

Barns stand as symbols of state's rural roots

Preservationists work to save buildings many farmers can't afford to maintain

By Meg Dedolph
Wausau Daily Herald

If you think of farms, you think of barns — not corrugated metal sheds — but cavernous wooden buildings painted dark red with arching roofs, hay spilling from upper windows and a weather vane on top.

But wooden barns could go the way of the draft horse and hand-sown fields as newer farming techniques leave the lofty buildings behind, prompting preservation efforts to save the distinctive architecture and remind people of their rural background.

"These barns are much more than buildings," said Jerry Apps, who wrote "Barns of Wisconsin."

"They are our histories, symbols of who we are as people in the upper Midwest. They represent values people had who settled this region. Whether we are one, two or three generations away from the farm, we're influenced by our rural roots."

Wisconsin's rural roots are many, as reflected in the variety of barn styles that dot the state. Experts in agricultural architecture and geography can classify Wisconsin's barns by style, ethnic origin and construction materials.

Please turn to **BARNs/4A**



Bob Radunz/Wausau Daily Herald

Marge Davis, Tomahawk, with camera in hand, stands near an old barn that she uses as a backdrop for many of her portraits.

Wisconsin barns tell stories of ethnic origins, agricultural history

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In the Lincoln County area, most of the barns have German influences, many brought by Pomeranian immigrants who settled here in the late 1800s.

German barns often are set into hillsides and have a forebay, an overhang on one side where the second-floor haymow extends over the first-floor stable.

Please turn to **HISTORY/4A**

Series

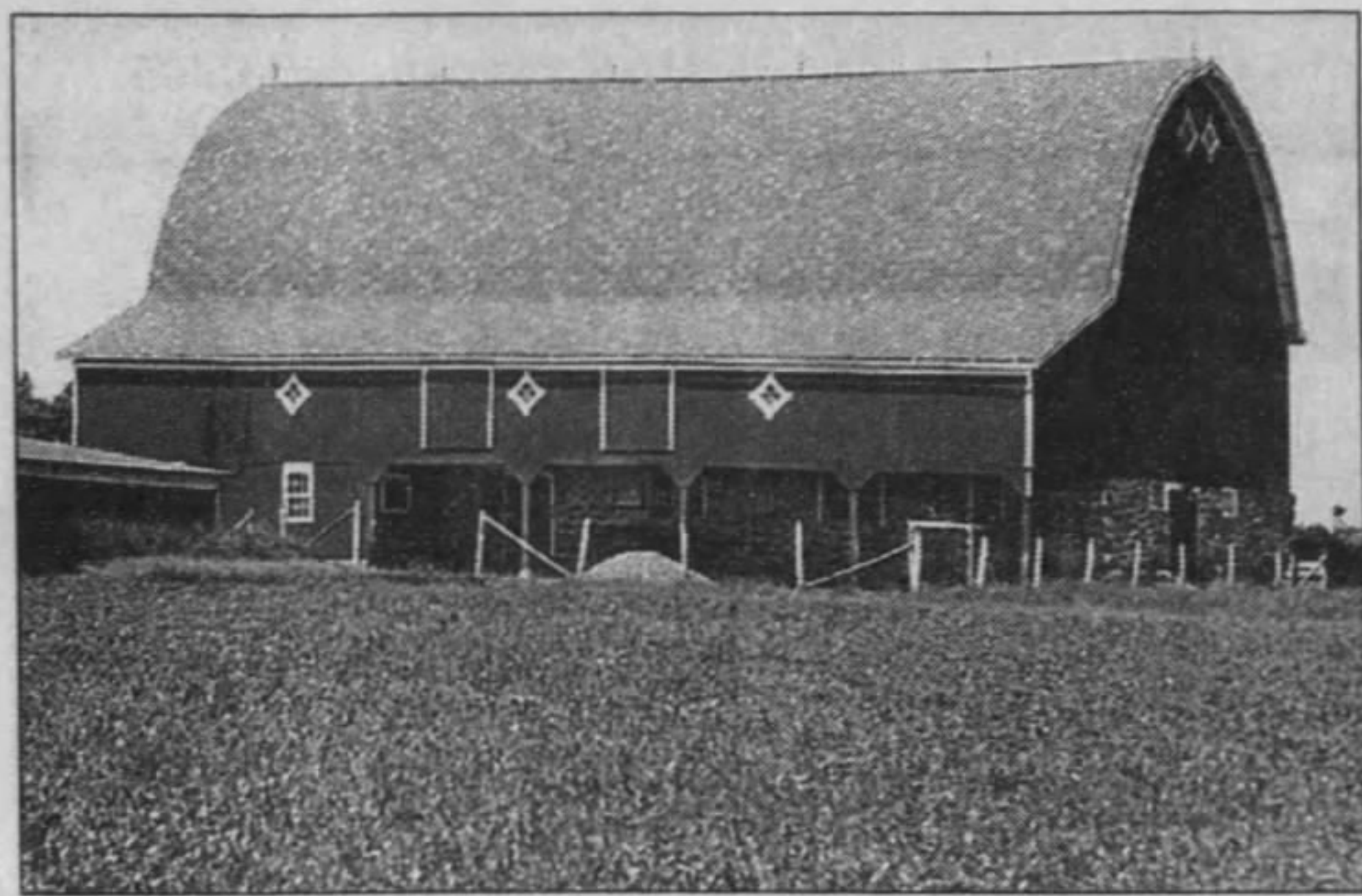
"Faces 'N' Places" is a weekly series in the Wausau Daily Herald.

