

# The Odyssey of the BIG Barn at the Prairie Museum of Art and History Colby, Kansas



## THE BIG BARN

The Cooper Barn was added to the museum complex at the Prairie Museum of Art & History in 1992 and the moving of the barn was one of the biggest media events recorded in Thomas County's history. The Cooper Barn purports to be the largest barn in Kansas.

With the donation of the barn, the Thomas County Historical Society Board of Directors deemed that the acquisition would be valuable to the site not only as an attraction but as a superb building appropriate for housing an exhibit of farming and farm machinery over the first 100 years of Thomas County agriculture. The display was opened in August of 1993 and has been touted by state agricultural historians as one of the most comprehensive in the state of Kansas.

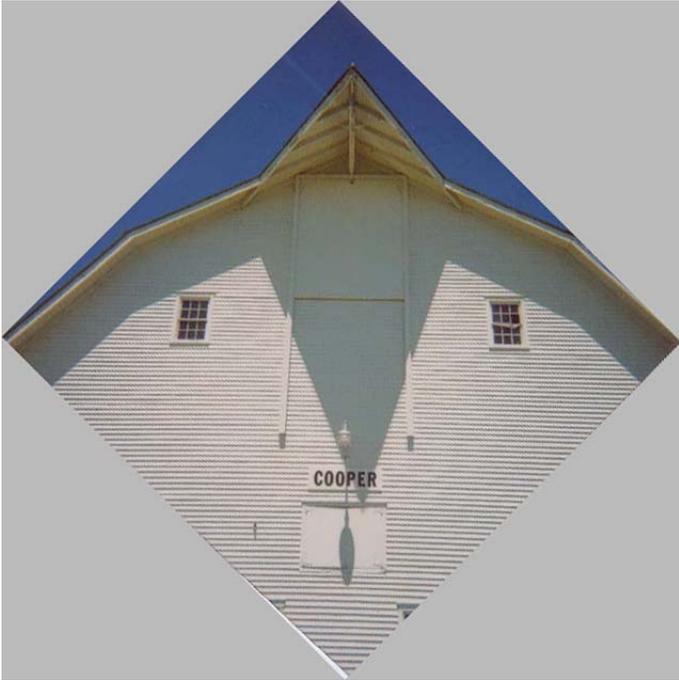
The barn was originally built at Breton, Kansas, which is five miles west of Rexford, five miles east of Gem and 16 miles north-east of Colby on Kansas State Highway 83. Breton was platted as a townsite at one time and was located on the main line of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad.

The large show cattle barn is 66 feet wide, 114 feet long and 48 feet high. For years the barn housed the Foster Farm's prize-winning registered Hereford cattle. The loft of this magnificent barn was used for storage of hay. There are four openings in the loft floor which allowed the hay to be pushed down to the runway below and then distributed to the cattle in the pens. The barn could house 75 head of cattle.

Foster Farms started raising registered cattle in 1919. Their goal was to have a show and breeding herd equal to the best. Under the efficient management of Doc Mustoe, they became nationally recognized as a top breeder of Hereford cattle. Through the years they won countless ribbons and awards at shows throughout the country. Early maturing calves that produced beef in a hurry was another goal for which they strived and accomplished.

The breeding was largely predominated by straight Anxiety 4th-Bred Herefords. In 1920, the breeding cows numbered about 60 head, all of Anxiety bloodlines. One of the foundation females, Creamette 12th, was purchased in 1918 from Mousel Brothers, Cambridge, Nebraska. Her calf, Foster's Anxiety, was the bull that did more than any other to

build Foster Farms to its greatest prominence.



the diagonal undersheeting which was for increased support and insulation. House siding was used on the outside rather than regular barn siding because it was more attractive and served as good advertising for Foster Lumber Company.

