (1871-76) in Chase County and Seth Hays Barn (1873, also known as the “Big John Farm Barn” and “Santa Fe Trail Barn”) in Morris County. The Sauble Barn was commissioned by Maryland native David Sauble and likely built with help from his brother, Edward Sauble, a stonemason who was living in David Sauble’s household in 1870. This barn has been maintained as part of a continuing ranch operation. The Big John Farm Barn in Morris County is attributed to Seth Hays, a trader, tavern owner, and rancher who came to the Council Grove area in 1847. Four decades after the barn was abandoned, the Fremont Park Revitalization Committee and Heart of the Flint Hills Chapter of the Santa Fe Trail Association engaged in a two-decade-long effort to stabilize it.

One of the largest remaining examples of Flint Hills stone bank barns is the Townsend Barn near Peabody. T. B. Townsend, a native of Pennsylvania,

where German farmers honed the bank barn type, amassed 3,600 acres of prime ranchland in the late nineteenth century. His three and a half story barn was built for the princely sum of \$10,000 in 1887. Fortunately, this landmark barn has been maintained as part of an active ranching operation.

Perhaps the best-known bank barn in the region is the massive stone barn at the Spring Hill Ranch (Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve) in Chase County. Maintained for more than a century as part of a ranching operation, it has been restored as part of the picturesque ranch headquarters.

Although stone was plentiful in the region, many early twentieth century Flint Hills barns were made of wood, incorporating cutting-edge structural design to create efficient hay storage. Among the barn innovators was Kansas’ own Benton Steele, who specialized in the design of round barns. But space-maximizing designs were soon propagated by catalog companies like



MOVING TO FORGOTTEN (DYPTICH)
Jody Lightner

Sears and Montgomery Ward, which sold pre-cut barn kits with gothic-arched and gambrel roofs. Flint Hills examples include the gambrel-roofed barn at Chase County’s Rogler Ranch

(Pioneer Bluffs – a National Register Historic District) which was likely built from a kit purchased from Sears or Montgomery Ward. The Pioneer Bluffs Foundation just completed a

major renovation to adapt the barn for meetings and events. Butler County is home to one of the state's few remaining gothic-arch barns, the Oak Lawn Farm Dairy Barn near Whitewater (1926, National Register of Historic Places), which has been maintained by the same family for nearly ninety years.

In the lean years from the Great Depression through the post-WWII period, farmers and ranchers further honed their resourcefulness to meet their construction needs. Among the successes is the smaller barn at the McNee Farm three miles southwest of Elmdale. Next to a wood-frame barn built in about 1920 stands a barn constructed in 1948 from boxcars surplused by the Santa Fe Railroad. At a time when construction materials were scarce, farmers could purchase boxcars for \$65 and repurpose them.

Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Kansas farmers and ranchers left us with a wealth of great barns. But changes in farm

operations foretold an uncertain future. As farms faced labor shortages during WWII, a reliance on labor-saving farm equipment, including custom cutting crew equipment, accelerated. By the end of the war, the vast majority of farmers had transitioned away from horse-drawn implements. As a result, expansive hay mows were no longer necessary, and the era of iconic hay barns came to an end.

For every barn success story – like Pioneer Bluffs and Spring Hill Ranch – there are dozens of tragic tales. In 2007, a USDA study identified 21,046 pre-1960 barns in Kansas. Each year, dozens of these lose their battles with wind, rain, and economics. Among the threatened barns is the truly unique main barn at the Whitewater Falls Stock Farm near Towanda, a 1,920-acre farm founded in 1879 by J. W. Robinson where prize-winning Percheron horses grazed on rich native grasses. The barn was almost lost by 2015 when the Kansas Historical Society awarded a Heritage Trust Fund Grant to help stabilize it. It



COUNTRY CLAIM
Justin Marable

will take a major effort to ensure its long-term future.

Although many Kansans still take barns for granted, national and state groups, including the Kansas Barn Alliance, National Barn Alliance, and National Trust for Historic Preservation, are working to raise awareness of the threats to these icons. Some barns are finding new life as part of sustainable

farming operations, guest farms or ranches, and event venues. Historic barns may qualify for preservation-related funding including tax credits.

With creativity, farmers and ranchers are working to ensure that the state's historic barns remain as part of the *Future of the Flint Hills*.

Christy Davis

FOLLOWING PAGE: COLOR IN THE BLUESTEM
Chris Wolf Edmonds

