

EAGLE RIVER, WI 54521

Lifestyle

Section B

(715) 479-4421

vcnewsreview.com

Wednesday, January 5, 2022



Still a distinctive sight on Eagle River's North Woods skyline, the circa-1925 M&R Dairy Farm barn complex was repurposed in 1962 as Big Barn Shops, housing 15 shops, restaurants and a bar in the 1960s-'80s. A third barn wing to the south, which

once stood at right, housing the Big Farm Kitchen restaurant, was destroyed in a 1977 blaze. Vacant since the late 1990s, the Big Barn Shops complex awaits a new use for the right deep-pocketed visionary. —Staff Photos By ERIC JOHNSON

Former Big Barn Shops looms large in memories, spurs food for thought

By ERIC JOHNSON
ASST. EDITOR

In recent years, the burgeoning hobby of “urban spelunking” — exploring and documenting derelict, abandoned urban structures long closed to the public — has become all the rage.

From pricey, lavishly illustrated hardcover coffee table books to online websites and YouTube videos, exploring the nation's cadre of modern urban ruins is as close as your fingertips, a page turn or mouse click away.

As a longtime local history and architecture buff, I've dabbled in urban spelunking over the years in a professional capacity, writing about decaying golden age movie palaces, grand dame department stores and ornate brick factories awaiting some deep-pocketed visionary to happen along and fund a creative adaptive reuse. Occasionally, but not often enough, one comes along to happily save the day.

Recently, I found myself doing some rural North Woods spelunking at Eagle River's long idled Big Barn Shops complex, a familiar sight along Highway 45 just north of the World Championship Derby Complex (WCDC).

A favorite Johnson family summer vacation shopping and dining destination in Big Barn Shops' 1960s, '70s and '80s heydays, my curiosity was piqued by my daily round-trip commute past the darkened complex.

Even in its increasingly decrepit state, shuttered Big Barn Shops still cuts

an impressive sight on the North Woods skyline with its distinctive twin wood stave silos and host of decorative rooftop ventilators. During winter sledding action at the neighboring Derby Track, the snow-covered Big Barn offers a picturesque, quintessentially Wisconsin backdrop to the world-class snowmobiling action taking place in its shadow.

Two decades of neglect have taken their toll both inside and out the Big Barn, evident as I tour the facility with Derby Complex operations director Scott Anderson and grounds maintenance manager Keith Numrich. Rain and snow melt leaks in through the hole-pocked roof. Pigeons seeking refuge from the elements fly in through missing window panes. Vivid green moss grows on the main floor carpeting, littered with fallen ceiling tiles and lighting fixtures.

Despite the decay, I look at the idled Big Barn, with its dramatic vaulted hayloft and a roofline still ramrod straight despite the onslaught of time and the elements, and think there has to be a productive next chapter for the historic complex, which has long figured prominently in Eagle River's agricultural and commercial history.

Agricultural showplace

While the Vilas County economy is today based on tourism, many decades ago agriculture was a much larger economic driver, with Vilas County home to a number of dairy, vegetable and potato farms.

Among the county's leading agricultural operations



With its vaulted ceiling, the upper level hayloft in the former Big Barn Shops in Eagle River once housed an art gallery, youth game arcade and popular local bar.

was Mathieson and Rasmussen's 381-acre M-R Guernsey Dairy Farm, located one mile north of downtown Eagle River at 1692 Highway 45.

M-R Dairy Farm's historic barns — two large north and south barns linked by a third connecting barn — were built in 1925-'26 and long served as a showcase of Vilas County's post-logging agriculture heritage, home to prize-winning Guernsey milk cows and powerful Percheron draft horses. A piglet nursery was later added to the farm's operations.

After sitting idle for several years after M-R ceased

operations in 1955, the expansive farm saw new life thanks to the adaptive reuse efforts of two local visionaries — Eagle River real estate broker Harry Pride and downtown merchant John Morley — who joined forces as P-M, Inc. to creatively redevelop M-R Dairy Farm as Vilas County increasingly pivoted to a tourism-based economy.