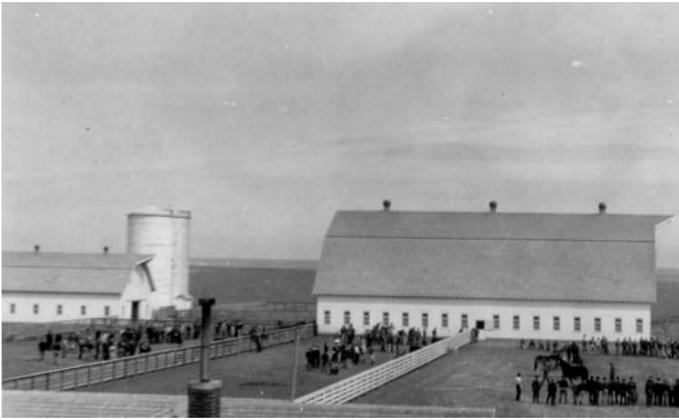
In 1965, the Ben Foster estate sold Foster Farms to a partnership and became known as O.C.K. Farms. The new owners included: George, Charles, Wilf, John and Gene Ostmeyer; Willard and Gary Cooper; Leo and Les Keller, and Bridge Kruse. The partnership dissolved in 1969 and Willard Cooper retained that part of the farm on which the barn stood. In the 1970s Colby Community College used the barn for the horse production program. After Willard's death in 1980, the barn became the property of Gary Cooper and Mary Jo Cooper Pawlus.

## THE BARN THAT BEN BUILT

The barn was once part of the Foster Farms owned by Benjamin Butler Foster, of Kansas City, Missouri. Mr. Foster started farming in this area in 1912. E.D. "Doc" Mustoe managed the Foster Farms from June 1, 1922 until July 3, 1965. Doc's son, E.D. "Dale" Mustoe Jr. was assistant manager from November 1945 to July 3, 1965.

The structure was actually built by men from the area in 1936 with Doc overseeing the construction. Lumber had been bought in 1928 and 1929 from the Foster Lumber Co. and put in storage until construction could be started. An auditor for Foster Lumber Co., Harold Mangus, had a natural architectural ability and helped with the barn design. Photographs of the barn under construction show





## DOC MUSTOE AND FOSTER FARMS

Ellsworth D. Mustoe was born September 19, 1889, in Adair County near Greentop, Missouri. He was one of nine boys and three girls born to Benjamin and Charlotte Hart Mustoe. "Doc" as he was later nicknamed, moved with his family to Norton County, Kansas, in 1902, where he attended elementary school. He helped his father who had a farm and raised cattle.

On March 6, 1912, Doc married Edna Irene Fisher, who died February 5, 1913 in childbirth. The baby, a son, died at birth. Doc married Edna Ann Bryant on August 6, 1916. They had two children, a daughter, who died in infancy, and E. Dale, Jr. Edna died on August 23, 1949. Then on November 5, 1954 Doc married Alma Perry Sparks.

In 1916 Doc established a dry and freight hauling business. He hauled freight with horses and wagon from Norton, where it arrived by rail, to surrounding towns such as Logan, Lenora and Leoville. It was during this period that he earned the nickname "Doc." It seems that on his dray travels, he met a farmer who had a sick horse. The farmer asked Mustoe to look at the horse and recommend a cure. He did and the horse recovered. The farmer called him "Doc" and the

nickname stuck. He was known by this nickname to many people for the remainder of his life.

On February 1, 1918, Doc was hired by Foster Farms at Breton, Kansas. There were at that time, three divisions of Foster Farms: Foster Livestock Company, Foster Elevator and Foster Farms. Foster Farms was the result of land acquisitions made by Benjamin B. Foster, owner of a vast lumber yard empire based in Kansas City, Missouri. He began buying land in Sherman County, Kansas in 1908. From 1908 through 1911 he purchased most of his acreage in Thomas County, Kansas. In 1937 and 1938 he acquired land in Kit Carson County, Colorado and some irrigated land in Yuma, Colorado. At the time that Foster began making land purchases in western Kansas and eastern Colorado, this part of the country was in dire straits because of the weather. High winds threatened to blow it to oblivion by continually shifting the soil. But Ben Foster was a man of vision and faith and after buying up these large tracts of land, he introduced improved farming methods seeking to hold the soil in place. At one time, Foster Farms owned 33,000 acres with 15,236 acres in Thomas County. In addition to these acres, the Farms leased the Dewey Ranch, known as the L-V Ranch in Rawlins County, Kansas and the Rothsville Ranch near Norton, Kansas.