If you have a story idea about a person, place or event in north central Wisconsin, send it to Mark Treinen at the Wausau Daily Herald, P.O. Box 1286, Wausau WI 54402-1286, or call 845-0705.



Contributed photo

Like many older barns, this gambrel-roofed barn has fallen into disrepair. Preservationists are interested in saving buildings like this as examples of rural architecture.



Typical of many barns built by the area's early Pomeranian immigrants, this Lincoln County barn has a forebay, or sheltered area visible on one side.

Barns

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But whether round or rectangular, gambrel- or gable-roofed, barns are attracting the attention of state historians and preservationists, who want to save these examples of rural architecture, an undertaking not without pitfalls.

The biggest problem, Tishler said, is trying to preserve good examples of barn building in an era when family farms are disappearing and agriculture is being done on a bigger and bigger scale.

"Farming is getting larger in scale with bigger machinery and wooden barns are a kind of headache. Farmers don't want to pay taxes on them, so they're disappearing," he said.

Farmers pay property tax based on the buildings on their property — whether the building is being used or not, said Robert Ross, who has about 300 dairy cows in the Edgar area.

"Sometimes, if the structure is a solid building and it maybe has been kept up to date, it's worth maybe sticking some new equipment in or remodeling it in such a way that it can be used," Ross said. "Some of the older buildings, maybe they're so far out-of-date, or maybe they haven't been maintained for the last 15 years, so by the time you put all the money back in to bring it up to running condition, it's probably not worth it."

Much of the impetus in Wisconsin's barn preservation programs is coming from people who don't necessarily know a barn from a shovel, Laatsch said.

"People have this romantic view of it, and the farmers look at a barn like a shovel. It's an implement, which, incidentally, they pay substantial taxes on," he said.

Starting in 1994, three state agencies joined together to sponsor barn preservation workshops throughout the state. One is scheduled for the spring in St. Croix County and another for October in the Marathon/Lincoln County area.

Nationally, the "Barn Again!" program encourages people to reuse barns as businesses or homes.

"It's real practical stuff," said Mitch Taylor of Iowa, who attended the first state barn workshop in Waupaca County and is now the president of Barns NOW. "It's mostly working farmers that are coming, looking for technical information. Then there are the people that enjoy barns."

Taylor, a physical therapist, counts himself among the latter. He lives on a small farm and has a barn that he's been doing minor repairs to, just to keep it standing.

"There's nothing special about my barn," he said. "For me, it's kind of a preservation thing. I may eventually put some animals in it, but I can't see it right now. I use mine for storage at this point in time."

