

Bob Hisserich · Sep 12, 2024 · 4 min read

Saving Historic Barns

I never paid much attention to barns when I was a youngster, even while playing in the haylofts. They were just a "thing" to me, like a swing set or a playground. Today, I look at barns in wonderment and pride.

When I was a kid, my parents bought an old barn outside of Cuba, Missouri, north of what is now Interstate 44. When my folks first took me to the new place and we drove up to the house, I made a beeline to the grand old barn, which stood proudly out behind the three-room, two-story farmhouse.



Brian Williamson is helping save an old barn at Saxon Lutheran Memorial - a living museum.

It might as well have been as tall as a skyscraper and as wide as a city block with its weathered gray boards and rusty metal roof. I was eight years young. When I close my eyes, I can see the wooden dowels used to pin the main frame together in my mind. Nails were used on the thinner, smaller boards and to hold hinges for doors. Our barn had a concrete foundation... many are just "pole" barns where telephone-type poles are set into the dirt and the structure is attached to the main frame of the building—others were put on large stones or blocks. Large beams were often doweled together. Then later in the 19th century, barn builders began to use large bolts and nuts to construct the barns. Nuts and bolts saved a lot of time during the construction process.



Recently, 573 had the opportunity to explore one of Missouri's oldest barns. The massive barn at Saxon Lutheran Memorial was built in the early 1800s, around 1820 or so, with hand-hewed massive oak timbers set on large stone foundations. The barn is on the National Register of Historic Places and is one of the 573 jewels we should all visit and support.



In 1839, in order to freely practice their Christian faith, 600 Saxon Lutherans settled in Perry County and the surrounding area. Among the group were Christian Adolph Bergt and Caroline Louise Voelker. In 1847, the Bergts acquired the property of an early pioneer, Thomas Twyman, who settled in the area in 1820. The property remained in the Bergt family until 1957. The property was purchased by the Concordia Historical Institute of St. Louis in 1961, restored, and in 1964 opened to the public as a "walk-in History Book" of German immigrant life in America.











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Saxon Lutheran Memorial's annual Fall Festival is held on the second Saturday in October each year and features demonstrations of activities common in the mid-1800s, such as blacksmithing, quilting, cross-cut sawing, cider-pressing, bread-baking, butchering, apple-butter-cooking, spinning, and the making of brooms, shingles, and soap. The festival, which takes place on October 12th this year, also offers horse-and-buggy rides, a silent auction, skits, live music, food, and handmade crafts.



The Saxon Lutheran Memorial is listed on the National Register of Historic Places due to the spectacular barn built on the property in the very early 1800s. The timber-frame barn contains within it an earlier double-crib hewn log barn and two log outbuildings whose original use is uncertain.



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Barns often had a hay hoist on one top end of the roof. With it, you could, through the use of a set of hay hooks, attach them to a bale, and use the wooden pulley at the top, hoist the bale into the opening and slide the bale into the loft. Then, it was just a matter of strong-arming the bale into position and repeating the process until all of your hay was "put up." We usually used to put up hay twice in the summer, except rather than using wagons, we used pickup trucks to haul the hay to the barn, where we hoisted it bale by bale into the loft. Apparently, the barn loved the attention and stood with pride as a valuable family asset.



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Dovetail joints make it able to withstand centuries without even a single nail to hold it together.



Imagine the power and time it took to cut and hew these massive logs with a hand axe.

My love of barns has spanned 60 years now – long enough to see the demise of huge numbers of them across the 573 area and the entire country. Maybe you didn't see them standing sentinel in an overgrown pasture or surrounded by assorted herds of cattle. They're there but not for much longer.



The original stone foundation is key to the barn lasting so long.





My family's barn was a classic Peaked Prairie barn, which is by far the most popular barn in Missouri. Peaked Prairie barns are boxes with a double-peaked roof that allows snow to slide off easily. They offer tremendous storage space for farm equipment, milking, and feeding stations, and, of course, the ever-popular hay loft!





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Like other structures, barns thrive when humans are active in them—moving cattle in and out, maintaining the farm tractor, and storing hay all lead to a long, living building. When that activity stops, the building begins to decay. Thank goodness there are a few people who are dedicated to the preservation of these old and wonderful works of art.







...blacksmithing, quilting, cross-cut sawing, cider-pressing, bread-baking, butchering, apple-butter-cooking, spinning, and the making of brooms, shingles, and soap all displayed at the festival.



Brian and Jennie Williamson moved from Nashville to the old farmhouse at Saxon Lutheran Memorial in the late spring of 2023 and became the Ambassadors of the property. They have been in the Christian Music Industry for the last 23 years. As they continue their nationwide music ministry, they are active in fundraising and expanding on-site ministry opportunities. They also work closely with the board to manage and oversee the restoration of the property. You can learn more at saxonlutheranmemorial.org



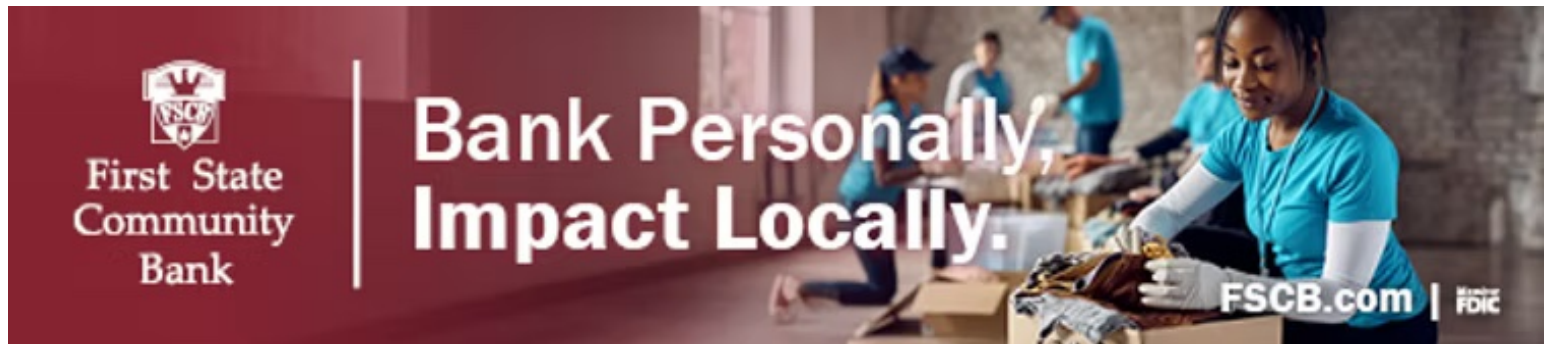
Times a wasting. Pull yourself out of that sunken sofa and live. Do something. Do anything. Follow your passion each and every day, and you will realize your dream sooner than later. If one person can do it, so can you. Now Get Out There!

Words by Bob Hisserich

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