

Adaptability and flexibility--two qualities that serve the farmer well are equally applicable to farm buildings. The barn on our farm has proved itself capable in both ways. Built in 1919 and "raised" in the traditional way, the gambrel roofed forty by sixty foot building looks very similar to other barns of its era that still survive in our community. But, while most of these other relics of the "pre-baler" days have ceased to house livestock or have been relegated to lesser functions on working farms, our old barn is alive with the sounds, smells, and activities surrounding livestock occupation. And yet, this building, too, has had to change with the times and with the goals and aspirations of the people who work here.

Our basement barn was the traditional red with white circles painted on the doors, it had wood shingles, and it had room for cattle and horses in the lower level and loose hay in the mows of the upper story. A long, sloped driveway on the south side was the entry point for loads of hay and grain, and doors on both east and west ends of the basement provided access for livestock and humans. Another door on the east end led to the stave silo, and a similar exit on the west end allowed one to enter the attached sheep shed.

Unlike most barns in our area--pine or hemlock sided--our barn has matched siding of cypress. The story I heard as a youngster was that someone had ordered the material and had failed to pay for it, so my grandfather was able to purchase these premier building materials at a reasonable price. The cypress siding did not hold the finish long after it was painted when it was new, and it has never had a coat of paint since that time. The siding is still in good shape with no tendency to rot. It has weathered to a lovely, soft gray, a pleasing color except on the dark, rainy days of fall when the wet wood takes on an austere, more forbidding shade. The cedar shingles eventually gave way to asphalt and then to metal.

Originally, the basement barn had twelve stanchions for the roan and red shorthorn cows, tie stalls for two teams of horses, and box stalls for young cattle. As time went on, the configuration inside the barn changed considerably. At one time, after my father bred the cows to beefier Shorthorn and Hereford bulls and quit selling cream or milk, he converted the stanchion area to a large box stall where the cows were in a "free stall" arrangement.

Trying to lessen work as he grew older, his goal was to make the barn accessible for a small tractor with a front end loader, so that he could clean the barn regularly without pitching all of the manure by hand. Unfortunately, the doors were not wide enough for even the little Ford tractor to enter. Undeterred, my father set about widening the openings.

He had not reckoned with the fact, though he'd heard it mentioned by neighbors over the years, that his father, Lars, "was quite a hand with cement." The concrete walls were, in fact, nearly impossible to break. He used a sledge hammer, but he had little success. He rented some kind of air hammer, and he chipped away a little at a time. The foundation of the old silo outside the barn also had to be removed. Those who know the history of the pioneering ways of our family would not be surprised at my father's next move. Accustomed to blowing stumps and large stones, he decided on "a little dynamite." At that time, in the 1960s, it was possible to easily purchase explosives at the local hardware store. So, in the end, it was a combination of sledge, air hammer, and dynamite that removed the remains of the silo and widened the doors of the barn enough for the tractor. My father did say, though, that the hens in the nearby henhouse were a bit upset, but not permanently, by the blasting.

Now, we tie cows again during the winter, not in stanchions, but with tie chains and a wooden barrier that can be easily closed to make the cows back up after they have eaten. Without access to their mangers, they then lie down without making manure under themselves. This has made it easier to keep the cows clean. They quickly became accustomed to this device,

and now, a simple "Back!" signals most of them to back up so that the barrier can be slid in front of them.

This is not the "modern" way to keep beef cows, but it is good for the old barn to have the heat of livestock in it during the cold season, and it is a pleasant place to do our feeding and cleaning chores. It seems as if the cows find it agreeable, too, and when the wind is blowing in subzero temperatures, or when there is a heavy snowstorm raging outside, it is pretty cozy in the barn.

Of course, most beef cows don't have names, either. But, we have only a dozen or so, and it is handy to be able to refer to them in a way that distinguishes them from each other. So, from west to east as they stand in the barn, we greet them by name: Buttercup, Tuva, Sjärnkulle, Majros, Lilleko, Duva, Dahlia, Klöver, Quacky, Rödkulle, Twiggy, Effie, Litego, and Smörblomma. And they ensure, that nearly a century after its "raising," that the old barn still pulses with life.