Adaptive reuse

Plans were floated in February 1961 for the \$2.5 million redevelopment of a sizable portion of the expansive M-R farm, bounded by Highway 45, Duck Lake Drive, McKinley Boulevard and Yellow Birch Lake.

Plans announced by P-M, Inc. included an ambitious “Disneyland-type project” theme park, Pleasure Island (1962-'86), and the adaptive reuse of the historic 9,000-square-foot M-R Dairy barns as Big Barn Shops, which combined dining and independent small retailers under one roof as the first and “most unusual shopping center in the north.”

At the time, Morley said the finished project would be the largest single attraction of its type in the Midwest, predicting some 130,000 annual visitors to Pleasure Island's Fairy Tale Hill and old west-styled Eagle Pass theme parks, and an estimated 225,000 shoppers and 75,000 diners patronizing Big Barn Shops, patterned by Morley after a successful barn conversion shopping center at Sister

To BIG BARN, Pg. 3B



Fallen ceiling tiles, discarded display cases and other debris fill the ground floor main hallway at Eagle River's Big Barn Shops, where a carpet of moss now covers the old man-made

carpeting. From its 1962 opening to its late-1990s closure, the rustic 9,000-square foot Big Barn Shops was an early North Woods mall forerunner. It awaits adaptive reuse.

Open Mic Lab event set Jan. 7 at The Warehouse

The Warehouse Community Arts Center's monthly Open Mic Lab event will take place Friday, Jan. 7 from 7 to 9 p.m., hosted by local musician Amber Beth.

Held on the first Friday of every month, Open Mic Lab events are open to the public and provide opportunities for artistic sharing and experimental performance including, but not limited to: comedy, film, music, poetry, storytelling and theater. Pieces do not need to be finished or perfected to participate.

Those interested in performing are encouraged to sign up for a time slot on The Warehouse website at eagle-riverart.com/events/open-mic-lab-the-warehouse-7/.

This free, family-friend-

ly event is also virtually live streamed from The Warehouse Art Center Facebook page at facebook.com/WarehouseArtCenter.

“Stop by and enjoy the live, local entertainment and friendly atmosphere,” said Angela Badeau, creative arts coordinator for The Warehouse.

The Warehouse's Inspiration Bar will be open and drinks will be available for purchase.

The Warehouse is located at 107 S. Railroad St. in downtown Eagle River.

This event is part of the Warehouse's weekly Friday music series. More information can be found online at eagle-riverart.com/calendar-of-events/.

VFW plans blood drive in Eagle River

The Community Blood Center will hold a blood drive Thursday, Jan. 13, 2022, from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at Veterans of Foreign Wars, located at 418 W. Pine St. in Eagle River.

Blood donors must be at least 17 years old (or 16 years old with parental permission), weigh at least 110 pounds, be

in general good health and have a photo ID.

Donors are encouraged to eat a regular meal and drink plenty of fluids prior to giving blood.

In order to keep physical distance between donors, appointments are requested. To make an appointment, call The Community Blood Center at 1-(800) 280-4102.

Not that you asked, but...

By Eric Johnson



‘Welcome Home Tree’

“Ye cannot see the wood for the trees.”

—English dramatist John Heywood, 1546.

It's often been said that one can't see the forest for the trees — they're not seeing the big picture for their myopic, tunnel-visioned focus on minutiae.

But in my case, I may very well consider that comment a compliment, for I see the one eye-catching pine in the midst of Wisconsin's Northern Highland-American Legion (NHAL) State Forest, the state's largest legacy forest at more than 236,000 acres.

Since moving to the North Woods 15 years ago, my way-finding sights have been set on what I've come to call the “Welcome Home Tree,” a towering red pine on the eastern side of Highway M as I head home northbound for Boulder Junction. It's bottle brush greenery reaching for the expansive northern sky just south of a gentle bend in the highway that leads to a straight stretch heading toward downtown Boulder Junction — once I see the Welcome Home Tree I know it's only minutes to home and hearth.

