

The Saga of the Bunn Barn

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In the fall of 2000, four members of the Woodstock, Conn. Agricultural Society, sponsors of the annual Woodstock Fair, came to the realization that there was an urgent need for an agricultural museum on the fairgrounds, a facility that would preserve, at least part, some of the town's agricultural heritage. The members had, for many years, been involved in a variety of fair activities one of which was an antique tractor display which features vintage tractors owned by local collectors. The realization that machinery of this sort was rapidly disappearing led the group to conclude that if it was happening to tractors it was also happening to other old agricultural implements that had outlived their useful life. It became apparent that if no one took the initiative and began a program of preservation, a valuable part of Woodstock's agricultural heritage would be lost forever. Behind every farmstead in the community were pieces of history rusting away, no longer needed and of no apparent value.

The foursome realized that if people of their vintage, ages 60 to late 70's, did nothing to preserve some of these long abandoned artifacts, the likelihood that future generations would do so was indeed remote and thus a plan slowly began to take shape. After several informal get-togethers the group decided to take their idea to the Executive Board of the Woodstock Agricultural Society for their input. The response of the Board was positive with the exception of one small nagging detail, how to finance the project. At the point the idea was presented to the Board of Directors, the group was charged with making the final determination as to whether the idea was viable. Again, the concept was favorably received with the final outcome contingent on the dollars involved and the proposed source of those dollars.

The committee was made up of; Harold Foskett, a farm equipment dealer; George Looby a retired veterinarian, Calvin Neely, a lawn and garden tractor dealer and Dexter Young, a dairy farmer. This group set about developing a plan that would satisfy their dream of an agricultural museum and address the predictable budgetary constraints they knew the board would impose on any project of that scope. Early on in the discussions there was unanimous support for a barn that would replicate a barn typical of Woodstock in the era 1860 -1950, the time frame on which a possible collection would be built. How best to achieve this goal ran the gamut from erecting a new barn to finding an abandoned one that could either be moved or disassembled and reconstructed on the fairgrounds. Numerous old barns were to be found in the Woodstock area but in most instances their structural integrity left something to be desired. Ultimately Calvin Neely suggested that an old barn located about one half mile from the fairgrounds (owned by the Town of Woodstock and used by the Board of Education as a storage facility) be looked at as a possible museum.

On the outside the barn was showing its age, covered with fading red asphalt shingles, dried and peeling, it did not spike the interest of a barn enthusiast at first glance. The committee prevailed on the maintenance supervisor in charge to open the doors in order that they might view the interior. The barn had, for several years, been used as a catch-all for items that the Board of Education no longer needed but was reluctant to throw away, in today's jargon the Board of Education had something of a hoarding problem. Dozens of old desks, vintage (c. 1990) computers, assorted chairs and others school-related paraphernalia filled every nook and cranny. Digging and pawing through this accumulation it was soon apparent to the group, now an official committee, that structurally, the barn was in good condition. The majority of the heavy chestnut beams were intact, much of the flooring was sound and there was no visible sagging or buckling. The basement level revealed granite pillars approximately eight inches square that supported the first floor and they showed no signs of tilting or tipping. This unique feature as much as any other single factor sold the group on acquiring this building for the museum. None of the group considered themselves experts on barn construction or renovation although each had spent most of their lives working in or around them so there existed a reasonably high level of confidence that this barn might be right for the project.

Over the next few weeks, various experts were called in to evaluate the barn and provide the committee with some frank appraisals as to its possible future use. To a person, they all supported an effort to preserve the barn and to proceed with an effort to acquire it from the town.