In 1921 Ben Foster moved Doc and his family to north Kansas City, Missouri where Doc managed Vivion Farm and Edna was housekeeper. Vivion Farm was a showplace where the Fosters lived (Ben's wife was Sheffa Vivion, of Kansas City). It consisted of 80 or more acres surrounded by a rosebush hedge. The grounds of grass and small ponds provided a lovely setting for the mansion. It is now a Baptist Seminary located near the Farmland Industries headquarters. Ben Foster soon recognized that Doc was too valuable to manage such a small place. He sent Doc

back to Breton as manager of the combined Foster Farms divisions in 1922.

Doc Mustoe was responsible for the management of all aspects of this huge farming enterprise. This included the farming, harvesting, selling of grain, raising and showing registered Horned Hereford cattle, registered Clydesdale horses and hiring all employees and seeing to their welfare. The farms in Colorado were rented to local farmers. Mustoe was responsible for the collection of rents and the general stewardship of these lands. His biggest area of responsibility was the operation of the Thomas County farms and the production and showing of the registered cattle and horses.

In 1919 the largest wheat crop ever raised on the Farms was harvested. That harvest required the labor of 282 men and the use of 24 grain binders, 27 wheat headers, eight threshing machines. In addition, 64 head of horses were used to haul bundles and pull header barges which hauled the headed wheat from the header to the stacks. Sixteen horses pulled the water wagons and 72 horses hauled the threshed grain in wagons from the threshing machines to the elevator. By 1952 harvest required 11 combines and one binder. Horsepower was used on the Farms until the late 1930s or early 1940s when a majority of the horses were replaced by gas-fired tractors. A few were kept for pulling wagons used in feeding chores for livestock in later years. Corn, oats, barley, alfalfa and forage sorghums were also grown at Foster Farms. Most of these crops were fed to the livestock produced by the Farms.

The number of people employed on the Farms varied from a 1919 payroll of 282 men to a winter payroll in the late 1950s of 25 men. There were 19 houses for families employed by the Farms. These families were provided a garden patch, a place for chickens, milk cows and pigs, and feed for the animals. A boarding and bunk house were provided for

the single men. Mr. Foster took great pride in the way his property looked and the homes and buildings were all painted white. The homes had electricity, plumbing and telephones since 1919. He felt that the upkeep and repairs around the Farms helped the morale of his men as well as that of the neighboring farmers.

The development of a nationally known herd of registered Horned Hereford cattle is probably what brought most fame to Foster Farms. Doc Mustoe was instrumental in the development and maintenance of this herd. These cattle were shown at livestock shows throughout the country and won numerous championships, honors and trophies. It is believed that Foster Farms, with 26 consecutive years of showing, was the oldest registered Hereford breeder under one ownership to show at the National Western Sock Show in Denver in 1947. At one time the herd consisted of 731 animals. It was dispersed at a three day sale at Breton on June 10th of 1955.

Foster Farms was also famous for its horses and mules. This business began in 1931 and they maintained an average of 350-400 head of these animals until the early 1940s. In 1938 President Roosevelt appointed Doc (one of five chosen) to purchase mules to be shipped to South America, although the threat of war canceled these plans. Clydesdale horses were bred under the direction of Mustoe with the help of a horse foreman. The Clydesdale blood lines were kept straight as well as color and markings. They showed the Clydesdales at the 1938 American Royal where the Budweiser Company bought a six horse hitch for use in their stables. In 1954, there were only 33 head of horses on the Farms.

The Foster Farms was the center of several activities. F. W. Bell, a member of the Animal Husbandry Department at Kansas

State College, interested Doc in establishing a training school for livestock judging and selection in 1921. The Junior Judging School eventually became an annual event and trained boys and girls to appreciate and recognize the finer qualities of good livestock. It was held at the Farms for over 25 years.