For others, such as Marge Davis of Tomahawk, the cost of repairing old barns is prohibitive.

Davis, a professional photographer, lives on property that used to be the Essex House Lodge, which closed in 1986. The barn was built in the early 1900s, before the property was converted to a lodge in 1924 by Maude and John Griffith.

"I took a passport photo of a guy who was into restoring barns and he said I ought to restore it," she said.

The barn leans slightly toward one end, and there's a sag in the roof, which doesn't stop her from using it as a portrait backdrop or from dissuading the bats and squirrels from taking up residence.

"The color changes," she said. "If it's wet, it gets these beautiful gray-brown tones. In sunlight, it's a softer gray. No matter what time of day it is, I can walk around the barn and find an interesting angle. And when I work with high school students, we get to pick raspberries and blackberries."

Preservationists hope not only to give people practical information on how to restore old barns, but perhaps work with the state legislatures to give tax incentives for barn restoration, Taylor said.

The success of preservation efforts will ultimately be measured by Wisconsin's country scenery, whether it's spotted with old wooden barns or metal pole buildings, Tishler said.

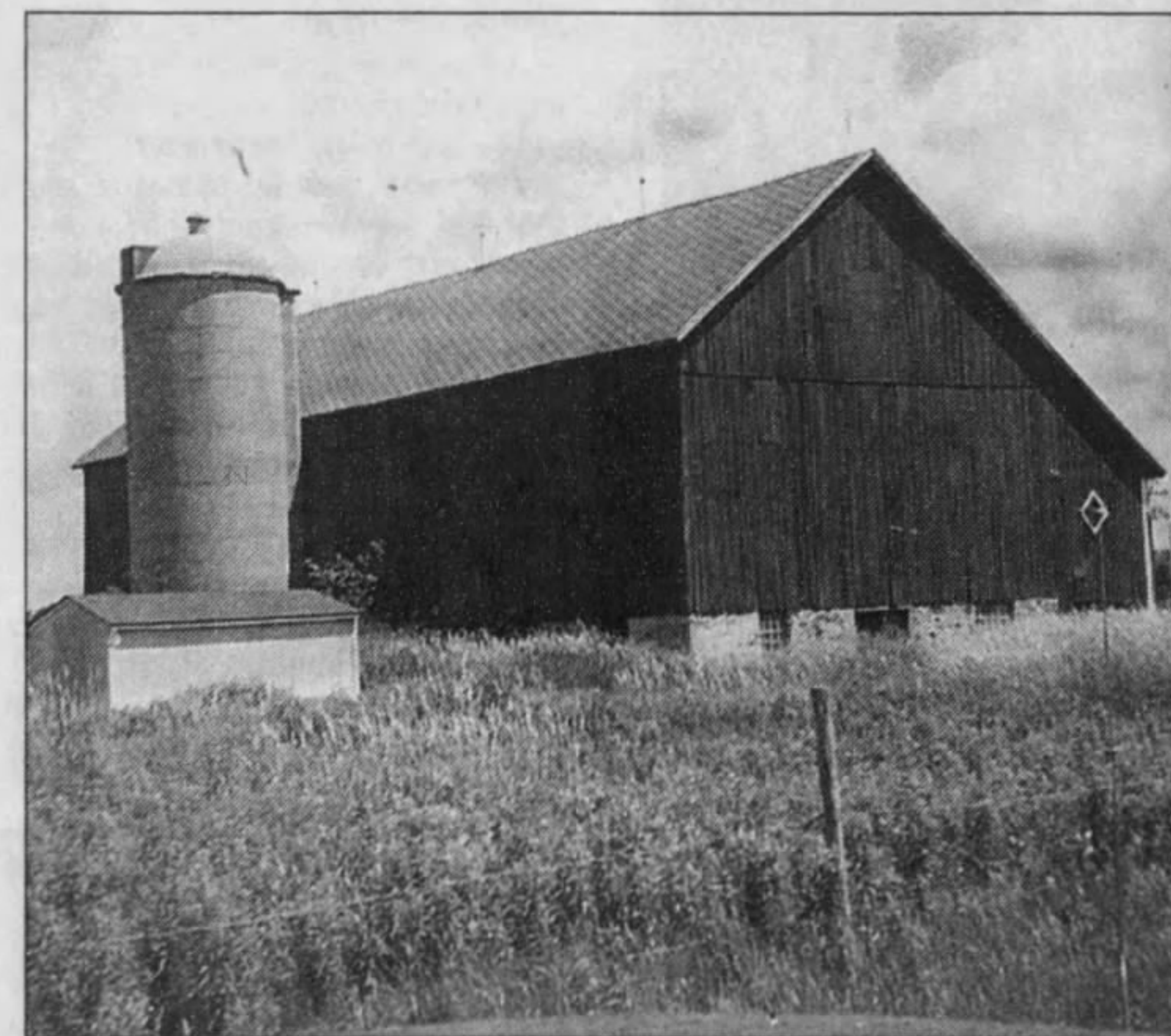
"It's part of who we are in Wisconsin, part of our legacy, part of our heritage," he said. "We're farmers, a lot of us. That was our legacy from the past. We're not a state of primarily wealthy industrialists or people who lived in huge urban areas. We were basically immigrants, miners, farmers, fishermen, small-business owners."

