

Great Lakes Lifestyle

Saying 'I do' on the farm gains popularity

Key Points

- A barn wedding requires careful attention to details.
- A commercial venue must meet various codes.
- Have photographer, musicians visit the barn in advance.

By JAN COREY ARNETT

BARNS, rich with history and character, have become a popular site for weddings across the United States and beyond. Who would have thought? Barn builders more than a century ago would certainly never have imagined that “crossing the threshold” might take on such a literal meaning.

An Internet search easily reveals dozens of sites where, depending upon a combination of factors, couples can create a day to remember. To be married in a barn that has personal significance makes the day even more special. Today’s wedding or party barns may be quite elegant or rustic.

“I grew up on a dairy farm,” says Linsey Barber of Ionia, who married in August. “Nick and I chose a burlap and lace theme. ... I know people were skeptical of our choice of venue, but by the end of the evening our guests were saying our wedding was one of the most memorable they had ever been to.”

Among the many reasons barn weddings are so appealing is that couples have extraordinary freedom, within the boundaries set by the barn owner, to spend as much or as little as they choose to make their day unique. Some sweat equity might make a friend or family member’s barn serve the purpose, while a converted, commercial venue can rent for thousands of dollars, depending upon the amenities.

Barns can run the gamut from those that have to be cleaned of cobwebs and critters before guests arrive, to those that are groomed and grand. Couples in blue jeans may as joyfully be toasted with cold beer from an ice-filled stock tank as those in beaded gowns and tuxedos might sip a bit of the bubbly from a flowing fountain.

More and more mainstream periodicals and publications feature barn wedding images and planning guides, among them, the 2013 “Weddings Flea Market Style” and Time Inc.’s “Real Simple Weddings.” According to the *LA Times*, “Antique milk cans and bales of hay are objects of lust on Pinterest,” a social media bulletin board.

Entire businesses have sprung



AT FIRST SIGHT: Linsey Barber says as soon as she saw the basement of the barn she knew that was where she wanted to be married. Linsey and Nick chose simple decor for their August wedding at Edgar Farm in Lakeview.

up, some in barns themselves, specializing in renting an array of things a couple might want for decorating from canning jars to mismatched china and old quilts to spread across bales of hay or white velvet settees.

But for a barn wedding to be memorable for the right reasons, it needs to be well-planned, well in advance, helping to account for why some barns are booked more than a year out. That means giving careful attention to many details, far beyond the matter of budget.

The most important of these is whether the barn is considered a commercial venue and must meet various codes for safety, handicap accessibility, lighting, emergency egress, food service, sanitation, etc.

You don’t want to find out days before your wedding that the barn you were counting on has just been closed by the city or township. The rule to remember is that if you are paying to use the barn, even if it is Grandpa Joe’s, it has become a revenue-earning structure, and codes apply.

A few of the questions to be considered when selecting a converted barn venue include:

■ Is the rental fee combined with your additional outlay for decorating going to work with your budget?

■ Is the location convenient for guests who have to travel, and are overnight accommoda-

tions close by?

■ How much freedom will you have to decorate, and how convenient will it be to do the work required?

■ Are the facilities going to meet your needs for number of allowable guests, lighting, acoustics, food service, restroom facilities and access?

Thrifty decorating

Choose your barn before you begin designing décor. Antique and thrift stores, yard sales, and estate sales can be great places to find unique inexpensive treasures, some of which might then be just fine for a first home or apartment.

Who says dishware and chairs have to match, or floral arrangements can’t be geraniums in coffee cans? Might Grandma’s old kitchen table dressed in blue gingham with homemade pies be more fun than white linen and a traditional cake? Guests might love to dress casual, vintage, or boho, a great way to save money and be comfortable in your unique setting.

Be sure to have your photographer and musicians, visit the barn in advance and at the time of day your wedding is to take place. Converted barns will usually have addressed the lighting and acoustical challenges, but be doubly sure. Backdrops may be needed. Musicians will want to gauge acoustics to determine

haylofts, lean-tos or other out-buildings, need to be secured as “off limits” to protect both the barn and guests?

Protective face masks and gloves must be worn when cleaning. Droppings from raccoons, bats, birds and other animals pose serious health risks. Many animals, particularly bats, will return if they can. Even if a hayloft is off limits for the event, it should still be clean of dirt and animal litter to protect people below.

Details matter

Barns were not built to have the kind of comfort wedding guests will need. If the weather is bad will your event be compromised? What additional lighting will be required and can it be installed safely?

Barns were also not designed to accommodate the physical challenges many people may have. How will these needs be addressed?

If you plan to serve food, can it be presented safely and kept sanitary?

If portable restrooms are required, larger, hand-capped-equipped units with hand-washing stations are a better choice over traditional units.

Where will guests park? Will roadside parking pose hazards? Could crops be damaged? If there are working farms or ranches in close proximity, could your day be marred by the sounds of equipment, the smell of animals or the dust from harvesting?

Are the neighbors OK with having an event take place involving traffic, noise and other activities?

In recent years, tossing rice as the bride and groom make their exit has given way to tossing handfuls of birdseed, grass seed or releasing balloons. Be sure what you prefer is acceptable to the barn owner, but don’t release balloons in any case. When they eventually return to earth, they become litter that is a hazard to animals and marine life.

Laura Waitz, co-owner of the popular Cottonwood Barn in Dexter advises, “Our 1920s barn is a labor of love, a sophisticated canvas on which couples can create their vision. It was a lot of work, but worth it.”

Old barns began as the heart of America’s farms and ranches. That they can now be the setting in which to bring hearts together in marriage gives hope that they can live on. Plan early and choose well to build good memories and a great marriage that last a lifetime.

Arnett writes from Battle Creek.



LABOR OF LOVE: Following building codes to a “T,” owners Laura and Dan Waitz transformed their Cottonwood barn in Dexter as an event facility. It has become a popular venue for weddings.

if special steps need to be taken for placement of instruments and sound systems.

If what you are investing is sweat equity to get ready for your big day, another set of critical questions must be addressed:

■ Will the barn owner’s insurance cover this event, and if not, what cost may be incurred to purchase coverage?

■ What condition is the barn in, and how much cleaning and repair work may be required to ensure safety? Any number of hazards, some of which may not be easily visible, can be disastrous, such as weak framing and deteriorated flooring.

■ Flooring, even if in good repair may be oil- or animal-stained, and have knotholes and splinters. This can easily damage gowns and pose hazards to shoes with narrow heels.

■ Will some areas, such as