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Barn again! Here's a guide to reviving an old barn

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By **Evan Harris**

"Save the barns!" Though it hasn't quite caught on like "Save the trees," the call for saving barns in Illinois and Iowa is growing louder and louder. Many property owners, divorced from day-to-day farming practices by a generation or two, find themselves with a puzzling, frustrating, melancholy problem: a crumbling barn, fallen into disuse. What to do?

The first step, says Rick Collins, owner of Trillium Dell Timberworks in Knoxville, Ill., is a change in mind-set, away from viewing that old barn as a "problem." Collins is the area's resident expert on barns and other traditional structures, and his own house is, in part, a restored barn.



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This 1860s barn in Central Illinois was restored for use as a weekend home.

"First and foremost, we want to educate people about the history and value of the structures they own. It is unfortunate that many barn owners don't see that they have something of value," he says.

Collins is referring to both historic value and monetary value. The former is honored in the work done by preservation organizations such as the Illinois Barn Alliance, part of the National Barn Alliance. Its mission: To promote and facilitate the identification, protection and preservation of the barns of Illinois. That's also true of the Iowa version: the Iowa Barn Foundation.

And yet, the barn preservation movement is not all about nostalgia. It is about "adaptive reuse." For Collins, helping a property owner make the most of a barn is as much about creativity as it is about construction. He and his crew have seen it all when it comes to barns. On the low-cost, low-key end, homeowners have converted their barns for things like storage, horses and gardening. On the high end, he's done more elaborate projects like bed and breakfasts, wineries, and barns converted into homes.

What to do with your old barn

So, if you have a barn on your hands, here's a how-to primer:

1. Explore value of your structure by doing a little research. Check out the book "Barns of Illinois" by Larry Kanfer, or contact the Illinois Barn Alliance or the Iowa Barn Foundation.

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2. Get an assessment. This is the single most important step. Done correctly, an assessment of your barn should include both analysis of the structure itself and of your needs, resources and potential uses for the barn. It is unlikely, given the size, grace, history, and utility of most barns in the area, that knocking it down and burning it or selling it for flooring is the most useful choice, regardless of your situation.

Avoid an assessment from a run-of-the-mill contractor. The opinion of a specialist is essential. You can get a referral for an assessment through the Illinois Barn Alliance or Iowa Barn Foundation. Trillium Dell Timberworks also provides the service.

Think creatively about using your structure in an "adaptive reuse" project. Many homeowners rent out their barns as storage space for boats, cars and other items too large to store in city dwellings.

3. Prioritize. Now that you've started the process, remember that your barn doesn't have to be renovated all at once. Use your assessment contacts to understand what has to happen now and what can wait. While you may not be able to afford to make your barn into a winery this year, you may be able to afford a few simple repairs that will safeguard against decay, making a winery possible in the future.

4. Create a plan over time. Establish short- and long-term goals for your barn. Perhaps in the short-term, it can be fixed up enough to rent out as storage space, creating an income to help with further repairs toward something bigger.

5. Ask the experts. The resources described in this article are but a small piece of something that is better described as a movement rather than a business. In other parts of the country and the world, barns are cherished for their history. As this movement grows in our area, remember: The experts want to help.

Get more information

* Illinois Barn Alliance: illinoisbarnalliance@gmail.com or (309) 289-7921

* Iowa Barn Foundation: iowabarnfoundation.org

* Trillium Dell Timberworks: trilliumdell.com or (309) 289-7921

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