



Barn Raisers

Heritage and the Art of Fundraising

by **Bill Armstrong**

It was sometime during the 1990s that I first came across the old Bell Barn in Indian Head. There it stood, still majestic against the prairie landscape despite years of wear and neglect. Built in 1882 as part of a corporate farming venture, the barn is the oldest major agricultural structure in Saskatchewan and one of the few round barns left in the province.

I remember thinking at the time that someone should do something to save it before it fell down. Previous preservation efforts had stalled. Then along came Frank Korvemaker.

A Regina-based archivist and heritage consultant, Korvemaker had been watching the barn's deterioration with dismay. He had been instrumental in mobilizing

community support for the Claybank Brick Plant, now a National Historic Site and Provincial Heritage Property. Although he agonized over moving the barn, he realized that if it were to be saved and used to interpret a fascinating part of Saskatchewan's architectural and agricultural heritage, it would have to be moved to a publicly owned site.

The Bell Farm

The barn's construction in 1882 was part of a grand but short-lived plan to implement corporate farming in the Northwest. The project began as the Qu'Appelle Valley Farming Company, but was soon known simply as the Bell Farm. Covering nearly 260 square kilometres, it was subdivided into 25 smaller farms, each supervised by a manager who reported to Major William R. Bell at the farm's headquarters just north of Indian Head.

In order to support the farming enterprise, the company created the town of Indian Head, erecting a grain elevator, hotel, flour mill and other facilities. Unlike most Prairie town plans, which were laid out parallel to the railway, the street grid for Indian Head was on an

angle to the rail line so that the primary streets led directly from the railway to the Bell Farm.

The project was a state-of-the-art commercial operation. In its first two years, close to \$250,000 was invested—around \$10 million in today's dollars. Over 100 buildings went up, including the Bell Barn. It was the first large-scale round stone horse barn in the North-West Territories.

In 1884, Major Bell also installed the latest in communications technology—a telephone system. By running the lines along the new barbed wire fencing, he was able to keep in contact with the managers of his 25 outlying farms.

The vision did not last long. The North-West Rebellion of 1885, bad weather and failed crops hit the large commercial farming project hard and the experiment failed. Major Bell left the area in 1896. The farm was subdivided into average-sized homesteader farms and sold off. Most of the wooden barns, out-buildings and the main residence were demolished by the 1960s. Only the iconic round stone barn and a few small cottages have lasted into the 21st century.

Withstanding the Test of Time

As early as 1985, engineers determined that the mortar holding the Bell Barn's stones together had lost its adhesive strength. Portions of the wall had given out and been rebuilt with concrete blocks, a serviceable but unsightly solution. By 2005 segments of the north and west walls had totally collapsed and the roof was caving in due to wood rot.

Recognizing the heritage value of this architectural and agricultural landmark, the Heritage Canada Foundation put the barn on its 2006 Top Ten Endangered Places List.

Spurred on by national attention, Korvemaker took action with a letter writing campaign putting forward the idea that the barn be carefully dismantled and rebuilt on public land. Encouraged by the positive response, he quickly called a public meeting in Indian Head, pulling in 120 people.

"It is a now-or-never situation," Korvemaker told the Regina *Leader-Post* newspaper at the time. "This building has maybe a year or two left before a good strong wind knocks it over completely."

◀ **Previous page:** Newly poured concrete floor drying under heat lamps.

Page précédente : Plancher de béton fraîchement coulé séchant sous des lampes chauffantes.

With some facts and figures at hand, Korvemaker was able to present a reconstruction project plan that made sense. An engineering estimate placed the cost of dismantling and rebuilding at about \$600,000, which included a concrete pile foundation that the original design lacked. The Braden family, who owned land next to the Walker farm where the Bell Barn stood, offered to donate a portion of land toward the project.

With about 20 people at the meeting volunteering to work together to make it happen, the project was in motion. The Bell Barn Society of Indian Head was formed with Jerry Willerth at the helm. "I remember going by the barn 30 years ago at least and thinking about rebuilding it then. This looked like a realistic chance to do it," Willerth says.

Born and raised on what was the original Bell Farm, the opportunity held special meaning for him.

Vivian McCall and her husband David also stepped forward that evening. He had been interested in the history of the farm and the barn



Photo: Kay Dixon

for years. With only a few months left in his term as mayor of Indian Head, David was looking for a worthwhile project. His political leadership proved invaluable in securing public land for the barn.

Korvemaker recalls approaching both the Rural Municipality of Indian Head and the Town. "We were seeking an agreement that the barn be owned by one of them, placing it on public land. The Town council agreed, on the condition that no cost be incurred by the town. The society agreed, even though we didn't have two cents to rub together."

▲ The Hon. Lynda Haverstock (left), Honorary Patron of the Bell Barn Society, and Jan Delage, coordinator for individual fundraising activities.

L'hon. Lynda Haverstock (à gauche), patronne d'honneur de la Bell Barn Society, et Jan Delage, responsable de la coordination des activités de financement.



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It Takes a Community

The Bell Barn Society board of directors began meeting regularly and gradually settled down to an active group of about 12 members.

Jerry Willerth, who had served as president of the Saskatchewan Soil Conservation Association, describes the board members as combining the right mix of skills and contacts to move the project forward. In particular, he points to Maurice Delage, a farmer and agronomist who had helped establish the North American operations of the multinational crop production company AgrEvo.

