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For more information on Pioneer brand low linolenic soybeans visit www.pioneer.com/LLSoy

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Community gives barn new home

By RHONDA DEDYNE

FOR three long years the Benedict Barn stood alone on its small island of grass, surrounded by concrete in the middle of a Wal-Mart supercenter parking lot.

Cars and trucks whizzed past on M-66, their drivers and passengers hurrying to and from the myriad of fast-food restaurants, big-box stores and other businesses that sprouted around the barn — more quickly than the wheat and corn that had once covered the landscape.

“It was a very sad-looking barn, sitting there with blacktop around it and vines growing up its sides,” Keith Benedict says about the large gambrel barn that was built in 1922 by his grandfather, Ross Benedict.

Keith, who was born and raised at the Benedict homestead and still operates a cash-crop farm adjacent to the property, sympathized with the barn’s unhappy state. He recalled those years when the family’s lambs and steers waited in pens for the trip along a much different looking M-66 to the nearby stockyard in Ionia.

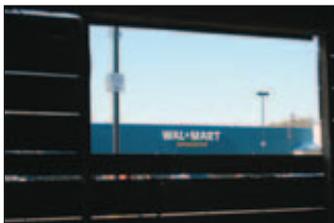
“At that time there were just four houses between here and Ionia. Those barns are all gone now.”

The Benedict barn is gone now, too — but it will rise again.

Thanks to the perseverance of barn preservation advocates and with cooperation from Wal-Mart Stores Inc., components of the Benedict Barn are stockpiled at the Sherman Lake YMCA Outdoor Center near Augusta where the barn will be reassembled for use as a learning center.

“Our plan is to do a 30-by-80-foot reconstruction of the original 40-by-109-foot front part of the barn with the same gambrel roof line, using all the materials from the barn that are in good shape,” says Sherman Lake YMCA Executive Director Luke Austenfeld. “Hopefully, we can have it up and usable for our 2008 summer programs.”

Randy Mouw, owner of Barn Cats in Rockford that dismantled the barn, believes that’s a distinct possibility. It took his experienced crew about five weeks to take apart the Benedict Barn.



WAL-MART FRAMED: The partially disassembled walls of the Benedict barn frame a view of a Wal-Mart.

“This was a good-sized job. One of the biggest barns we’ve removed because of the back-end portion that included a 50-by-60-foot granary, but that won’t be rebuilt at the new site. It actually should go together rather quickly once a final determination is made on its reconstruction,” Mouw adds.

The Sherman Lake staff has big plans for its new “old” barn. Animal care, gardening and hands-on classes will provide valuable lessons about agriculture and farming practices dating from the 1800s and 1900s.

“We have youth who come from all over, and many have never seen a barn or barnyard animals,” Austenfeld says, noting that the center has a financial commitment to the project in regard to architectural drawings, as well as in-kind donations of time and labor. “Eventually, we hope to create a real, working farm using the barn as a focal point.”

On a mission

For now, everyone is satisfied simply to have the barn safely removed, especially



FORMER MAJESTY: The Benedict Barn as it once stood.



ON ITS WAY: The Benedict barn has been squeezed out by Wal-Mart, Taco Bell, Menards and other commercial growth, but will find a new home at Sherman Lake YMCA Outdoor Center near Augusta.



MOVING ON: Keith Benedict is happy his family’s barn will help future young people learn about life on the farm.

the “Barn Lady,” Jan Corey Arnett.

A “barn lover” who grew up on a Michigan dairy farm, Corey Arnett’s mission to save the barn began in 2004 when she knocked on the door of the Benedict farmhouse and inquired about the family’s plans for the barn.

“The barn was a familiar landmark on M-66. I had always admired it and the farmstead setting,” the Battle Creek area resident recalls about her initial conversation with the family after she had seen the developer’s sign in their yard.

That visit set in motion a series of events, including media coverage in local and regional newspapers and a documentary broadcast on CMU public television, that resulted in a communication from Wal-Mart Stores Inc., citing a willingness to dismantle the barn and pay for its removal.

Interest in the barn from a pair of state and national organizations, the Michigan Barn Preservation Network and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, was instrumental.

“It’s a sad thing to see barns disappearing,” says MBPN President Brad Brogren. “We’re always interested in providing whatever assistance we can to save barns that are still usable.”

Support from the preservation groups was important in determining the barn’s destiny, as was a \$150,000 pledge from Wal-Mart in the fall of 2006 toward the relocation of the barn.

“It would have been hard to save the barn had Wal-Mart not agreed to put money into the project; acquiring funding at that level from a nonprofit or other entity would be difficult,” Corey Arnett says.

Working to relocate the barn was an investment in the community, according to Nick Infante, Wal-Mart’s re-

gional senior manager of public affairs.

“One of the things we heard consistently from the community when the supercenter opened in June 2005, was that they wanted to save the barn. We’re part of the community, and we want to do what’s best for this area.”

“We received a number of proposals from individuals and organizations around the state who were interested in the barn, but its use at Sherman Lake YMCA was the most closely aligned with its original use and purpose,” Corey Arnett says of the selection process that involved representatives from MBPN, the Michigan Historic Preservation Network, National Barn Alliance and barn contractors.

The extent of interest from people who wanted to secure the barn did not surprise Corey Arnett.

“We frequently get calls and e-mails from people who are looking for barns,” she says. “If owners don’t have the resources to keep barns and outbuildings in good repair, they should make them available to people who want them for other uses. Barns can have a new life.”

Keith Benedict agrees. He plans to visit “his” barn at its new home. “I’ve always enjoyed farming; it’s been a good way of life for our family. We’re pleased that the barn will be used again.”

Dedyne writes from St. Johns.

Benedict barn facts

- The original barn built by Ross Benedict in 1914 was struck by lightning and burned in 1921. The new, larger double barn that was built in the summer of 1922 was used continually until a 35-acre parcel of the farmstead was sold in 2004.

- Upward of 7,000 bales of straw were housed each year in the barn, sold during the winter months for use in area dairy operations.

- The farmhouse and an assortment of outbuildings were demolished by developers during the construction process for retail stores at the site.



ENCROACHMENT: Taco Bell is a stone’s throw from the original location of the Benedict barn.