Progressive Era Barns Stuck In a Pioneer Past

How Hoosiers Are Preserving Their Historic Round Barns

By: Wayne Hastings
April 6, 2022

Scientific Farming in Hoosier Heartland

Stretching back to the later half of the nineteenth century, Hoosier farmers began recognizing a need to reengineer how they produced crops and raised livestock so as to remain relevant in a rapidly growing marketplace. According to Deborah Fitzgerald's *Every Farm a Factory*, by the early twentieth century, "the overwhelming consensus [in America] was that farmers needed to become more businesslike, more like economists, in conducting their

affairs." (Fitzgerald, 2003, pg. 21) So in what ways did Hoosiers adjust?

Purdue University extension agents examining farmer's sheep, ca. 1930

Indiana newspapers from the turn of the century tell us that farm owners were increasingly interested in "scientific farming" that involved using labor saving machinery, prioritizing specific crops and livestock, and using "good business judgment." (*The Results of Scientific Farming in Madison County*, 1902) Beginning in 1912, extension agents from Purdue University began holding exhibitions, courses, and lectures to encourage local farmers that "science is the basis of industrial prosperity today. [And that] efficiency is the keynote of success always." (*Farm Topics Are Discussed: Must Be Well Educated*, 1914)

1 Greensboro Township, Henry County, Indiana

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As Hoosiers were advised to invest in farm machinery, specialized crops, and scientifically approved medicines to treat livestock, they were also suggested ways in which their barns could be improved. In A Round Indiana, John T. Hanou describes how the development of round barns from the 1870s to the 1930s was a "never-ending search to improve productivity and increase efficiency." (Hanou, 1993, pg. 11) Although not invented in Indiana, Hoosier farm newspapers and publications promoted the round barn as a cheaper and more economically efficient alternative to the rectangular barn. Nathan Pearson Henley, the Father of Indiana round barns, constructed his barn, as pictured here in Henry County, because it was more spacious, allowed for quicker routes to feed livestock, and had a self supporting roof that did not require interior beams. Round barns were also extremely useful for housing large amounts of animals, typically cattle and pigs. Henley's barn also has a silo that is situated in the middle of the barn. This allowed for convenient feeding of the animals and allowed for space to be used more economically on the property. Hoosier farmers were quick to adapt to the self-supporting silo because of how economically efficient they were.

Image Caption:

Nathan Pearson Henley's Barn in Henry County, IN

2 Liberty Township, White County, Indiana

Indiana entrepreneurs further improved upon the round barn design. Most notably, the “Ideal Circular Barn" was developed by Benton Steele, a talented draftsman and architect. According to Haou, “his enthusiastic promotions and regular advertisements in an Indianapolis agricultural newspaper, the Indiana Farmer, from 1902 to 1909 helped Indiana’s round barns reach a pinnacle in construction from 1906 to 1912.” (Hanou, 1993, pg. 22) His design promoted the true round barn, which in contrast to Nathan Henley’s barn, is perfectly curved. These structures required even fewer materials than octagon shaped barns and were strongly resistant to wind damage. However, construction of the “true round barn” required expert craftsmanship and carpentry skills. Steele’s barn, pictured here in White

County, appears modestly as it sits in a rural pasture, almost as if it's unaware of its revolutionary history.

Ultimately, industrial farmers were constantly searching for scientific ways to improve their "business". The round barn is a symbol of Progressive Era forward thinking. However, do today's Hoosiers choose to contextualize them as such? By examining preservation efforts of round barns across the state, I will demonstrate how historically preserved round barns are rather used as symbols of Indiana's proud pioneer past. Ultimately, I hope to show that there is untapped opportunity for round barns to be used as teaching tools.

Image Caption:

Benton Steele's Barn in White County, IN

The Round Barn Theatre is a repurposed historic round barn that is owned by the Barns at Nappanee, a tourist attraction dedicated to preserving and sharing the cultural heritage of the Amish to mainstream American audiences. Built in 1911, the barn was transported to the current site in 1999 to serve in the mission of Barns at Nappanee and to function as a meeting place for external theatre groups. Many productions relate to the preservation of Amish culture.

Nappanee, Indiana

The Round Barn Theatre poses as an interesting case study into how round barns are being used as interpretation tools for historic sites and arts programming. Based on descriptions of the site, this round barn is being used to communicate about traditional ways of life and to demonstrate how a group of people were able to live simply. Rather than investigating how round barns were technological innovations upon rectangular barns, it is interpreted as the antithesis of modern technology. Nearby the round barn are other structures that represent traditional Amish culture such as an old blacksmith shop, an area where visitors can make molasses, and rural lodging where you can spend the night. The Barns at Nappanee acts as a rural getaway where you can learn about a culture that is stuck in time and the round barn acts as the center point.

