

## The Kuse Family Barn

Hildegard Kuse



Kuse Family Barn 2002

I am a gambrel roofed Wisconsin barn built when my northern county was just changing from lumbering to farming. My weathered boards are hemlock lumber sawed from logs left after the bark had been peeled for northern tanneries. Huge glacial granite boulders were used to form my foundation in 1924.

What a day it was when a crew of neighbors came for my barn raising! Walter, my young owner, took pictures from six in the morning until five in the afternoon when I stood proud and tall.



Raising the Kuse Barn in 1925

Those pictures went to his future bride, Amanda, who soon joined him in a log cabin on the partly cleared land. They brought his widowed mother's cows, Spotty, Maude, Maggie, and Cherry to homemade wooden stanchions and the old horse Prince to a new box stall.

What changes I've seen since then. I could tell the whole story of the progress of Wisconsin from those early pine and hemlock forests to the small family farms, to today when many small farmers with barns like mine have moved from the land. Only a few barns like me still stand and many of them are surrounded by housing developments.

I wonder if the families in those houses know what happened where they now live. I could tell them about whole families who milked on winter evenings by the light of a kerosene lantern, the family history they shared with each other, and the hopes and dreams they had. The youngsters learned about life cycles and parental care as they watched newborn calves and baby chicks and new kittens.

In the early days, farmers kept all of their animals under one roof so I sheltered the roosting chickens, the geese, and the sheep.

I remember the sweet smells of new clover and timothy hay as it was hauled up with ropes and a hay fork and piled up until it almost touched the tip of my roof. My kind of gambrel barn roof allowed for more hay storage space than ordinary gable roofs. Then came cold winter days when that same hay had to be thrown down from the mow and piled into the mangers.

Before I was fitted with a water tank and drinking cups, my family hauled water from the pump for each thirsty cow. On a frigid winter day when thirsty old Maud drank eleven buckets of water to wash down the dry hay, the job of pumping water was a bitterly cold one and the warmth of cattle in the barn was a welcome comfort. The family dog and cat also curled up together for the night in the warm straw bedding. Root crops like rutabagas and mangels were stored in a partitioned root cellar in bins of sand or dry leaves. They were cut up with a special knife or hexel machine so the cows wouldn't choke on them and fed to the cattle in the days before enough land was cleared for a large corn crop that could be made into silage.

When farmers like Walter took their cream to patron hauling creameries, they bought separators, the latest labor saving invention. Before the days of milk houses, I had a shiny DeLaval cream separator in a partitioned alcove. The machine was fun to turn, but the girls hated to wash and dry each individual disk that helped to spin the cream away from the foaming milk. When the family pig heard the separator turning, he kept up a high-pitched squealing solo until he had his share of the skim milk. He didn't get it all though. Amanda made some into cottage cheese. Buster the dog and Tommy the cat waited for their share and some was mixed with middling for a chicken mash.

I could tell you about the heat and drought of the thirties and the years of the great depression when crops failed and many farmers lost their land. Many barns like me never had a chance after that.

My family lost their old horse, but decided to go back to raising a team of oxen, so for ten years they were a part of my life until they were replaced with an Allis Chalmers tractor, which was stored in my threshing floor until a machine shed was built. I watched the evolution of farm machinery from dump rakes to hay loaders to balers.

There were no sons in my farm family so, when Walter died, his high-school-age daughter farmed with her mother for a year until she left for college. Since then land on our farm has been rented to the neighbors, but the family has still cared for me. Every fall they check my foundation for cracks and put in new mortar. They even have had special events like family gatherings and puppet workshops here.

It's been quiet here lately. Only the bats, barn swallows, and feral cats have lived here. The neighbor stores his hay in my mow, but lately he has also made big round bales out in the field.

Nearly all of the old barns around here have been torn down and I wonder about my fate. I know that there are plenty of modern buildings that house hundreds of animals, but they can't tell the tales I could share. I think the country needs at least a few barns like me to tell the story of the state's rural history.

But maybe there is hope. In 2002, the family had six of my windows replaced. In 2013, a new metal roof was put on the barn.



**The Kuse Family Barn with a New Metal Roof – 2014**

Some of the other buildings on the land now house a family history museum. I can do my share to be a symbol of the enduring optimism and the warmth and caring concern that marked the lives of American farm families.

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