Apps, who spent much of his childhood milking cows in his father's barn, agrees.

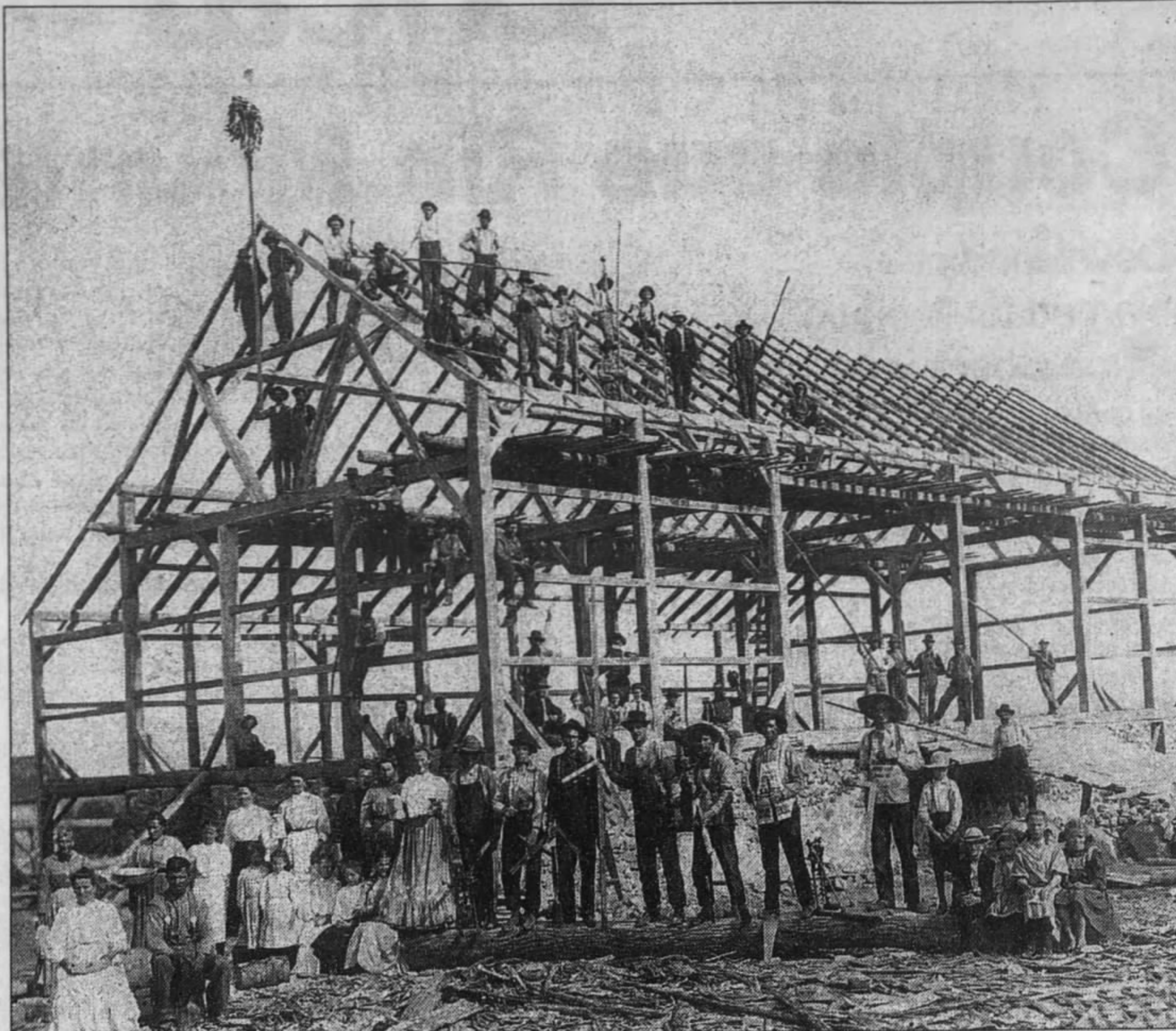
"If you would have asked me the great virtues of barns when I was home on the farm, I suspect you would have gotten a different story than you would have today," he said. "Barns are wonderful, tangible symbols of who we were ... when we lose the symbols of who we were, we lose a little of who we are now."



