

Saving barns a mission to preserve piece of Iowa history

Iowa Barn Foundation has helped preserve and restore nearly 300 barns



Erin Murphy

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Jim Frost stacks hay bales Thursday at a barn on the Frosts' land outside of Waterloo. The barn, built in 1877 and renovated in 2018, has been used as a horse barn, dairy barn and currently houses sheep. The barn is on the 2023 Iowa Barn Foundation All-State Tour in September and will host a lunch in the 2024 Iowa Barn Foundation Spring Tour in June. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

DES MOINES — Dwight Hughes has tears in his eyes as he speaks. Behind him is the small, model barn displayed at the Iowa State Fair, which he hopes will inspire Iowans to help preserve the real things scattered across the state, but dwindling in numbers.

"I'm not sure how you say thank you, but this is big," Hughes says.

Hughes, who is from Cedar Rapids and serves as a board member with the Iowa Barn Foundation — a nonprofit organization that raises funds to help Iowans protect and restore barns. The passion project for Hughes and the foundation's volunteers is to preserve a piece of Iowa history that is in danger of becoming extinct.



A model barn, built to draw attention to the Iowa Barn Foundation's fundraising and restoration efforts, sits on display Aug. 8 at the Iowa State Fairgrounds in Des Moines. (Erin Murphy/The Gazette)

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The old, red barn that is a staple of many Midwesterners' image of their home is becoming a rare sight on modern farms. Hughes and the Iowa Barn Foundation want to preserve as many of those iconic buildings in the state as possible.

"Preservation of the heredity of family farms across Iowa is very significant. (The barns) are symbols of the agrarian society that built and enhanced our state," Hughes said recently at the Iowa State Fair, where the foundation unveiled the model barn to raise awareness for its cause. "And I just think that from a historical standpoint, it's good to have the younger people be exposed to all of that hard work: ethics, moral values, family values. You know, the whole deal."



The Frost barn at 1745 E. Eagle Rd. near Waterloo, built in 1877 and renovated in 2018, is listed among 72 barns across Iowa on the 2023 Iowa Barn Foundation All-State Tour on Sept. 16 and 17. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

The barns are disappearing because they are not nearly as useful in modern agriculture. Now, Hughes said, more farmers use pole barns because they can hold larger farm machinery. More and more small, family farms are giving way to large production farms that use animal confinement systems.

The classic red barn is just not as useful as it used to be. "And if you don't use them, you don't maintain them," Hughes said.



Wayne and Jim Frost open the hay loft door of a barn Thursday on the Frosts' land outside of Waterloo. The barn, built in 1877 and renovated in 2018, has been used as a horse barn, dairy barn, and currently houses sheep. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

Since its creation in 1997, the Iowa Barn Foundation — a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, all-volunteer organization — has raised more than \$2 million and funded the restoration of nearly 300 barns across the state, the organization says. The foundation publishes a biannual magazine and hosts annual tours of Iowa barns.

Barn owners interested in obtaining a grant to help fund the restoration of their barn fill out an application to the foundation with pictures, the location and condition of the barn and an estimate of costs for needed repairs, Hughes said.



Jim Frost arranges dairy pails at a barn Thursday on the Frosts' land outside of Waterloo. The barn, originally built in 1877 and renovated in 2018, has been used as a horse barn, dairy barn, and currently houses sheep. Its restoration won an award of distinction from the Iowa Barn Foundation. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

The Iowa Barn Foundation's board discusses and votes on which grant applications to approve. The foundation also offers help to the barn's owners with recommendations for things like contractors, painters and other skilled workers who can aid in the restoration process.

Hughes said the program has become popular to the point where grant requests outpace the available funding.

"We've got a lot of people applying for grants to restore their barns. We're running out of money to do that," Hughes said.



Jim Frost feeds sheep Thursday at a barn on the Frosts' land outside of Waterloo. The barn, built in 1877 and renovated in 2018, has been used as a horse barn, dairy barn, and currently houses sheep. Its restoration got help from a grant from the Iowa Barn Foundation. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

That led the foundation to reserve a spot at this year's Iowa State Fair. The hope is that the increased visibility will attract more donors.

Mike Naig, the Iowa state agriculture secretary, during a news conference just before the Iowa State Fair praised "the hours, the time, the effort" by the Iowa Barn Foundation's volunteers. At the news conference, Naig recalled the barn on his family farm growing up, which he said — like so many other barns across the state — is no longer in use in the same way it used to be.



Iowa Agriculture Secretary Mike Naig discusses the Iowa Barn Foundation's fundraising and restoration efforts during an Aug. 8 news conference at a model barn at the Iowa State Fairgrounds in Des Moines. (Erin Murphy/The Gazette)

“But in its heyday, it was a very productive place,” Naig said. He said when he and his siblings participated in 4-H growing up, the family barn housed cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens. “It was the place, I’m confident, that lots of lessons were learned in that building because of things that my parents were teaching us through that experience. The barn was a center hub of activity on a farm.”



A cornerstone reads J. S. M for John S. Mitchell, the son of the original homesteader, on a barn on the Frosts’ land outside of Waterloo. The Frost barn, built in 1877 and renovated in 2018, has been used as a horse barn, dairy barn, and currently houses sheep. It has 3-foot-thick limestone walls at the base. (Nick Rohlman/The Gazette)

The Iowa Barn Foundation’s annual barn tour highlights barns that have received restoration grants from the group. The tour is self-guided, free and open to the public.

This year’s tour features 72 barns, according to the foundation, eight of which are rare, round barns. More information on the tour can be found at [the Iowa Barn Foundation website](https://www.iowabarnfoundation.org/).



The Kirkpatrick-Dighton round barn, pictured Tuesday in Coggon, was built in 1914 by Robert Kirkpatrick using clay tiles that probably were purchased by Johnston Brothers Clay Works, a company based in Fort Dodge. The barn is on the 2023 Iowa Barn Foundation's All-State Barn Tour. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

Hughes said he believes the foundation's mission is at a critical juncture, as more and more barns become neglected as their usefulness wanes. His hope is that the foundation can continue to help more Iowans preserve these structures.

"Now's the time to take that step and let's roll. What can we do with this? Capitalize on it: not for me, not for our board, not for your board, but for the state of Iowa. This is a project for the state of Iowa," Hughes said during the State Fair news conference. "We're investing our time and resources to save heritage, to save history, to bring honor to hardworking farm families who have developed and enhanced our state."

Hughes views the cause as one of preserving an integral piece of Iowa's history.

"Think about your grandchildren or your great grandchildren. What's going to happen if we don't make an effort to save these iconic structures?" he said. "In my view, this is time sensitive because of our age and because of the ages of the barns."



The Kirkpatrick-Dighton round barn in Coggon, seen Tuesday, is one of eight round barns on this year's Iowa Barn Foundation's All-State Barn Tour, which featured 72 barns. (Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette)

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