For five generations running from my Great-Grandpa Aschauer to my own children in their youth, the tree stood as a welcoming sentinel that a much-anticipated summer vacation arrival in Boulder Junction was just around the curve, whether chugging into town on the Milwaukee Road or arriving by a DeSoto, Oldsmobile or Dodge.

Why my fondness for this one particular tree out of the millions, billions or perhaps trillions of trees populating the NHAL? It's hard to say.

Why did I fall in love with my wife, Barbara? Why do I prefer Coke over Pepsi? Why do I love Rex Stout “Nero Wolfe” detective mysteries? Why do I favor pepperoni, onion and banana pepper as my go-to pizza toppings? Why do I split my baseball loyalties between the rival Brewers and Cubs? Why do I love traditional Milwaukee crullers, while I could be chased around the block with the pumpkin spice crullers and red velvet crullers that make their unwelcome visit around the holidays?

I suppose part of it could be attributed to decluttering guru Marie Kondo's amorphous “does it spark joy” benchmark, but mostly it's just a shoulder-shrugging “IIIIIIII dunno” in my best Lou Brown imitation from “Major League.” I just do.

But that being said, I suppose part of my affection is a respectful awe that the Welcome Home Tree is one of the lucky designated survivors of modern forest

To JOHNSON, Pg. 2B

LIFESTYLE

Big barn: adaptive reuse for state barns

FROM PAGE 1B

Bay in Door County.

Big Barn Shops made its grand opening debut on June 23, 1962, while Pleasure Island opened its gates a week later on June 30. A crowd estimated at more than 1,500 attended Big Barn Shops' grand opening ribbon-cutting despite inclement weather.

The north and connecting barns housed a variety of small gift, toy and sportswear shops on the ground level, including more than 16 different retailers at Big Barn Shops' peak of popularity. The upper level of the barns, with their dramatic soaring timbered ceilings, housed the Haymow Art Gallery, kid-magnet Hayloft Arcade, and The Loft, a popular local bar that hosted a number of legendary Saturday night "Derby Fling" parties in the run-up to WCDC's headlining Sunday championship sled races.

The south barn, a literal stone's throw away from the Derby Track, was dedicated to leased restaurant operations, originally anchored by The Blue Ox Inn, a family-style restaurant managed by the Tonne Family, operators of the popular Paul Bunyan's Cook Shanty logging camp-styled restaurants in Minocqua (1961) and Wisconsin Dells (1958). Blue Ox Inn was later replaced by the family-style, all-you-can-eat Big Farm Kitchen.

The south barn was destroyed in a dramatic 9:40 a.m. blaze on July 2, 1977, leveled in about 40 minutes.

Retail and post-fire restaurant operations at Big Barn Shops lasted into the late 1990s, when the facility went dark.

Tom Anderson, chief executive officer of the 30-acre Derby Complex, said WCDC's investor group, which took ownership of the Big Barn Shops complex in August 2018, has no plans for the long-idled Big Barn.

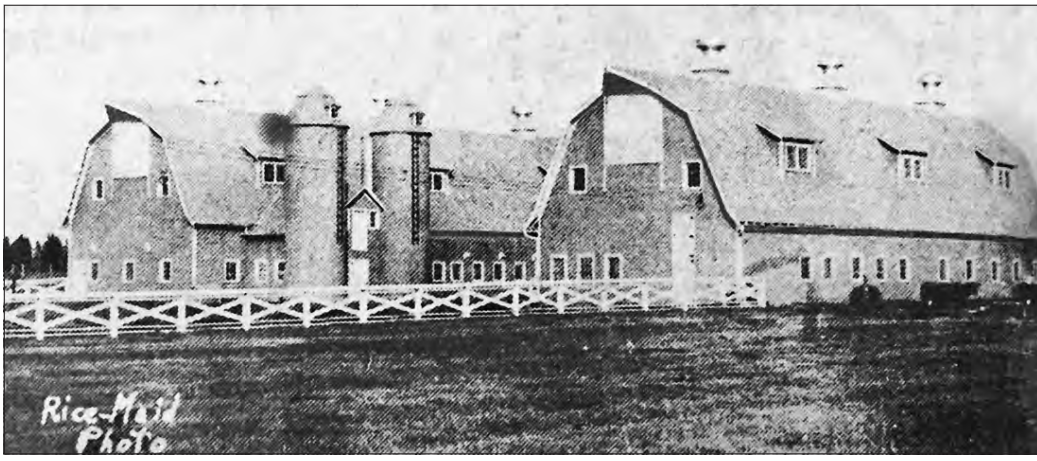
"The only thing using it is the pigeons," Anderson said of Big Barn Shops. "It's a great piece of history. In one respect we'd like to see it retained, however it's deteriorated way, way beyond what we feel is salvageable. It's a shame to see it go downhill, but it served its purpose."