This barn has a gambrel roof, an architectural development of the post-World War I era. Gambrel-roofed barns provide more storage space under the roof, valued by dairy farmers.



This barn has a saltbox roof, one of the earliest roof types.



A 1910 barn raising on the Herman Grunenwald farm in the town of Scott includes a wreath, hung at the barn's apex. The wreath, made from greens or flowers, is for good luck, said Alice Krueger, president of the Merrill Historical Society.

Whom to contact

For more information on barn restoration, write: Barns — University of Wisconsin-Extension, 610 Langdon St., Room 229, Madison WI 53703, or call 1-608-265-2501.

The state extension service has two pamphlets on barns available for \$2 each from local extension offices.

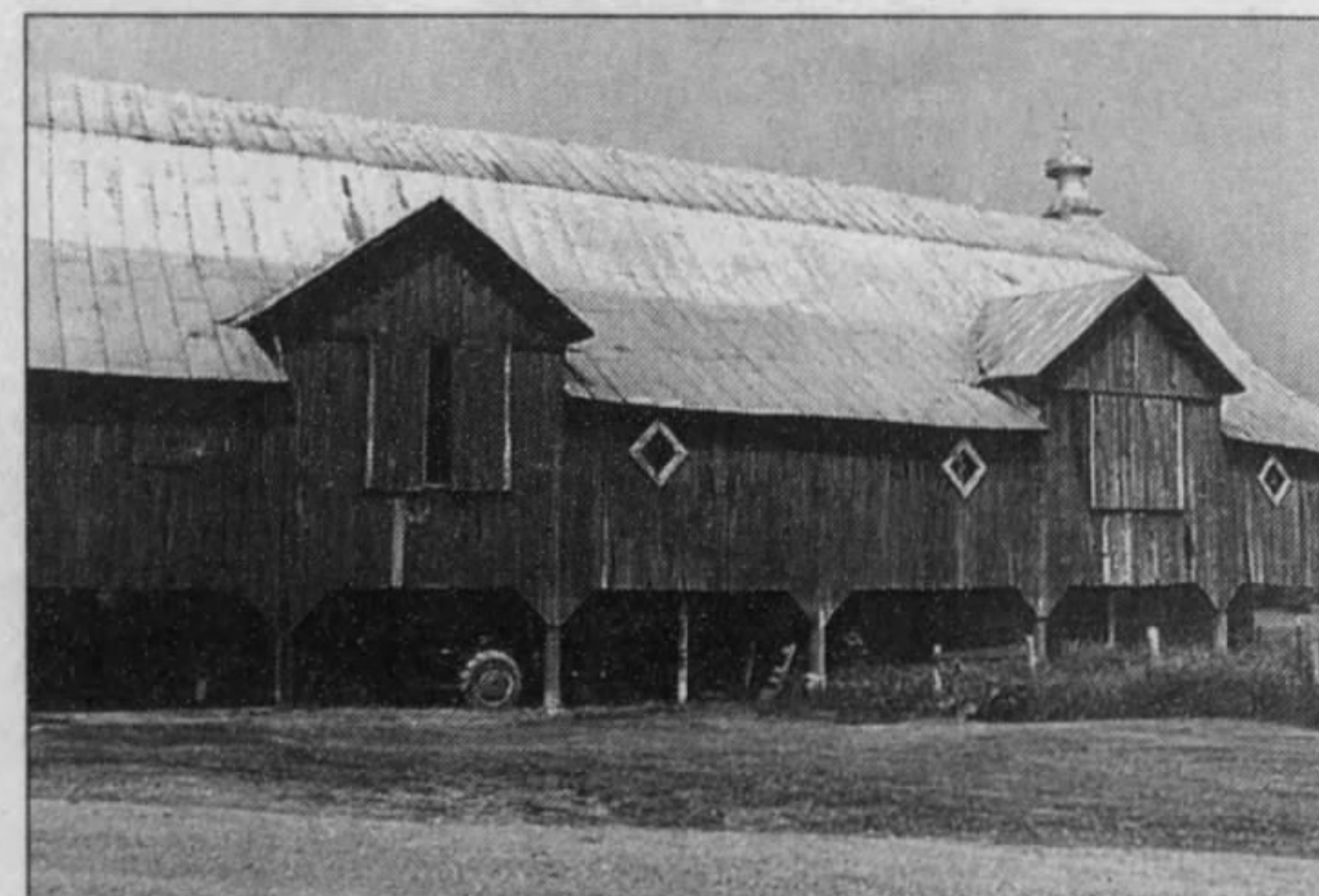
The pamphlets, written by Jerry Apps, author of "Barns of Wisconsin," cover topics including the history and construction of barns and other farm buildings, and the ethnic origins of certain types of barns.



This barn is an example of a round-roofed barn, made possible with advances in laminating wood after World War II, according to Bill Tishler, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Another example of a round-roofed barn in Lincoln County.



This is another example of a barn with a forebay, which, if positioned correctly, could offer shelter from winter winds or shade from summer heat, said William Laatsch, professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

History

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Wisconsin's weather makes this barn especially suitable for people and animals; a southern-facing overhang offers protection from north winds and takes advantage of the scarce winter sun.

"The barnyard would warm up a little more in the winter sun," said William Laatsch, professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

The overhang also provided welcome shade in the summer for both people and animals to enjoy, said Alice Krueger, president of the Merrill Historical Society.

In the Irma and Gleason areas, barns and other buildings tell the story of Estonians and Latvians who settled the region in the late 1800s.

"They had excellent joinery," said Bill Tishler, a professor of landscape architecture at the UW-Madison. "There were tightfitting logs, no chinking between logs and the corner notching was a little more sophisticated than something maybe the Belgians did. The Estonians came from a wood-building tradition and the Irma-Gleason area is far enough north so there was a fair amount of coniferous timber like pine and cedar which was easier to hew."

Besides their ethnic origins, the bigger, two-story barns are an architectural record of Wisconsin's agricultural history, Apps said.

Farmers stored grain or hay on the second floor and kept their dairy cattle on the first floor, a far cry from the days when cows were left to forage in snow-covered fields.

Before Wisconsin became a dairy state, farmers grew grain, and a one-story barn provided enough room to thresh and store the crop. If farmers kept any cows, they roamed outside year-round and gave milk for only part of the year.

These barns, without foundations, had doors on the long sides, that, when opened, allowed the wind to blow the chaff from freshly threshed grain lying on the floor.

"At first, the doors would swing outward," Tishler said. "In the winter, every time you had to swing those doors outward, you had to shovel snow."

Farmers soon figured out that building doors that slid on tracks saved time and aching backs.

