

Mary O’Leary’s Cabin

By Mike Cowan

If walls could speak, what a story these would tell. Mary O’Leary’s Cabin holds a treasury of Wisconsin’s history within its hand-hewn log walls. Families lived here – probably generations’ worth of the state’s earliest 19th century settlers.

Grain or other feed was possibly stored here, as those families became better off and moved from the cabin into newer clapboard homes. And eventually, families left here, abandoning the cabin altogether as a practical structure.

Even as the cabin was dissembled with each log cataloged and numbered, its journey wasn’t finished. The latest leg brought the logs from their original location near West Bend, Wisc., north of Milwaukee, to Silverthorn Road just outside of Shullsburg, Wisc., where they were painstakingly put back together and chinked with mortar.

Now the cabin stands reconstructed on property owned by Donna and Jerry Shepherd as an extension of Tailings Country Store, the shop Donna has owned and operated in Shullsburg for the past 18 years. “We’re preserving a little piece of Wisconsin history,” Donna said. “I can’t believe how lucky I am that I get to be part of something like this.”

Mary O’Leary’s Cabin was named for Donna’s mother. The quaint old cabin houses antiques, primitives and folk art that are for sale during special events like the old-fashioned “Fall Gathering Days”, in September and the upcoming Cabin Christmas weekend November 14 and 15.

But these events offer so much more than a unique shopping experience—they also provide a link to the past. The walls of the cabin may not actually talk, but they do speak in their own way. “The cabin has little quirks and it makes noises,” Donna said, recalling a day when the cabin first went up, before the insulation had been added.

“It was a blustery day and the wind was howling through the walls the way it must have 100 years ago. You really feel an appreciation for how difficult life had been back then.” Donna is eager for others to experience the cabin as well; she has plenty of plans for its future use that extend beyond shopping.

For example, Donna welcomes visits by school groups so children can see how early Wisconsin settlers lived. She is considering cabin rental for classes or retreats, and has even had it outfitted as a lodging facility for future guests.

For Mary O’Leary’s Cabin information, call 608-965-3220 or go to:
www.tailingscountrystore.com