The Round Barn Golf Club located in Fulton County reinterpreted its historic barn, the Wideman Gerig Barn from 1910, as a golf pro shop. According to the WTIU documentary, A Rural Revolution: Indiana's Round Barns, the barn was relocated to the Mill Creek Golf Course in 2001 and shortly thereafter the golf course's name was changed to the Round Barn Golf Club. Similar to the Round Barn Theatre, the Round Barn Golf Club uses its round barn as its site focal point for purely aesthetic purposes. Golf courses are carefully designed as bucolic landscapes which use ponds, grassy hills, and sandbanks to make the site naturally appealing. Although not a part of an "Amish" village, the historic barn frames the site as a rural getaway as well. Interestingly, the golf course harkens back to themes of old-fashioned tradition by encouraging visitors to add up their scores while in the pro-shop with pen and paper, rather than digital scoring boards. (Gibson, 2020) Themes of tradition aside, the barn primarily functions as a practical need for

space. The Round Barn Golf Club ironically mentions little about its round barn and its unique history. Most telling here is what the Round Barn Golf Club chooses to not tell us about round barns, rather than what they do. As with the Barns at Nappanee, there is untapped interpretive potential.

Rochester, Indiana

The Spurgeon Round Barn located at the Kelley Agricultural Historical Museum was originally constructed in 1914 and was later moved to its current site in 2000. E.W. Kelly, the namesake of the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University, founded the site as a way to preserve pioneer traditions through a collection of original buildings. The interactive site also includes a blacksmith shop, farmhouse, granary, and log cabin school.

Sharpsville, Indiana

Of course, this is extremely similar to how the round barn was interpreted at Barns at Nappanee. While the Museum is the site of events, such as weddings and graduation ceremonies, its primary purpose is to preserve the crafts of pioneers. This firmly establishes their round barn as a part of

the past and not as a forward looking entity. The dedication to preserving the structures of pioneers is honorable, yet slightly misguided in that they choose to preserve a round barn, which were mostly prominent during the early 20th century. These types of sites followed the lead of other historical museums such as Conner Prairie, a reenactment pioneer village. Clearly interpreting the lives of pioneers has always been near and dear to Hoosier hearts and has become a part of the cultural identity of the state. Does it say something that many Hoosiers choose to get married in these structures dedicated to the pioneer? Interestingly, just as round barns are used as wedding venues today, Conner Prairie was also a common site of matrimony- “no wedding ring, no tall wedding cake, no 20th century trappings to obscure its simple charm.” (Conner Prairie Settlement; Look Back Into the Past, 1980)

The fact that “seventy-three percent of all circular barns built in the state have been destroyed since 1900” (Hanou, 1993,

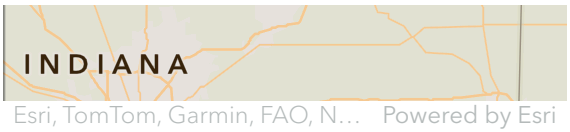
pg. 83) suggests that more ideas on how to preserve and repurpose them are desperately needed. Rather than focusing on how round barns are representative of the past, it would be engaging to research how they were products of the industrial age. Farmers across Indiana during the late 19th century and early 20th century were encouraged to alter farming techniques to increase production. Innovative historic sites can be used as reference for investigating Indiana's industrial past.

Modern Interpretatation of a Pioneer Site

Duck Creek Aqueduct at Whitewater Canal

The Whitewater Canal located in Metamora, Indiana is a testament to how historic structures can be interpreted as modern, industrial sites. Beginning in 1836, the Indiana Mammoth Internal Improvement Act transformed the river towns along the Ohio River through the creation of canal routes. According to the Indiana State Museums and Historic Sites, towns such as the Metamora attracted large amounts of commerce by providing "a source of fresh horses, food and lodging for travelers and a place for farmers and others to buy and sell their goods." (*The Crossroads of America: Welcome to Whitewater Canal*, 2022) This resulted in the creation of a gristmill, hotel, and bank. The Indiana State Museums and Historic Sites is clearly interested in telling a story about early industry in Indiana.

The site is also home to the nation's only known wooden aqueduct, the Duck Creek Aqueduct, which is also recognized as a National Historic Civil



Metamora, Indiana

Engineering Landmark. The Aqueduct was constructed in 1843, but was later destroyed in 1846. The American Society of Civil Engineers observes that rather than rebuilding from scratch, the builder ingeniously acquired a covered bridge in its early stages of construction and adapted it to replace the open trough." (*Duck Creek Aqueduct*, 2022) This type of recognition suggests that the Duck Creek Aqueduct is a site of modern ingenuity, rather than simply pioneer history. Today, tours are given of the site as an important teaching tool in learning about how engineering promoted economic growth in early 19th century Indiana towns. This opens up opportunities for round barns to present themselves as innovative historic sites. Round barns situated at county fairs have the potential to host science fairs, engineering displays, or robotic contests. The opportunities would also be limitless if an Indiana science museum were to purchase a round barn.

Conclusion: The Round Barn's Future

Ultimately, today's Indiana round barns lack interpretative ingenuity to warrant the expensive costs of preservation. The reliance upon the pioneer narrative has little potential in engaging today's younger audiences in Indiana's state history and using round barns as unconventional retail spaces or stage theaters has limited use. The greatest untapped potential for round barns is using them as industrial era teaching tools in relation to STEM learning. Indiana's round barns are relics of industrial heritage and remain symbols of revolutionary agricultural work. Future ideas on how to repurpose these barns should also consider how they can unfasten them from a pioneer past.

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