As cows — rather than wheat fields — began covering the Wisconsin countryside, large rectangular dairy barns sprang up. Around World War I, farmers began using gambrel roofs, which give barns their distinctive arched silhouette and provide more storage space immediately underneath than do gable roofs, Tishler said.

"(Central Wisconsin) took on dairy farming with great interest and gusto and went right on to build a very serious type of barn," Apps said.

The next stage in barn building came around World War II, when advances in laminating wood at UW-Madison made it possible to make curved beams and barns with smoothly arched, or Gothic, roofs, Tishler said.

"The more quaint, the smaller, more distinctively ethnic barns ... those were more common along the lakeshore, along Lake Michigan and into Door County," Apps said.

These were probably among the first barns built when people found themselves settling a farmstead in autumn, a Wisconsin winter fast approaching, Tishler said.

Round barns are also present in Wisconsin; there's probably one in every county, Apps said. Their origins could be in old stories — the Devil can't corner a person in a round barn — or old science, like the University of Illinois study that said round barns were easier to erect and gave a farmer more space for his money.

Apps' theory is that round barns never took hold in Wisconsin because they would have been at odds with the straight roads, fences and survey lines set out by land ordinances in the late 1700s.

Today, most farmers use metal pole buildings, which are low maintenance and easily customized for uses ranging from livestock stabling to machinery repair, said Deb Folszowski of Morton Buildings.