For each member, this was a first time experience. None of them had ever managed a project such as this, but off they went innocently hoping that their quest would end successfully. It was decided that the first contact would be with the Superintendent of Schools and his Maintenance Manager to determine if they would be willing to give up the building. The conversation was a positive one. Their main concern was what they could or should do with the contents. A community yard sale was suggested and that any residue be taken to the town transfer station for disposal. This suggestion seemed to address their concerns and a meeting was then arranged with the Board of Selectmen to get their opinion as to the possible acquisition of the structure for the sum of \$1.00. That meeting, held on March 19, 2002, was also positive in nature and it was then arranged that a presentation be made to the Planning and Zoning Commission for their consideration. That meeting, held on Jan. 16, 2003, was basically a formality required by statute whenever the sale of town property was being considered. On Jan. 27, 2003 the Chairman of the Museum Committee met with the Board of Finance to obtain their blessing in order that all agencies involved in any such transfer be contacted in the prescribed manner.

A special Town Meeting was held on Feb. 18, 2003 during which the so- called Brunn Barn was transferred from the Town of Woodstock to the Woodstock Agricultural Society. Well before the formal approvals were in place, the Committee had begun the process of how to proceed with moving the barn from its location about one half mile from the fairgrounds to its new site on the grounds. Exploratory findings revealed that it was feasible to move the barn intact overland to its new location until the question of lowering a major utility trunk line greatly complicated the picture. The costs for lowering the line to allow passage of the building down an existing road were well beyond what any conceivable budget might allow thus necessitating a trip back to the drawing board. The idea of dismantling the barn and reconstructing it on the grounds had been an option from the beginning so the process of finding an experienced contractor began. It was as if providence intervened when the name of Glen Pianka surfaced and contact made.

Glen Pianka is a retired Connecticut State Policeman. Before retiring at a young age, he began to explore the possibility of barn restoration as a second career. He founded Lebanon Country Collection in Lebanon,CT with restoration of historic structures a specialty. Not far into the negotiations, the committee knew that it had found the right man to carry out the project. Throughout the entire process the degree of agreement between the contractor and the committee was quite remarkable. Things progressed very well and in early 2004, a contract was signed (with prior approval by the Board of Directors for funding already secured). The dismantling process began in the fall of that year with all salvageable materials removed from the original site and stockpiled on the fairgrounds. A local contractor was hired to do the required site restoration requested by the town once the building was down. This involved filling the cellar hole and grading the site.

As mentioned earlier, the main structural members were in good condition as was some of the flooring, all of which were reassembled the following spring. The siding and roof were in poor condition and relegated to the scrap heap.

On Oct.13, 2004 a brief groundbreaking ceremony was held at the construction site to celebrate, in a rather informal way, the beginning of reconstruction although actual work was put off until the following spring. When spring finally arrived in 2005, Glen and his dedicated crew began work in earnest to put the barn back together, every stick having been marked appropriately during the dismantling process. Once the foundation was poured, the work moved forward quickly realizing that there was a Sept. deadline to meet if the building was to be ready for the opening of the fair on Labor Day week-end.

While construction was going on, the committee began the task of accumulating artifacts that would make suitable exhibits for opening day. The group actively solicited members of the fair association and members of the community at large to either donate or loan items in their possession that they felt would be suitable items for display. A commitment

that the committee had made to each other is that each item that found its way onto the floor must be in relatively good condition. They wanted the exhibit to be as good as it could possibly be. It was necessary for the members to be quite diplomatic in order not to offend anyone when venturing out evaluating possible gifts or loans. When a prospective donor's gift might not meet the standards the group had set for itself saying, "no thank you" had to be done in as gentle manner as possible. Refusing to take grandpa's rusted out wheel barrow held the strong possibility of being the ultimate insult. It was neither the intent or purpose of the committee that what was on display would be sub standard. Collecting junk was not its mission. Donors were given two basic options, an outright gift or a loan, either short term or long term with grantors responsible for putting a value on their gift for tax purposes.

The response was quite gratifying; by the time the fair opened on the Friday before Labor Day 2005 there was a very good display on the main barn floor for fairgoers to view. Glen Pianka and his crew worked diligently throughout the summer and as the witching hour approached there was some small amount of anxiety as to whether it would be ready. In a scenario worthy of a good B movie, the painters finished applying the last coat of barn red paint at 5 o'clock on the Thursday afternoon before opening day. On the following day the doors opened and almost five years of meeting, planning, and cajoling were over.

