

“Heart of Heatherbrook”

Barn Mural Captures Attention

Travelers passing through Michigan's Calhoun County along Interstate 94 have a treat in store as they approach or pass the junction with I-69 just west of Marshall. There, an already eye-catching red barn is now turning heads as it has boasts a mural that is garnering praise. The mural is the work of the Michigan Barn Preservation Network (MBPN), volunteers including the Battle Creek Society of Artists, and barn owners, Larry and Phyllis Wohlscheid, under the guidance of professional artist Tony Hendrick, Grand Ledge. The project was funded by a \$15,000 grant to the Network from the county's Arts & Industry Council (AIC). The barn was featured on the 2006 MBPN Barn Tour since it has been repaired and repainted as a labor of love by Wohlscheid.

The 12'x 32' mural is one of five done this past summer in Calhoun County and springs from meetings held around the county to learn how people wanted to see art expressed publicly. Murals on barns and other buildings received the most votes as did the idea that murals should depict health, wellness, and local history.

The MBPN was inspired to write a grant, enthusiastic support was given by the AIC, and by January 2007 the work began. Terms of the grant stipulated that the project must involve volunteers from as diverse a background as possible who would be involved in the painting. The work could be directed by a professional artist who could also assist in the hands-on work.

Volunteers meeting in a heated workshop at the Wohlscheid farm learned the rich history of what had once been Heatherbrook Orchard, a thriving fruit farm with hundreds of plum, apple, pear, and cherry trees. Several farms in the area were established by Marshall's Stuart brothers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Heatherbrook was a popular destination for locals as well as busloads of prisoners from Jackson State Prison who came to pick fruit for the prison kitchen. Migrant labor from the south picked fruit for processing.

Stuart family descendants Mark and Deb Stuart and Phyllis

Arnold Rosenau whose father managed Heatherbrook Orchard, remember the work that went on inside the big barn to sort and sell apples, equipment used to spray the fruit with powerful pesticides, and the kindness of the many people who visited or worked on the farm. Rosenau recalls Marshall icon, B.E. Henry, calling square dances in the barn and the shouts of 4-H'ers who gathered there for roller-skating parties. To this day she fondly refers to the century-old barn as "my barn." Mark Stuart notes that many varieties of apples from the early 1900s no longer exist.

Heatherbrook's demise came when I-94 and I-69 sliced through the farm and a killing frost finished off what was left. What remains today of the farm is threatened by yet more development. Orchards across Michigan are in jeopardy not just from development but from competition from cheaper-priced imported fruit.

Award-winning Grand Ledge artist Tony Hendrick taught volunteers (more than 60 over the course of the project, ranging in age from 9 to 91 and representing at five racial or ethnic groups) his technique of "underpainting" to build a rich base on which to apply increasingly more detailed color. After nearly three months of weekly group painting sessions, Hendrick completed the final touches and applied clear coat sealant. Wohlscheid built a frame and panel by panel, mounted the mural on the barn where it can be seen from I-94 or viewed up close.

The final requirement of the grant was that a public event be held to celebrate the finished mural. On June 15 before a crowd of more than 250, the mural was unveiled, complete with square dancers, a bluegrass folk artist, food, displays, and country-themed games for kids. MBPN President Brad Brogren, Treasurer Rob Foti, and members Steve Stier and Julie Avery represented the Network at the event.

The mural will remain on the barn for ten years. Visitors can take Verona Road or Michigan Avenue west from Marshall and go north on 15 Mile Road, park beside the barn and walk to the mural. Cards describing the project are available inside signage beside the barn or in a rack near the end of the driveway.

Despite a vigorous fight from casino opponents, a casino is planned for hundreds of acres within a short distance of the Wohlscheid farm and barn which near the end of the mural project went up for sale. The mural can be removed and relocated if necessary and so can the barn though Wohlscheid is already giving thought to hosting weddings and other events in his mural barn.

For more information about "The Heart of Heatherbrook,"

contact Jan Corey Arnett, project coordinator, at jan@jancoreyarnett.com or coralan@net-link.net. Mural shirts and other memorabilia will soon become available. Watch www.mibarn.net for information.

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