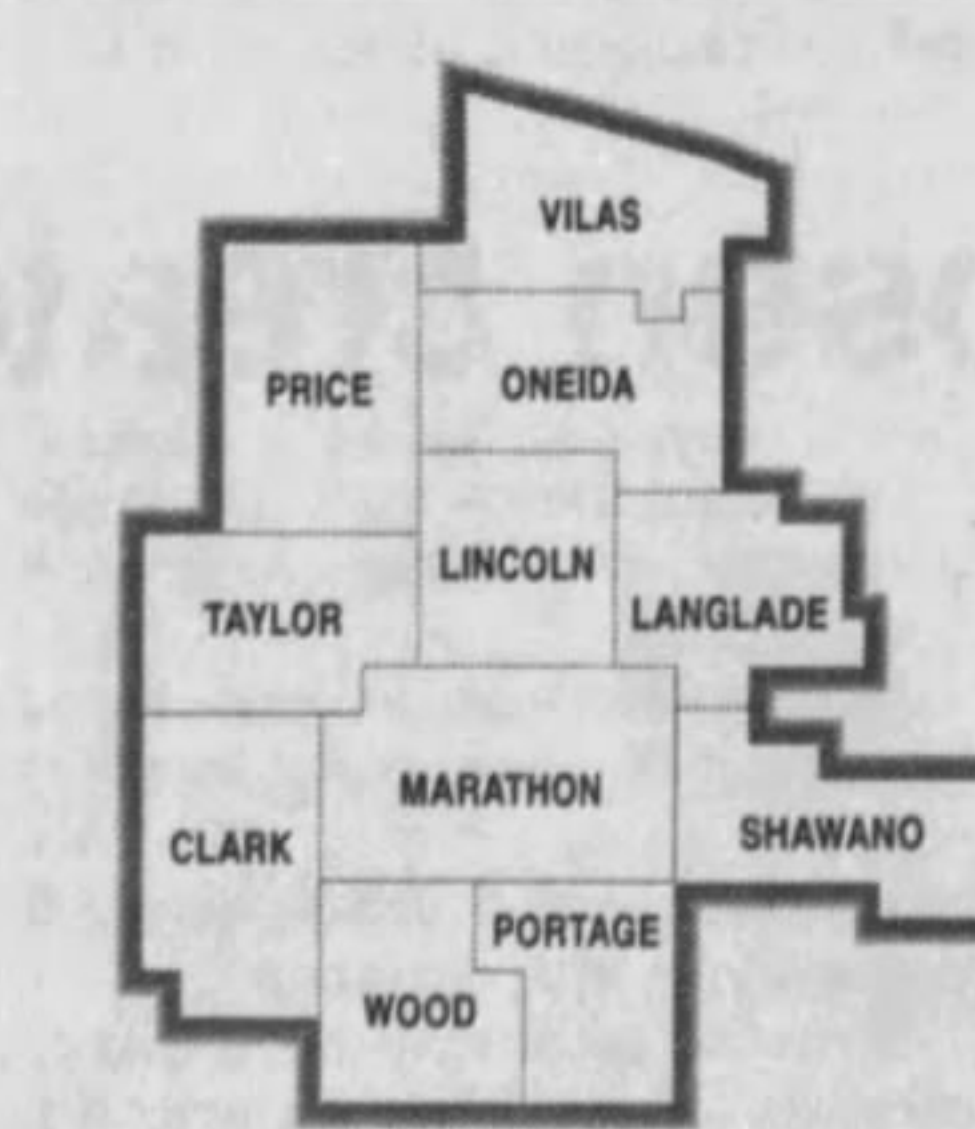
Regional roundup

Oneida County

RHINELANDER — Inmates from the McNaughton Correctional Center near Lake Tomahawk have been shoveling roofs and clearing fire hydrants around Rhinelander since Jan. 11. The group of inmates started shoveling snow off the Rhinelander High School roof Jan. 11 after school officials became concerned with the safety of the snow-loaded roof. They have since been working around northern Wisconsin clearing roofs at the police and fire departments, Woodruff municipal building and Hurley municipal building.

Wood County

WISCONSIN RAPIDS — A Wisconsin Rapids woman's claim that she was falsely imprisoned when she was held for six days at Norwood Health Center has been denied by



Wood County. Emily Nelson filed a civil claim in December against the county after the sheriff's department held her at the health center following a complaint that the woman was suicidal. The claim, which was

denied Jan. 22 by a county committee, alleges that Nelson was assaulted by the arresting officer, subject to ridicule by the Norwood staff and unnecessarily held against her will.

MARSHFIELD — Strand Associates, a consulting firm for Marshfield, recommended to the city that it build a new \$24-million wastewater treatment plant in order to prevent sewage backups and to comply with new sludge storage requirements. The firm made the recommendation after considering four options: upgrading the existing plant, building a new plant, phasing in construction of a new plant, and building a new plant while still using the existing plant for peak flow treatment.

Langlade County

ANTIGO — An Antigo man who is

accused of having sexual contact with a 15-year-old girl, who is now his wife, was released from custody on a \$5,000 bond Jan. 22. Charges were filed in 1995 and were dismissed after they married. The charges were refiled by the district attorney recently after the girl and her husband experienced marital difficulties.

