

LIFESTYLES

Barn raising puts together pieces of the rural past

By Elaine Krewer
About 300 people gathered near Metamora Saturday for a celebration that locally "waxed the rafters."

Volunteers from all over Central Illinois and some from out of state participated in an old-fashioned barn raising at the Illinois-Mennonite Heritage Center.

The volunteers helped assemble a historic pine barn which once stood on the Christian Sutter farm near Miller. The barn, built in 1865, was of special historic interest to the Mennonite Heritage Center because a conference of Anabaptist Mennonite church leaders was held in the barn in 1875.

The barn was donated to the Illinois Mennonite Historical and Genealogical Society by Sutter descendants. It was dismantled piece by piece and stored near Springfield in 1977, with each piece numbered and diagramed so that it could be reassembled in the Heritage Center.

To retrace the past as accurately as possible, the barn was reassembled in the same way and with much of the same tools and equipment used in the 19th century. Wooden pegs were used to hold the beams and planks together in place of nails. The pegs were pointed, it with large wooden mallets instead of hammers. Hoes and poles were used to raise the walls.

About 150 volunteers worked on the barn at different times throughout the day, said project chairman Ivan Backlund of Metamora.

"No one really started all day," he said. "Most of them were from about a 60-mile radius of the area, and several were from Indiana."

However, two people came all the way from New York for the recent stud barn race, because they are preparing to wear a book on 19th-century barns.

Preliminary work on the site began in May when volunteers started arranging the materials and making some minor repairs. The materials were ready and waiting at 8 a.m. Saturday when the barn raising began. Most of the wall framework was completed by noon, and the rafters were up by the end of the day, Backlund said.

"We had hoped to get the rafters done in an accomplished one day," he said. "It's now ready for roof sheathing then shingles."

He added that the extensive list of volunteers was "amazing" and that when more work will be done on the barn.

"We'll continue to work on it when we can, and we'll work some evenings and some Saturdays," he said.

Despite all the work involved and the lack of modern labor-saving tools, those who helped raise the barn enjoyed the chance to

participate in a once-in-a-lifetime event.

"We don't really trust about the labor involved because it's a non-routine job," said Jerry Lepp of Gibson, Ind., one of the volunteer workers. "It's mostly fun because it's something most of us will not do again. It's also kind of thought-provoking to be reminded in the machinery that worked very well in past times."

About 150 to 200 people also came to watch the barn-raising, and also to enjoy free sandwiches, homemade cookies, and ice cream being served in the Heritage Center basement. Many brought their children with them to catch a glimpse of the "old days."

Some also toured the exhibit inside the Heritage Center, which included a display of farm tools and implements from the Sutter barn. Those tools will again be housed in the barn after restoration of the barn is complete, said Backlund.

Among those who attended was Della Glaser, 88, of Maple Lawn Apartments in Eureka, a former Mennonite resident and a granddaughter of the barn's original owner.

"I was born and grew up on that farm," she said. "We kids played in the barn on cold days and on rainy days. We used to climb the ladder over the hay mound and throw the hay down and jump into it. That was a real spot in these days."

Her mother, Magdalena Sutter Hoyer, was seven years old when the barn was built, and later sold her daughter about the original barn-raising.

"They came from far and wide for the barn-raising, with wagons and strong wagons," she said. "They built it just like they're doing now. The women worked all day too. They must have been cooking lunch for the workers."

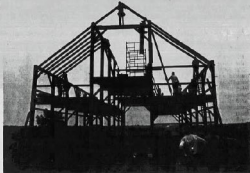
Some additions were made to the barn later, but those have been removed and the barn is being raised exactly as it was when built, Mrs. Glaser said. She added that she was pleased to see the barn restored after many years of passing and possession.

"It seemed like forever until they got together and did it," she said. "I'm really happy about this project today. I'm having a good time and seeing so many good friends."

"The Sutter barn will probably not be the only historic building to be re-erected at the Heritage Center, according to Backlund. Long-range plans include reconstruction of an old country school, a corn crib, and possibly other buildings at the same site, but those projects are "about 15 years away," said Backlund.



Volunteer laborers from all over Central Illinois, and a few from out of state, helped assemble the barn. Pictured are two workers fitting together beams at the corner.



Workers begin assembling the rafters atop the frame of the Christian Sutter barn, which was partially reconstructed during an old-fashioned barn raising Saturday at the Mennonite Heritage Center near Metamora. The barn, built in 1865, was dismantled 12 years ago and kept in storage so that it could be reconstructed at the Heritage Center. The rafters were completed by the end of the day and work will continue over the next few months.

Photos by Elaine Krewer



This collection of items from the Sutter barn includes a chain to keep cows from knocking while being milked, a cow's head, a silver medicine dropper, a brass blow torch, pliers, a regular rubber ice skate blade, and a barbed wire window. The collection, now housed in the Mennonite Heritage Center display area, will be moved back into the Sutter barn once the barn is complete.



Estella Glaser of Eureka pauses to examine the homestead bench she once played "horser" on as a child, which is now housed in the Mennonite Heritage Center in Metamora. The bench is one of many implements and tools once kept in the Sutter barn. Mrs. Glaser grew up on the farm near Miller where the barn once stood.



Eugene Schertz of Metamora (left, with hatchet) carved wooden pegs while his wife Optra (second from left), his grandmother Anne Schertz of Metamora (partially obscured) and Jed Wullmar of Goshon, Indiana (right) look on. The pegs were used to hold the barn beams together, just as the barn was constructed originally 124 years ago.