

Barn Quilts of Lafayette County History

“Growing up in West Virginia, Donna Sue Groves and her family would play a simple game of counting the barn advertising signs, such as Chew Mail Pouch, See Rock City, Seven Caves, Natural Bridge and Drink R.C. Cola on long road trips. They would use the different styles of barns such as Bank, Round, Crib and Tobacco as part of the automobile game. During vacations, she delighted in watching for the colorful geometric Hex signs scattered throughout Pennsylvania. Her family used barn watching as an opportunity for family discussions, a way to pass the long hours riding in the car, and as a history lesson.”¹

When Donna Sue and her mother purchased a farm in Adams County, OH with a tobacco barn, Donna Sue promised that one day she would paint a quilt square on the barn for her mother who loved quilts and barns. Donna Sue, serving as a Field Representative with the Ohio Arts Council, saw firsthand the power of public murals. The empty barn walls she saw as she traveled throughout the Ohio River Valley seemed an opportunity to create public art, foster community pride, support community self expression and serve as a catalyst for economic development as a tourism destination.

In 2001, Donna Sue finally painted that barn quilt for her mother. And with one, why not more? Why not start a driving trail for tourists through Adams County benefiting local businesses and artists? Why not engage community members and celebrate the farming and quilting heritage of their area? The idea caught on like wild fire as word spread to other communities who asked if they could participate, much to Donna Sue’s delight. All that she asked in return was that each new community remember the purpose of her project – an honor to her mother.

The reason for the rapid acceptance of the concept is the same wholesome philosophy Groves envisioned at one time to be just a single tribute. The squares not only honor the wife of every farmer where they appear, they also recognize the rural heritage that has been a part of the fabric of America since Colonial times.

Today, there may be as many as 1500 barn quilts on barns and other significant community structures in counties in Iowa, Illinois, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Maryland and Missouri with the intent of covering the states with a “Clothesline of Quilts”. Although the projects may be similar in concept, each project is unique in expressing the individual community values, vision, heritage and culture. Each grass roots community project captures the spirit of using “art” for community celebration and economic development.

Our local project began when a community member saw a barn quilt on a local highway between Galena, IL and Hazel Green, WI. Intrigued, she started making plans for her own barn quilt. She must have talked about the project enough that her own adult children made

¹ <http://www.randesignscustomjewelry.com/history.html> 1/11/2008

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her a barn quilt as a surprise Christmas gift. This inspired her to start a local barn quilt project so she contacted the Lafayette County Extension Office in early January, 2008. About that same time, two other local women had been to a quilting bee where they learned about a barn quilt project starting in neighboring Green County. They also were excited about the prospect of spreading the project throughout Lafayette County.

Lafayette County conducted a Needs Assessment in November, 2007. Stakeholders were asked to answer questions regarding challenges the County will face in the future. When asked, "What five challenges do you see facing residents of Lafayette County over the next 5 years?" many respondents replied in terms of working together to promote Lafayette County. Answers included statements like "keeping towns vibrant," "instilling a sense of pride in the county," "entice new residents and visitors to the county," "maintaining the visual beauty of the area and preserving its predominantly agricultural character," "tourism development," "encouragement and support for artistic and cultural ventures and events," and "maximizing local potential."

The UW-Extension Office, Lafayette County 4-H Leaders and Home and Community Education (HCE) groups had long been discussing ways to work together on an inter-generational, county-wide project. So in January, when the groups were approached about the idea of a barn quilt project throughout Lafayette County, they were enthusiastic at the opportunity to share and learn together. Meetings were held with leaders to start laying out plans. By May 1st, objectives were agreed upon, a logo chosen, committees formed (policy, finance & funding, fair, production and publicity), local grants applied for, news articles released, and one barn quilt was in production! What great progress in such a short time.

The objectives of our project, **Barn Quilts of Lafayette County (BQLC)** are to bring families and local organizations together to celebrate and promote the culture and history of Lafayette County; call attention to the unique architecture and history of barns and other buildings; promote quilting as an emblem of area art, culture and history; stimulate economic development of our rural communities; and increase the value of our rural heritage. As Donna Sue Groves, the Ohio founder of barn quilts said, "The barn quilts are public art that celebrates the place people call home. They make people feel good about themselves and where they live."

To accomplish these goals, we plan to develop two tracks for barn quilts: 1. The traditional track of strategic locations with potential funding; and 2. An independent track for those who want to fund, build and paint their own. To educate and involve Lafayette County community members, we will ask county art teachers to have their students participate in a quilt square coloring contest of selected quilt blocks picked by our committee; have a booth and quilt block painting bee at Cinco de Mayo Days in Darlington, at the Lafayette County Fair, June 25-29 - have a booth, and be actively working on at least one barn quilt which will be mounted on a

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county fairground building and have an “I Spy” for kids focused on finding quilt blocks throughout the fairgrounds; have a minimum of 6 (six) barn quilts on display on buildings **throughout** the county by year’s end; take advantage of opportunities to encourage barn quilts as they arise such as a quilt show; and advertise the project with brochures placed in businesses throughout Lafayette County and through a website.

We are modeling our project after successful projects in Iowa. BQLC has purchased the Best Practices Manual developed by Grundy County, Iowa which has a well developed barn quilt project. The official barn quilts logo has also been purchased and trademarked as “Barn Quilts of Lafayette County”. Similar projects have generated upwards of 50 county barn quilts within 3-5 years – we foresee comparable results due to the local appeal and enthusiasm.

Success will be measured by interest generated in this project. The Lafayette County UW-Extension office will work with a broad range of partners to facilitate the project. Besides the Lafayette County 4-H Clubs, and the Lafayette County HCE Clubs, potential partnerships include community chamber-type groups, church organizations, local businesses, area school districts, Center for Community Economic Development Specialists, UW-Platteville (including Continuing Education, ArtsBuild, Local Fare, Communication Dept, Industrial Tech Dept., Pioneer Farm), Southwest Technical College, Blackhawk Technical College, and interested individuals.

Quilts are a symbol of the heritage of our rural county. They provided not only warmth and comfort, but a social opportunity and artistic outlet for generations. Barns are recognized as rural assets and traditional farm architecture. Barn quilts intertwine two historic threads of our rural heritage. When quilt designs are painted on an 8' x 8' piece of plywood and hung on a barn, they're enjoyed by everyone who drives by and carve new trails for rural tourism. What better way to celebrate the culture and history of Lafayette County than to bring community members and families together to create their own Barn Quilts!

We are confident that these barn quilts will enhance the sense of community pride felt by all Lafayette County residents. At the same time, the project will serve to attract visitors from other areas of the state and country into the rich farmland of our county, to “go barn storming” and take advantage of the beautiful scenery, wonderful restaurants, specialty shops, and other amenities the county has to offer. And we will be a part of Donna Sue Grove’s long range hopes to create a "National Clothesline of Quilts" stretching across the nation.