An emergency landing field was located on Foster Farms. The Farms did not own or use planes but more than 200 planes used this landing field in 1947. In 1948, on May 16th, 62 planes with a total of 121 pilots and passengers arrived for a fly-in breakfast. Many came out by car bringing the number of registered guests to 339. They consumed 34 dozen eggs, 174 pounds of hickory-smoked ham, 80 dozen rolls, 12 pounds of coffee, 11 pounds of butter and 20 pounds of jelly. Demonstrations of stunt flying, spraying and carrying passengers were performed by visiting pilots. The event took place again in 1949.

In 1945, E. Dale Mustoe, Jr. returned from service in the Navy to become assistant manager of Foster Farms. Dale had a degree in agriculture from Kansas State College. A great deal of Dale's work concerned the machinery since he had worked one summer for the International Harvester Company.

After the dispersal of the registered cattle, the Farms became involved with a commercial herd of cattle. Following Ben Foster's death in 1961, Foster Farms was sold in 1965 and Doc and Alma Mustoe retired to live in Rexford, Kansas. Ellsworth D. "Doc" Mustoe died August 2, 1972.



## BARN AGAIN!

No project of any importance was ever accomplished without a beginning idea or dream. The idea for the moving of the barn to its present site at the Prairie Museum of Art and History is attributed to Lloyd White and Max George both of Colby. These men, both in their 70s at the time, whose fertile minds gave birth to the idea, proved that along with their hard work and the efforts of a lot of other good folk, the Barn could be moved. In February 1991, White and George approached the Thomas County Historical Society Board of Directors with their idea and reported that Gary and Elfriede Cooper, Colby; and Mary Jo Cooper Pawlus, Bethlehem, P.A.; had offered to donate the Cooper Barn, formerly of Foster Farms, to the Society, if it could be moved.

The executive board of the Thomas County Historical Society authorized a fundraising campaign for the purpose of moving the barn to the museum site and laying the foundation with hopes to move the barn in the Fall of 1991. Lloyd White and Max George were selected to spearhead the committee for raising the money.

By May, donations of at least \$70,000 were pledged, with \$50,000 of that already in hand, so the Board accepted the donation of the Barn and gave approval to proceed with planning the move.

By mid-July, with \$68,000 in firm pledges (toward a goal of \$75,000), the Board committed to the project and approved a contract with Gary Williams Midwest Movers of Hastings, NE to move the Barn for \$25,000.

In August the Board of Directors signed the contract with the Cooper family to formally accept the gift of the Barn which would then become the property of the Thomas County Historical Society on September 23, 1991 and plans were made to move the barn by the end of the year.

Plans for a barn dance at the end of September to raise funds for the barn were also under way. The dance was greatly anticipated as there were many folks in the area who could remember earlier dances held at the barn.

The rafters of the loft first rang with music when a dance was held in August of 1936, the year the barn was built. Everyone was invited and word of the dance was put out by radio. Over 2,500 people registered. Live music was provided by two bands from KMMJ Radio Station in Nebraska. The music never stopped! When one band needed a break, the other one took over. The party started about 8:00 p.m. and lasted until after daybreak. Ruffin Wilson, owner of a cafe in Rexford at the time, provided refreshments.

During the summer of 1968, another dance was held in the "big barn's" hay loft. The partners of the O.C.K. Farms, owners then of the barn, invited their friends and business associates to the dance. Live music was provided and this time a piano had to be carried up the stairs. Approximately 500 people attended and had a good time. A catered breakfast was served to all those attending.

The cavernous loft of the Cooper Barn was the site of the fundraising barn dance hosted by the Thomas County Historical Society held on September 28, 1991. Volunteers worked days before the dance to clean the barn and ready it for the big event.

