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A 'top 10' Illinois barn is reborn

Knoxville firm restoring 19th-century barn in Mercer County

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GateHouse News Service

Posted Feb 19, 2009 @ 11:11 AM

ALEDO — Rick Collins, co-owner with his wife Laura for the past 13 years of Trillium Dell Timberworks, Knoxville, calls his company's most recent project historic.

"A third of the building materials was hand hewn and floated down the rivers," he said. Collins said the owner, whose name he declined to give, chose this barn because he liked how it looked. "It's one of the top 10 barns in the state," Collins said. "He picked this building out without really knowing it."

He has some praise for restoring this particular barn. "When people renovate they are reinvesting in our cultural heritage — that's pretty cool and pretty important."

The barn that is being reconstructed is at a farm on 135th Avenue, about a mile west of Illinois 94 and about four miles north of Aledo. The barn was moved from Keith King's old place in Hamlet and was originally built for Graham Lee.

Collins invites anyone interested to come by and see the progress. "We encourage it," he said. "We've done this 100 times."

"We always encourage the public to come out and see things like this. People come out and get invested in it and it gets maintained."

His company always salvages as much as it possibly can. He said the price tag for this kind of reconstruction work is high, but it costs less than a new building of like fashion. "If you were to build a barn like this with new materials it would double the cost."

He said his company mostly gets hired by municipalities, forest preserves or historic districts. Besides doing restoration work, Trillium Dell builds with new materials. "We specialize in this kind of work, but we build new ones like this from new materials."

Collins described some of the unique features of the barn, which was made of white pine. The building is 42 feet square, with a clear span, a hip roof and a "whole drive threshing bay that is 42 feet long and 16 feet wide."

The bulk of the timber in the structure is 12-by-12-inches-by-30-feet or 12-by-12-inches-by-42-feet, says Collins. He estimated that 90 percent of the wood in the structure is from the original building, which he thinks was built in the 1860s or 1870s. "We didn't find a date in this building."

Re-erecting the frame began around the first of January. He estimates that it usually would take from four to six weeks to reconstruct a building like this, however, the weather has had an impact on the progress. "The weather hasn't been good," he said.

The deconstruction took three weeks. Collins said they took hundreds of photographs to ensure the building is put back together the same way it was built originally.

In the 1800s the lumber was "rafted down the Wisconsin River, then rafted down the Mississippi River, sawn in the Quad Cities and brought here by wagon.

"This is probably one of the first we've come to call the progressive farm barn," Collins said. Progressive barns were being built in the late 1800s to improve farming efficiency. "It was the first real shift towards labor-saving and better production."

He calls the quality of the work that went into the building superior. "The quality is what you would see in churches and cathedrals, rather than what you'd see in barns."

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