That being said, Anderson said the WCDC investor group "certainly would" entertain offers from parties interested in rehabbing and repurposing Big Barn Shops for adaptive reuse.

"We're open to anybody wishing to purchase it," said Anderson. "We're open to any kind of options."

Next act?

As it turns out, I'm not the only one with fond, nostalgic memories of Big Barn Shops and Big Farm Kitchen in their halcyon days — and a mind awash with possibilities for the complex's adaptive reuse.



Looking northeast, Eagle River's Big Barn Shops complex as seen in 1932 when it operated as the M-R Gue Karen Sailer, president of the Guern-

sey Dairy Farm. The expansive agricultural complex was built in 1925 on a 301-acre site along Highway 45 North, one mile north of downtown. — Contributed by Lawrence Anderson

Another kindred spirit is nonprofit Eagle River Historical Society.

"I remember going to the Big Barn Shops and eating dinner over there," recalls Sailer. "It was fun. Everyone seemed to enjoy it. I think it's much missed. Everyone is very nostalgic about it. It prompts memories. People have these very treasured stories."

And like me, where others see decay and ruin at Big Barn Shops, Sailer, who toured the facility two years ago, sees opportunity for the right visionary.

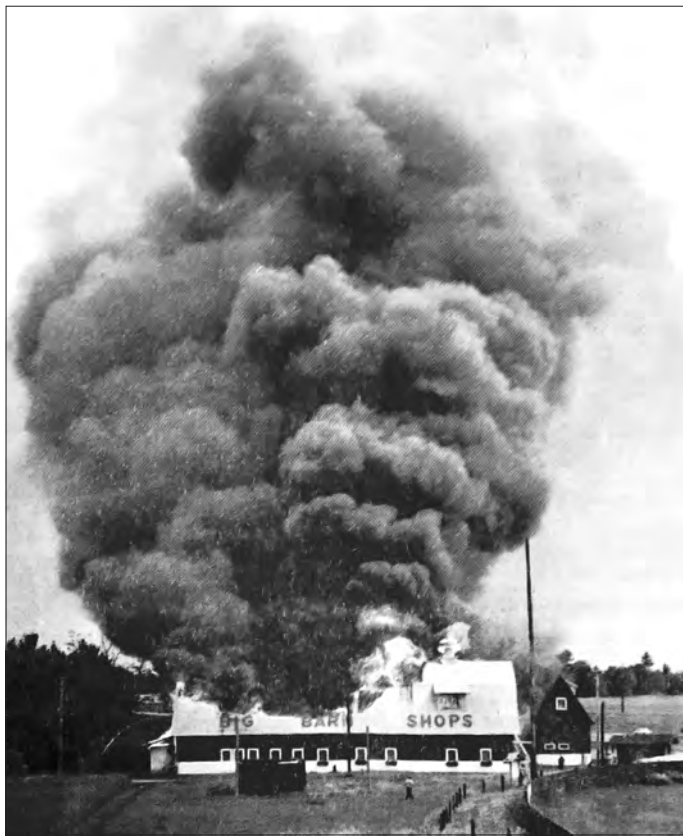
"It's sad," she said. "Wouldn't it be nice to see it restored? I'd love to see it preserved, but I'm also a realist about what I know would have to go into it. It would have to have economic potential to make it happen. I think if you had the right people committed to the idea, it could be done. With enough money, anything can be done. It could be all kinds of things. But whether there are the people out there who are committed enough to invest without expecting to get a three-year return on their money would be another question. If someone wants to start selling stock and do it, I'm in, I'll buy some."