Following the day's activities of a barbecue, horse-drawn wagons, a petting zoo, money hunts in a tank of corn, horseshoes and music, the "West Texas Swing Band", with members of the original Bob Wills' Texas Playboys Band, took the stage. A crowd of 3,000 people came to the event from all over Northwest Kansas. The crowd is reported to have consumed 1,100 pounds of meat from seven hogs, 750 pounds of beans and 300 cases of potato chips. The hay mow was crowded with so many spectators and dancers that there was scarcely any room for dancing. The fundraiser for the expenses of moving the barn netted close to \$15,000 (bringing the total funds raised to \$90,000) to assist with the expenses of moving and restoring the Barn.



## ON THE ROAD

The September 1991 issue of the *Prairie Winds* newsletter reported that "during the week of November 11-15th an event of historic significance will take place in Northwest Kansas. The Cooper Barn, formerly the the Foster Barn, will be moved (intact) 16 miles to the Prairie Museum of Art and History in Colby, Kansas. "

The move was scheduled for the last two weeks in October but was postponed until

mid-November to allow for the completion of corn harvest in the area thereby decreasing road traffic and the significance of utility outages. The move was estimated to take four days; one for preparation, two for moving and the last to set the barn down. A preview of the barn on the museum site was planned on December 8th, then it would be closed for reconstruction, concrete work and utility installation until the spring.

The Board of Directors accepted the bid from Stupka and Schlick, in September, for the barn foundation and footings at the museum site. The cost was \$17,627 and work commenced immediately.

Permission to travel on Highways 83 and 24 and railroads was obtained from the State of Kansas, and Kyle and Union Pacific railroads. Crews from Midwest Energy would work with the mover to drop the necessary lines. The barn would move under one Sunflower Electric line east of Colby and one City of Colby line would have to be dropped at the southeast corner of the museum site. The Thomas County Sheriff's Department would be on hand to take care of traffic control.

But the move was postponed. On Halloween the area experienced a major snow and sleet storm and it continued to rain and snow periodically throughout the winter. This halted plans for the move because of the need to pull the Barn across several wheat fields and unimproved roads. The mild and wet winter turned into a dry and hot March and April causing stress to the wheat crop but allowing the move to be scheduled in May.

All the highway permits necessary for the move were in place. The railroad officials had been contacted for permission to cross tracks. Landowners had given permission to trespass. Midwest Energy, Sunflower Electric, and the City of Colby had agreed to assist in downing or raising power lines along the route. And. . . . Gary Cooper had extended the gift contract until May 31, 1992.

In short, but at length, the move was a **GO!**

On May 6 Gary Williams and crew brought the first two semitrailer loads of equipment from Hastings, Nebraska to the Breton site. He and his crew then flew back to Hastings, "slept fast" and made a second trip to Breton the next morning with three more loads of equipment and set to work.

The Barn, standing 48 feet tall and measuring 114 feet by 66 feet, was estimated to weigh 150 tons. Local workers had previously attached some 40 frogs and other pieces of steel angle iron to the mow supports or pillars and to the sides of the Barn, under which huge I-beams were placed to support the barn. There were four such I-beams which traversed the width of the barn. Under these were placed even larger I-beams which traversed the length of the barn.

To accommodate these beams, the Barn was raised by hydraulic jacks which were activated by a central pump that caused the jacks to raise in unison. On the first lift the first surprise of the move happened. The nuts holding the Barn to the foundation had all been removed from the bolts which ran from the concrete through the plates, but at the first attempt to lift, the Barn refused to budge. After much head scratching and mulling, it was decided that a second set of anchor bolts was present which did not protrude through the top plate and were therefore not visible.

Some of these bolts were broken free from the foundation concrete and some were sawed and the Barn on the next lift attempt, moved. It rose higher and higher as each set of beams were lifted and shoved into place by the Caterpillar 930 wheel loaders. Under the grid of I-beams, eight sets of dolly wheels were finally set in place. These dollies each had eight wheels with tires comparable in size to tandem truck tires. There was another set of two dollies under a sort of tongue in

front of the Barn. All this was connected by way of a fifth wheel on the back of the tractor truck comparable to a tractor used for pulling semitrailers down the highway.

