

Rebuilding after fire, board by board

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Contributing Writer

On September 28 of last year, a 161-year old treasure was lost to Calhoun County. The enormous old barn at Southern Exposure, a combination nursery, gift shop, tea room, and restaurant establishment on N Drive North, went up in flames and in no time was gone from this earth.

"When a building is a century and a half old, it's very very dry," says previous owner, neighbor, friend and helper, Bernard Jones. "There's dust in the beams and siding, just like an old grain mill, and it's incredible how fast it bums. Then too, any vacant building will go up faster than one occupied by people or animals. You can walk into a building and feel whether it's alive or dead."

Owners Curtis Whitaker and Scott Stokes took no time to lick their wounds after the conflagration. They immediately got in touch with Terry Stitt of Terry's Barn Restoration in Three Rivers, and arranged for him to bring the assembled parts of an old barn from 20 Mile Road to Southern Exposure and rebuild.

"There's really three barns that went into building one," Stitt explains. "We got the old beams from two other barns in the Colon area just to have enough old wood for this one."

Stitt and crew are putting the old wood on the inside, then adding insulation and exterior siding, which will be painted red. "We started this project on January 20, and we've got to finish soon because they still need to get someone in to do the electrical, plumbing, heating and decorating in time for a wedding at the end of March," Stitt explains. "I've got a crew of three plus several relatives working four days a week, and we're going to make our deadline--unless the weather gets too bad."

Terry's Barn Restoration crew have worked on barns all over the state of Michigan. "We take them down, build them up and remodel them," he says. "Once we moved an old barn from Centerville to Cheboygan for a horse vet. By the time we finished, he had about \$140,000 in that barn."

The new barn will only be half as large as the barn that was lost, but it will be better insulated and, no doubt, more fire resistant. The old corn crib and hog house--and even a couple of outhouses--remain from the old farm, however, and because of these other buildings, Southern Exposure has been able to remain partially open through it all. If you call 962-1225, you can still set up workshops, bridal showers and receptions, for the spring season.

Because of the looming threat of war, owners Whitaker and Stokes, respectively a colonel and a major in the Air Force, are gone a lot of the time and are often even incommunicado for long stretches. But Jones and Jan Lauener, events coordinator, are holding things together.

"We went from the darkest day of the fire to now," says Lauener, as she looks out of the window of the old corn crib, which is now the restaurant. "It makes your heart sing to see the building go up like this."

Jones, who has 50 years history with the land and the old farm buildings, is still wistful when he looks out the same window. "When I look out there I can still see the old barn."



Workers from Terry's Barn Restoration of Three Rivers assemble parts of an old barn in their effort to help Southern Exposure rebuild.

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Rising from ashes