In the time that passed since the Brunn barn was identified as the ideal setting for a farm museum the history of the structure began to unfold. At one point in its long life, the barn had been the property of the Brunn family of New York who summered in Woodstock as was the fashion of the times among a certain strata of New York's affluent families. The advent of high speed rail service from New York to Boston over the Air Line Road made it possible for families of means to maintain summer homes in the Woodstock-Pomfret area. So it was with the Brunns. Julius Brunn, the patriarch of the family, was a wealthy tea and coffee merchant who, along with many of his peers, chose the area as a summer retreat for his family. The property was in fact a working farm, a gentleman's farm if you will, and the barn of this piece was part of the operation.

One of Julius's sons was Dr. Armin Brunn a veterinarian who earned his degree from the now long defunct American Veterinary College of New York in the class of 1884. Prior to attending veterinary college he had graduated from Cornell University in 1882, As best as can be reconstructed it would appear that Dr. Brunn manufactured veterinary pharmaceuticals and also managed the farm. He was very active in local affairs having served in the Conn. General assembly in 1907. In addition he was a trustee of the of the Woodstock Academy, secretary of the Day Kimball Hospital and was President of the Woodstock Agricultural Society in 1909.

Dr. Brunn had a brother Constantine and a sister Freida. Constantine was considered a rather intellectual individual having served in the government consular service and was

considered, in the parlance of the day, a bit odd. Freida's background remains somewhat obscure.

Julius Brunn passed away in the spring of 1909 and his will provided that the property be divided rather unequally between the two sons. Armin received 116 acres and Constantine received 14 acres and so, not unexpectedly, this division did not sit well with Constantine. One can suspect that there was more than a bit of brooding on Constantine's part as he continued to mull the terms of the will attempting to come to grips with the apparent inequality in its terms.

On Wednesday evening, Sept. 29, 1909, Constantine, who lived about a quarter mile away from Armin, was called to his brother's home to return a telephone call which he had received. It should be remembered that in that era not every home had a telephone but there would be a strong likelihood is that his brother, the veterinarian, would have one. When he arrived at Armin's home he apparently had some difficulties in reaching his number and became more that a little bit upset, upset enough to attempt to tear the telephone from its mounting on the wall. It is interesting to note that even in the early years of the twentieth century customers were having problems with their phone service. It should also be noted that almost all phones in that era were wall mounted.

This series of events triggered a violent response from Constantine. He drew a pistol from his coat and fired one shot at his sister killing her instantly and another at his brother mortally wounding him with a round to the abdomen. He then went into the parlor where he committed suicide. Dr. Brunn died several hours later despite the heroic efforts of local surgeons to save him. The legend in Woodstock is that this act was premeditated, that in advance of this bloody evening, Constantine had dug four graves on the property, three of which were to be occupied by his siblings and himself and the fourth by the family's pet jackass.

The press of the day was not above reporting events of this type in a most graphic way, no detail of the wounds inflicted was left to the readers imagination. They were anatomically correct in every detail. The reports we view on television every evening are but an extension of what was graphically reported over 100 years ago.

From that fateful September day in 1909 until 1940, the home in which the murder-suicide took place remained unoccupied. In that year a religious order, the Daughters of the Holy Ghost, purchased the property from the Brunn Family with the intent of establishing a college on the property which grew over the next few years and was known as Annhurst College. In the years after its founding it was a women's college and later became co-educational. Its life was not long. Dwindling enrollment and rising costs caused it to close in the early 1980's but throughout its life, the Brunn family remained an influence.

A Woodstock resident was a student at the college and she wrote a paper detailing some of the events ascribed to the Brunns and it was on this resource that the facts regarding that bloody Sept. evening are based. The house in which the Brunns resided has been taken down but the barn lives on filling a new role in its long and useful life.

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