The lifting of the Barn and installing of the I-beams and dollies took a crew of four plus some volunteer labor (who may have been in the way part of the time but who were certainly willing) three and a half days.

On the afternoon of May 12, a Versatile four-wheel drive tractor was hooked up by way of a nylon tow rope to a beam under the barn and along with the tow truck pulled the barn in a 180 degree turn to a spot at the southeast corner of the Breton site. The next morning, May 13th, after the Midwest Energy crew had raised the power lines blocking the way, the Barn was pulled across fields of growing wheat owned by Keith and Howard Baalman. The Barn also had to cross the Kyle Railroad tracks between the wheat fields. This was accomplished without mishap and the Barn was poised for the trek the next day.

And then the rains came! It had not rained in Thomas County in three months but the Barn move brought rain. It rained an inch, more or less, all along the route on the night of May 13th--just before the Barn was to be pulled onto Highway 83 at Breton. The fill at this location was relatively dry and the crew encountered very little trouble crossing it.

It was smooth sailing west on US 83 Highway to the nine mile corner and west on US 24 to three miles east of Colby. The Barn was majestic as it rolled along with Lloyd White raising and lowering the American and Kansas flags from the ridge peak as power line heights dictated.

Then, at the turn from US 24 south onto Thomas County Road 431, disaster almost struck. The rain had caused the fill at this location to resemble a loblolly, or a mud hole. To negotiate this impasse, the Master Mover had ordered 30 24-foot bridge planks

from the Rawlins County Highway Department. They were heavy weighing some 200 pounds each. Though hard to manhandle they had, nonetheless, been delivered to the spot when the Barn arrived. With all pulling tires spinning, the Barn was inched off the blacktop, around the corner and onto the county graveled road. Once the tractor truck had passed over the back planks, they had to be carried to the front until the truck was again on solid ground. This man-killing job took two hours to complete. The Barn then moved two miles on south where it parked for the second night.

On the third day of the Odyssey, the Barn proceeded west on the Morgan Township road past the Continental Grain Elevator and stopped just shy of Country Club Drive at the east Colby exit (#54). This stop was for lunch and to gird up for the next phase.

The ramp off the access road was negotiated with no trouble but at its bottom lurked disaster. . . almost. At the bottom of the ramp was what is known in this part of the world as a lagoon. A lagoon is a depression in the topography which collects water when it rains. This soil does not readily accept water nor does it give it up. Water just sits there until it evaporates. The Barn ventured forth into the lagoon, that though it was not full of water, the soil was very wet. There the Barn sat. . . mired in the mud. . . Williams' fall-in Number 2.

Steel landing mats were employed under the wheels of the dollies. The two Cat 930 wheel loader winches were hooked to the barn to assist the tractor truck. The Barn moved a foot at a time. The winch lines were doubled. The mats carried forward and the Barn moved. . . but very, very slowly. The volunteers and crews threw themselves into the backbreaking work beginning at 1:30 p.m. on a very hot and windy afternoon. At 5:00 p.m., the Barn emerged.

The two 930 wheel loaders, in tandem, a big winch truck belonging to Murfin Drilling Company and Max Embree's Versatile tractor were hooked to the Barn. With relative ease, the entourage proceeded across Betty Se-crest's summer fallowed field onto her pasture where they paused long enough to wait while Midwest Energy crews lowered the last power line in the Barn's path.

The Barn then moved roughly 90 degrees onto the museum wheat field and finally onto the museum grounds. At about 8:00 p.m. on Friday, May 15, the Barn was winched over the foundation and lowered onto blocks for the weekend. Larry Schlick and Bud Stupka poured the remainder of the foundation on Saturday, May 16th, after the dollies had been removed. On the 18th of May the Barn was lowered onto the foundation. The Barn was at its new home.

There were a total of 27 power structures and lines along the route. These lines had either to be let down and driven over or raised and passed under. Some of the poles had to be removed or tilted sideways to allow the Barn to pass. Midwest Energy provided crews from Colby, Goodland, Great Bend, Atwood and Hoxie to aid with the move. Sun-flower Electric provided a crew to oversee the passage under their 345 KV line six miles east of Colby. It had enough clearance to pass under but was de-energized. The City of Colby lowered the last line before entry onto the museum site. At none of the 27 power line locations did the Barn halt for more than 15 or 20 minutes. The line crews did excellent work. The lines all had to be replaced quickly after the Barn passed.