Online, it's easy to find dozens of idled old barns across the state that have been repurposed for a variety of commercial uses — restaurants, lodging, retail stores and, most commonly, combination wedding, event, conference, party and concert venues.

Rustic chic The Barn Restaurant in Prairie du Chien is housed in an early 1980s barn restoration.

"It's fun to watch people who have never been here before," said Crawford County restaurateur Drew Hager, who has leased The Barn since 2011. "It's fun to see their reaction. People are pretty amazed. People enjoy it."

The Barn's restaurant, bar and banquet facility operations have been so successful that numerous harmonizing additions using repurposed materials scavenged from demolished barns have been added onto the original 2,500-square-foot barn, which now encompasses a 16,000-square-foot facility.



A 9:40 a.m. July 1, 1977 blaze destroyed the south barn restaurant wing at Big Barn Shops, seen looking north from the Derby Track. A concrete block firewall and the efforts of area firefighters saved the remainder of the complex. —News-Review Archive

Hager is a big believer in repurposing old Wisconsin barns.

"You just can't recreate the original feel of the barn, with the old wood and hand-hewn construction," he said. "It's a unique atmosphere that you just can't create brand new. It's like an antique. You just relish it."

Another believer in the adaptive reuse of old barns is Irene Buechler of Belgium in Ozaukee County, co-owner of The Barn at Buechler Farms with her husband, Brian. Between 2015-2017, the couple restored their 105-year-old barn and granary and a 1970s addition into a popular three-season wedding, event, conference and concert venue.

"We've grown so fast — it's been taking off like wildfire," she said of The Barn, which has expanded to include a bridal suite, an outdoor deck and a beer garden among other amenities. "People love it, they absolutely love it. Its rustic and chic, very laid back, very airy. There've been lots of compliments. They love the whole idea of what we're doing. People have started getting away from those banquet-style ballrooms. It's unique and special, not cook-

ie-cutter. It's got character. It's different. It's got some history to it. Things aren't being built the way they used to be anymore."

While there are many success stories out there, restoring an old barn for adaptive reuse is not an undertaking for the faint of heart or thin of wallet.

Just ask Gordon Kingston, owner of Antiques at Gordons in Grafton, who restored a century-old 5,000-square-foot Ozaukee County barn in 1980 to house his upscale antiques business.

"It is not an easy process," he said. "These buildings are a pain in the *** to work with. You start pulling on a string and you don't know how many knots are going to show up. These barns are durable as hell, but it's expensive. It costs a ton of money."

Still, looking back, he fondly recalls the six-month restoration as a "fun project," working alongside his now-late father to rehab "an old barn into a very fine venue."

Kingston is familiar with the "great big honker" Big Barn Shops complex in Eagle River, having exhibited at numerous antique shows staged in the Derby Complex Expo Hall.

"That could be a great building," he said of Big Barn Shops' adaptive reuse potential. "It's in one hell of a good location, sitting right off the highway."

Pines seeks nominations for Alumni Hall of Fame

The Northland Pines School District Alumni Hall of Fame Committee is seeking nominations for the 2022 induction.

The Alumni Hall of Fame was created with two thoughts in mind — the first is to recognize the outstanding accomplishments of Northland Pines and/or Eagle River Union High School alumni. The second is to bring to the forefront outstanding role models for current and future student bodies.

The Northland Pines Alumni Hall of Fame Committee is asking community members to submit a nomination form if they know an outstanding alumnus who has been out of high school for at least 20 years. They are also accepting nominations for individuals who have contributed to the school district's success in ways other than being a student. Nominees may also include teachers, secretarial or custodial personnel, etc.