"Maurice knew almost all of the top people in the big agribusinesses on a personal basis," says Willerth. "We needed those people on board and we needed someone like Maurice who could meet with the presidents of these corporations and get the \$50,000 donation instead of the \$1,000 donation through the usual channels."

Willerth remembers sitting with Delage at that first public meeting, both of them coming to the conclusion that the project couldn't be done for \$600,000. Delage volunteered to be in charge of the fundraising committee, but only if the target was raised to a more realistic \$1 million.

The Braden family came through with a two-acre donation of land and an agreement to sell an additional three acres to the society. This allowed the barn to be relocated about 200 metres north of its original site while still remaining on the 1882 farmyard.

◀ Frank Korvemaker in front of the Bell Barn before the reconstruction project began.

Frank Korvemaker devant la grange Bell avant le début du projet de reconstruction.

Raising the Roof and the Money

With these key pieces of the puzzle in place, focus shifted to raising awareness and support. The story of the barn and all that it symbolized to Saskatchewan's agricultural heritage came next. Korvemaker stresses how building community support and attracting donations depended on it.

Indian Head Elementary School teacher Garth Weisbrod saw a great opportunity to bring history to life for his grades 4-5 class. He combined a research and writing assignment with a hands-on construction project: the students created coin boxes in the shape of miniature barns made of tin cans and pebbles, with Popsicle-stick roofs.

"It was easy to work into the curriculum and the kids had fun with it," Weisbrod says.

More than 20 businesses in Indian Head placed the mini-barns by their cash registers, collecting more than \$3,500 in spare change to date. Some of the students recently volunteered to build more barns to replace those lost to wear and tear.

Attracting significant donations would need the voices of credible champions. The project succeeded in recruiting two Saskatchewan celebrities: former Saskatchewan Lieutenant Governor the Hon. Lynda Haverstock (now CEO of Tourism Saskatchewan), who agreed to be Honorary Patron; and renowned Canadian actor Eric Peterson of

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Photos: Dan Loran



Corner Gas fame (and a native of Indian Head), who became Honorary Chair.

The July 2007 first annual dinner-auction proved to be a milestone event. Local MP Andrew Scheer and provincial MLA Don McMorris voiced their support for the project and have participated in all three dinner-auctions. Local agribusinesses stepped up, setting the standard for future events.

"I was amazed by the range of in-kind donations at the first auction," says Vivian McCall. Now it's not uncommon to see companies donate something and then bid in the auction to buy it back."

The black-tie bidding during the second dinner-auction proved lively and lucrative. Corporations with deep pockets pushed revenues from the evening into the \$50,000 to \$60,000 range, an astonishing

amount in a community of about 2,000.

Altogether, fundraisers and other donations—including through the society's website, www.bellbarn.ca—have contributed more than \$450,000 toward the project. McCall notes that many of the mail-in donations have come from people across Canada who grew up in and around Indian Head.

The project also benefited from government grants. Initially, there were frustrations as various federal and provincial programs either ended or suddenly changed their criteria. Ultimately, the form-filling paid off. The federal government came through with \$700,000 in funding from Western Economic Diversification, and about a month later the province's tourism and agriculture ministries added \$50,000 each to the project, recognizing both the project's tourism potential and its role in preserving Saskatchewan's agricultural heritage. This support took the fundraising results over the \$1 million mark.



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Dismantling and Reconstruction

In 2008 the walls of the old barn were carefully taken down, leaving a few stones in place to mark its original location. Meanwhile, the concrete pile foundation was prepared at the new site. Just days after the July dinner-auction, Gracom Masonry's crew began rebuilding the stone walls. With a proper foundation, the renewed barn is expected to last for 100 years.

Fittingly, the last stone was set in place by Frank Korvemaker on September 23. Then the carpenters began re-creating the barn's distinctive wooden roof and cupola,

and other workers moved in to pour the concrete floor. Willerth, who has been on site almost every day since the reconstruction began, watched as the barn was safely secured for the winter.

With the major components of the reconstruction project in place, the society is focused on raising the estimated \$100,000 needed to complete the work. It is also investigating possible sources of funding for an interpretive program to explain the significance of the Bell Farm complex.

Meanwhile, members of the society are excitedly planning for a grand opening event and fourth annual dinner on July 17, 2010. While the end of construction is in sight,

fundraising will continue in order to maintain and operate the site into the future.

“The result is that the Bell Barn has been saved and rebuilt, not as the altered cow barn of the 1920s, but to the original horse barn design that Major Bell erected in 1882,” muses Korvemaker. “Check it again in 300 years to see if we did the right thing.”

Bill Armstrong is a writer and researcher based in Regina. He is also a heritage activist and amateur landscape photographer and historian.

◀ **Top Left:** Gracom Masonry crew responsible for the wall reconstruction pose in front of their work.

En haut à gauche : L'équipe de Gracom Masonry devant son œuvre.

◀ The Bell Barn wall rises as the summer harvest approaches.

Le mur de la grange Bell s'élève alors qu'approche la période des récoltes estivales.

▲ Rendering of the reconstructed Bell Barn according to its 1882 design, along with proposed visitor amenities.

Rendu de la grange Bell reconstruite comme en 1882, avec l'ajout des installations proposées pour l'accueil de visiteurs.