Other obstacles which had to be moved, were the road signs and markers. Each morning the Williams crew pulled the signs before starting that day's move. These, of course, had to be replaced as soon as possible. With the aid of local farmers: Lyle Saddler, Don Woofter and G & E Farms and their able em-

ployees: Darrel Meyer, Mark Cersovsky, Tom Redmond, Andy Horton and Dan Rietcheck, the chore was accomplished. They were dubbed the "Olympic Sign Restoring Team" as they were so adept and rapid that they had all the signs replaced at the end of each day's move. There were 114 signs in all.

KN Energy and Southwestern Bell located their underground lines at the locations where Arlo Sporer installed fills at the railroad and road crossings. Officers of the Kansas Highway Patrol, Department of Transportation, Thomas County Emergency Preparedness, Thomas County Sheriff's Department and Colby Police Department managed traffic control and the numerous onlookers. Without the help of all these people and scores of other volunteers, the move could not have taken place. THANKS! to each and everyone.

## **PRAIRIE GRASSES TO GOLDEN GRAINS**

As with the arrival of a new baby, all parents are consumed by the expectation and delivery, but when the bundle of joy comes home...reality sets in. With the completion of the barn move to the museum site, the real work for the board, staff and volunteers began in restoring the big barn and developing an exhibit.

By the end of June, 1992, the concrete work in and around the barn was complete. The floor had been poured and the sidewalks were laid by Stupka and Schlick. The contract to do the exterior work on the barn was awarded to Sierra Sandblasting, of Atwood. This required repairing the doors and windows and painting the barn and was com-

pleted in the late summer and fall of that year. It was a BIG job.

Most of the electrical work was done by Lawrence "Smitty" Smith, a retired electrician, who volunteered his labor and expertise to the project. Meanwhile, the exhibit that would be permanently housed in the Cooper Barn was determined. The vast space of the barn lent itself to hold the story of agriculture on the High Plains for over 100 years. The exhibit was entitled, *Prairie Grasses to Golden Grains: Agriculture in Northwest Kansas, 1870s to 1990s*. The goals of this exhibit were to: 1) document and examine the progression of agriculture from the pioneer to today's farmer; 2) illustrate the economic impact agriculture has on Northwest Kansas, Kansas and the nation; 3) place value on and instill an appreciation of agriculture; 4) provide several avenues for the public to examine and learn about agriculture; and 5) awaken interest in history through agriculture. A chronological timeline of agriculture in Northwest Kansas was developed using five time periods: Settlement; Wheat is King; The Great Depression; WWII-Post War Era; and Modern Times. These periods were then addressed through four main themes of Policy, Environment, Technology and Social Issues.

The museum staff pulled out all the stops and worked hard and feverishly to put together the exhibit that reflected the importance of agriculture as a way of life and agribusiness as an economic necessity to the northwest Kansas area as interpreted through photographs, manuscripts and artifacts.

The Thomas County Historical Society was awarded a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council which provided some funds for the project to get assistance from four scholars in locating research materials, identification of machinery, selection of artifacts to be used in the exhibit, and issues to be highlighted and discussed in the exhibit. The

scholars who helped were: Dr. James Forsythe, Fort Hays State University, Hays, Kansas; Dr. Virgil Dean, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas; Dr. Leo Olivia, Woodston, Kansas and Joyce Thierer, Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas. Tim Adrian and Max Embree, both from Colby, helped with the exhibit development by volunteering many hours to discuss and identify tools, implements, photographs, and subjects of interest in agriculture.

Following completion of the research, text development and the exhibit mockup. Work to restore the implements and machinery had to be done. Painting of the interior was completed by staff and volunteers and it was also decided that the stalls would be put back in the barn. The replacement of the stalls rekindled the image of a huge livestock barn.

