



— BY DAVE AUSTIN —

## An Interview with **Marlene Fenstermann** 25 Years of Service as County Representative

Being a representative for the Iowa Barn Foundation (IBF) is a rare opportunity to explore and cultivate your community. Representatives are volunteers who love visiting with neighbors, encouraging ways to preserve and rejuvenate “cathedrals of the prairie”, the barns created in an earlier age.

Marlene Fenstermann has been an IBF representative for 25 years bringing IBF opportunities to barn owners of Allamakee and Winneshiek Counties. We asked Marlene how she got started with IBF. She said, “My professional nursing work included frequent trips to Des Moines. Given the distance between Decorah and Des Moines, I had to leave early in the morning for 10:00 o’clock meetings. In the early years, the farmers were up with barn lights on starting their morning chores. Then as the years passed, I noticed fewer morning lights shining in barn windows. Livestock was vanishing from the traditional farm yards, and fences were disappearing in the fields. Then, one day, Marlene said, “I read an article on the front page of the Des Moines Register that Jacqueline Andre “Jackie” Schmeal had noticed the same changes in Iowa on her travel between Ames and Houston, Texas.” Schmeal consulted several friends and started The Iowa Barn Foundation in 1997. “It was an important decision for Iowa.” IBF has given over \$2 million dollars in 270+ grants to rehabilitate barns across Iowa.

“I decided to attend one of the very early IBF meetings,” said Marlene. “I was a ready convert to the IBF mission.”

We asked Marlene about the duties and work of a county representative. She said, “You have to know the role of IBF, its mission of preserving barns, and have an enthusiastic willingness to visit with farmers about their barns.” The actual preservation often is

just discussing the significance of a farmer’s barn, helping them see the treasure in their farmyard, often built by their ancestors, and discovering the route for repair, adaptation, and stewardship of their barn. Preservation may also come by a partial grant from IBF, but more often it is by self-funding by the local owner who has seen the rehabilitation self-funded projects of their neighbors.

The Iowa Barn Foundation sponsors a Spring and Fall self-guided tour of Iowa barns. The Spring tour features barns of a selected area of Iowa. The Fall tour features barns across the state barns that have received IBF funding assistance or have received awards of merit for self-funding their own barn project. The 2023 Fall tour had 72 barns making it the largest barn tour in the nation. Marlene expressed delight in what happens during the tours. “The touring people, from all over Iowa and adjacent states, start conversations with the barn owner, learning the barn history, how the owner decided to repair or upgrade their barn, and see the value of saving a worthy barn.” Some barn projects start simply by seeing the positive attitudes of their neighbors. IBF also publishes a magazine with quality photographs and stories about Iowa barns.

The role of an IBF representative is multi-faceted, being both a public relations person for the goals of IBF but also a problem solver working with the local barn owners. The representative sets his/her own agenda of involvement. The owner and the representative progress through the project to completion in a collaborative manner for problem solving. Hopefully, they reach out to other IBF representatives for assistance if needed.

The barn owner has many questions. The representative becomes a helpmate

After hearing Marlene’s name mentioned by multiple barn owners, I finally got the chance to meet her in person at the Boeding farmstead in Decorah during the 2022 fall barn tour. Her energy and enthusiasm for Iowa barns is contagious. We made plans for my return in October, and Marlene treated me to a tour of several of her favorite barns in the area. It was an amazing day, and this photo was taken after we toured the Ashmore-Jewel Barn on the Luther College campus. As the board was reviewing plans for recruiting additional county reps, we put together a list of duties and responsibilities. There was unanimous agreement that Marlene is the gold standard for an Iowa Barn Foundation County Representative. Marlene will be mentoring Jim Palmer in 2024, and two of them will share duties for Winneshiek and Allamakee Counties.

communicating and planning with the barn owner. How can the stone barn foundation be repaired? Who are local stone masons with skills to do a good job? What kind of siding and roof repair are acceptable? How are IBF grants awarded? Marlene noted that early in the discussion with a barn owner the documentation, grant awarding, etc. must be done before the project work begins. What adaptive uses of the barn are permitted? How to deal with the public during the barn tours? During the early discussions with the local owner, which may turn into many months or years, the representative will take photographs and record the changes that take place during the restoration process. Early on the representative may use an assessment form to document current needs and condition.

The IBF representative becomes a frequent visitor to the farmstead, working with the owner to solve problems and explore possibilities. They become an on-going friendship. The representative volunteers his/her time and energy. The owner and representative share the pride and joy when a project is successfully completed. Their joy bubbles forth knowing another Iowa barn has been rehabilitated for another Iowa generation. Of course, representatives will want to attend IBF meetings to learn what other representatives are doing.

If your county does not already have an IBF representative, please consider volunteering to become one. Contact: Jack Smith (IBF President, 563-599-3061, jacksmith@icloud.com) or the County Representatives Coordinator Craig Stephens at (515-681-1009, cdstephens@fngi.net). Other questions can be directed to iowabarnfoundation@gmail.com