The deadline for the 2022 class nominations is Jan. 31. The nomination forms are available at Northland Pines High School and online at npsd.k12.wi.us/schools/high/about-us/alumhalloffame.cfm.

The Northland Pines Alumni Hall of Fame Committee was founded in 2007 and inducted its first group of individuals in the spring of 2008. There are currently 31 outstanding members from all parts of the United States who have been inducted thus far.

Anyone interested in the Alumni Hall of Fame can visit the designated Alumni Hall of Fame area located just inside the main entrance of the Northland Pines High School. Each inductee plaque includes his/her picture and a list of his/her contributions to society.

For more information, contact Scott Foster, Northland Pines School District administrator, at (715) 479-6487 opt. 3, ext. 1, or email sfoster@npsd.k12.wi.us.

YMCA offers membership specials for the new year

The YMCA of the Northwoods in Rhinelander is offering promotions for new and existing members to save on memberships in the coming months.

Through Jan. 7, existing members can invite their friends to join the YMCA for both parties to save 50% off membership fees for three months, or two new members can sign up together to take advantage of the offer.

Another promotion going on now through Jan. 12 is the "Pay the Day" membership discount promotion. Those joining the YMCA during the promotion will have their membership fee adjusted according to the day they join.

"You can stop by, take a tour of our facility, and when you take out a membership your joiner's fee is waived and your first month's membership is equal to the day you join," said YMCA of the Northwoods Membership Coordinator Danielle Larsen. "Why join the Y? With programs from A to Z like athletics to after school care, dance classes to disease prevention, volleyball to volunteerism, we don't just strengthen individuals, we strengthen our community. Everyone deserves the chance to live a healthy lifestyle. At the Y, no one is ever turned away based on the inability to pay. Call today and see how we can help you reach your fitness goals."

Other promotions include a special for college students during winter break with a 30-day membership for \$30. A \$25 deposit for a key fob which provides 24-hour access is due at sign up but will be refunded when the key fob is returned.

A new young adult membership also is available at a cost of \$29.50 per month for 18- to 29-year-olds. This new membership reflects a savings of \$14 per month off regular adult membership cost.

"The Y is more than just a building or treadmill, the Y is here for the community," Larsen added. "When you join the Y you help youth learn aquatic safety, give parents a chance to role model a healthy lifestyle, and give all in our community a place to belong."

For more information, contact the YMCA at (715) 362-9622, visit ymcaofthenorthwoods.org or stop in to the facility located at 2003 E. Winnebago St.

God's Gathering Place plans seminar Jan. 22

God's Gathering Place in Conover will host Pastor Dan Waters of Iron River, Mich. to present his seminar, "Making Sense of the Old Testament" at the church Saturday, Jan. 22.

Participants will learn how all of the events of the Old Testament fit together to tell the story of God's love, mercy and grace, according to organizer Donna Goddaeus. The seminar will run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. with a light lunch provided from noon to 12:45 p.m.

A free will offering for missions is suggested. The event is free and everyone is welcome.

Registration is required by Sunday, Jan. 16, and can be completed by calling Bill Lochte at (715) 891-6096.

Waters has served 45 years in the Pastorate, including 25 years as pastor of Iron River Bible Church. He earned his degrees at Grace Theological Seminary and Dallas Theological Seminary with additional studies at Northland International University and Central Baptist Seminary.

God's Gathering Place is a non-denominational Bible church located at 720 Highway 45.



In 2017, this 105-year-old barn at Belgium in Ozaukee County was restored and transformed into The Barn at Buechler Farms, a popular

three-season wedding, event, conference and concert venue.

—Contributed Photo

Lots and lots and lots
...of jigsaw puzzles in stock now.

(including our exclusive Eagle River
Ice Castle puzzles!)

Grandma's Toy Box Eagle Craft & Hobby
Downtown Eagle River (715)-477-2227 Open every day at 10:00a.m.