The grand opening of the exhibit was slated for September 25, 1993. An activity filled day was planned (on top of the exhibit preparations) including a barbecue and barn dance. In order to accommodate the people in the barn, now in the city limits, a sprinkler system had to be installed. The barn dance profits went toward the cost of the \$40,000 bill for the system and installation. The work was completed in July of 1993.

Another fire code requirement called for ample access to an exit from the loft for large crowds. Larry Oren of L&M Steel designed and built the exit stairway that was placed at the north end of the barn which provided an entrance and exit to the dance floor or loft. Staff and volunteers cleaned the loft and set up benches made of lumber and cinder blocks.

To top off the restoration, literally, the barn received three new cupolas. Lloyd White and Max George spearheaded a committee to replace the former cupolas which had been destroyed over the years from the weather and the wind. The two men also picked up the tab for the expenses incurred in the project.

The Bryan Laufer family donated one cupola from the Hesterman Barn located one mile north of Ludell, Kansas. After a lengthy search for matching cupolas, the committee decided to have two new cupolas constructed.

Bob Ekberg, who had recently retired from McKee Sheet Metal Furnace and Air Conditioning in Colby, agreed to make the cupolas. McKees provided the materials at cost. The cupolas, which stand six feet tall and four feet square and weigh in at about 150 pounds each, match the Hesterman cupola which White restored himself.

The cupolas, though not original to the barn, are typical of ones found on barns built in the same era as the Cooper Barn. Not merely an ornamentation, the cupolas serve to ventilate the hay loft.

To install the cupolas, White and Ty Koon were hoisted up to the roof on a 50-foot crane provided by the Commercial Sign Company of Colby amidst a rainstorm on September 15,

1993. By straddling their legs on either side of the peak, the two men secured the cupolas onto the roof. The cupolas provided an appropriate finishing touch to the project.

On Saturday, September 25, 1993, amidst the activities on the museum grounds, the exhibit, *Prairie Grasses to Golden Grains: Agriculture in Northwest Kansas, 1870s to 1990s*, opened in the Cooper Barn.



## HOME SWEET HOME

After the relocation, restoration and refurbishing, the Cooper Barn has found its niche in the operations and events of the Prairie Museum of Art & History.

In 1994 a "Raise the Roof" Campaign was held to raise monies to reshingle the buildings on the museum site. The Big Barn's roof still had the original shingles on it but some leakage was apparent. That autumn, the Lone Star Church, Vacin Barn, and the Cooper Barn were all reshingled with any necessary roof repairs made at that time.

With the addition of the barn, the museum has attracted more donations that tie into the story of farming in northwest Kansas, the barn and/or Foster Farms. For instance in late 1994, George Ostmeyer of Hill City gave the museum three large tack boxes that he had acquired from the barn when he was a partner in the OCK operations. The boxes were from Foster Farms and there were some memorabilia from stock shows long past. All these gifts help the historical society preserve the past and the story that we have to tell.

Of course, the Big Barn is quite an attraction itself and visitors far and wide come to see the barn. It is without a doubt a favorite with school children but has many adult admirers, as well. From barn enthusiasts to

former employees of Foster Farms and their families to journalists, the Cooper Barn is a hit. As the museum holds special events on the grounds, the barn lends itself handily to the occasions. Concession stands to program presentations as well as the crowds are easily accommodated in the barn's interior spaces.

Plans are for bathrooms to be installed to better serve the public attending these affairs.

The Barn has had an appeal with young couples since 1994 who have held their weddings, wedding receptions and/or dances in the huge loft. The barn's unique atmosphere seems to have attraction for such affairs. The couples often go all out with western wear and horse-drawn wagons and coaches. The barn can be rented by groups and families for get-togethers. Arrangements are made through the staff at the museum.

Without a doubt, the big Cooper Barn contributes a great deal to the history of Thomas County and because of its relocation to the Prairie Museum of Art & History, the barn can continue to foster memories for many more generations.

**Prairie Museum of Art + History**  
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