

NewsWatch

An old barn finds new role



REPURPOSED BARN: The Ellis Barn was moved to the Oakland County Parks' Springfield Oaks site and is used for a variety of activities, including dog shows, fair activities and weddings.

Key Points

- Ellis Barn was given to Oakland County Parks by a nonprofit organization.
- Barn was dismantled, moved and reassembled at Springfield Oaks.
- It's used by the Oakland County Fair for exhibits and is rented out for functions.

By **COLLEEN GEHOSKI STEINMAN**

MADE of wood, stone, brick and beams, a barn is at once a place of work and a place of play. While an old barn can be an expensive drain, it also has the potential to become an economic windfall.

Its hand-hewn beams and wooden pegs, rusting metal bolts, crumbling mortar, and ancient stone offer shelter for feed and animals. But a barn, particularly an older barn, can be much more.

It's a place of nostalgia, of memory. To a child, the barn is a great playground, building tunnels and forts among the stacks of hay bales or swinging from ropes from the loft into a big pile of hay or straw. Caring for animals and their feed, the barn quickly becomes a laboratory where young people learn the value of hard work.

Today, historic barns can be a place of business, housing microbreweries or hosting weddings and craft shows. One of the best examples of this is the Ellis Barn, located in Oakland County Parks' Springfield Oaks.

"The Ellis barn really proves a point that with enough financial support, these historic structures can be re-erected and adapted for other uses," says Dan Creyts of the Michigan Barn Preservation Network, which awarded the structure "Barn of the



LOOKING UP: The voluminous ceiling inside the barn has a complex post-and-beam structure that supports the barn.

Year" in 2003 and included it on the spring barn tour.

The Ellis Barn's storied past includes historical significance for both farming and transportation, according to a publication "A Tale of Two Barns," created by Oakland County Parks. Commissioned in 1884 by livestock broker Norman James Ellis, the twin Madawaska Twin gambrel-style barn was erected by a Maine barn builder. Its voluminous design, with no interior hay loft, was designed to store large quantities of hay before modern baling equipment.

A massive landmark along Dixie Highway, the barn housed a thoroughbred Percheron stallion, Ingomar, whose stud

fees helped pay for the barn. Along with other livestock, Ellis was responsible for introducing this breed of sturdy workhorses that helped develop Michigan's farmland and improve its road system, including the Dixie Highway. The Old Saginaw Trail was critical in linking Detroit, Pontiac and Flint.

Ever the entrepreneur, Ellis adapted his business interests when the introduction of automobiles replaced Percherons. He transformed his large sheep pen on the lower level of the massive barn, digging out at least a foot from the lower level of the barn to accommodate Tennessee walking horses, and created an indoor riding arena. From 1945 until 1969, the Ellis Barn hosted a number of events for the Dixie Saddle Club, effectively moving the barn into a full-time recreation business.

In 2001, the barn and land, which had been in the Ellis family for more than 100 years, was purchased by a nonprofit organization owned by professional baseball players Kirk Gibson and Tim Lincecum. They promised that the barn would be preserved. The structure, along with a \$75,000 donation, was given to Oakland County Parks. The county also received a \$600,000 Department of Transportation Enhancement grant to dismantle and relocate the barn.

In 2005, the late Joe Schwartz, of Amos B. Scharz Construction Co. in Indiana, took on the project. As a former Amish barn builder, the company had the knowledge to dismantle the structure and restore it at its new location. Joe was 71 when he led the project, but Oakland County Parks staff still recall how he walked the entire length of the barn's top beam.

At 14,000 square feet, the barn is 129 feet long and 56 feet wide. While being dismantled, the crews discovered many new facts about the massive structure.



WEDDING PHOTOS BY AMY ALEXANDER-BARNES OF CREATIVE ELEMENTS DESIGN STUDIO



A CELEBRATION: The Ellis barn is often used for weddings. The Sarah Showler and Dennis Twaddle Jr. wedding was June 11, 2011.

They learned that Ellis' changes, including relocating stalls, had compromised the structure of the barn. An elaborate cable system had been rigged to help keep the barn up, but the work crew restored the original footings and braces needed to keep the structure in place, says Kathy Thomas, an Oakland County Parks seasonal naturalist.

Thomas, now semi-retired, led interpretive tours of the restored Ellis Barn for years after its dedication in 2005. She loves the reaction that most people have when they first walk into the barn.

"They look up and simply say, 'Wow!'" Thomas says. "There's no hay loft and the space is massive."

Thomas also notes the metal hay track and trolley that runs at the peak of the barn. It's the original piece from the family farm and was used to haul entire wagonloads of hay into the ends of the barn. Trap doors allowed workers to drop hay into the stalls beneath, she explains.

The Schwartz crews also found evidence of a small water leak and charred wood from spontaneous combustion of decomposing hay. Fortunately, the fire never took hold, probably from lack of oxygen, Thomas says.

"That's the most common way we lose these old barns," Thomas says. "The roof is really the most important part of the struc-