Shawano County

SHAWANO — A group of teenage skateboarders who were restricted to the use of the courthouse parking lot plan to ask the city and county for a paved space for skateboarding and rollerblading. The students are frustrated about the parking lot's bumpy condition and its unavailability until the end of business hours.

SHAWANO — The estate of an Oconto County man shot to death by

Shawano County deputies has filed a \$1 million lawsuit against the three deputies. Reinhold Deering, 69, was fatally wounded Feb. 1, 1995, after deputies returned Deering's gunfire. The summons names deputies James Reich, Paul Schnasa and Michael Wizner.

Clark County

NEILLSVILLE — A Marshfield man who escaped from the Clark County Jail Jan. 7 was arrested Jan. 21 in Dane County after a 13-hour standoff with Madison police. Stephen B. Post, 29, had been released from the jail on Huber privileges and failed to return. Post was found barricaded in a motel in the city, where law enforcement traced threatening phone calls Post made to in-laws in West Bend.

Lincoln County

TOMAHAWK — In a money-saving effort, the Tomahawk Public Library began Saturday to close two hours early on Fridays and remain closed on Saturdays. The move came about to deal with budget constraints after the Tomahawk Finance Committee decided not to increase the library's budget over last year's \$103,000 allocation.

Vilas County

CONOVER — Conover Assistant Fire Chief Robert Martinson died of smoke inhalation Jan. 26 while fighting a fire in his home. After reporting the fire, Martinson apparently went to the roof to clear snow when he fell through the roof and became trapped in the attic.

Compiled by Wausau Daily Herald reporter Ann Ditscheit.