



Willowhaven Interpretive Center

Bourbonnais Township Park District
Whispering Willows Park
1451 N 4000E Road
Bourbonnais, IL 60914

Quilt Block: Duck Paddle – Fannie’s Fan

Original Owners and/or Builders: H.W.G. Folkers

Age of Barn: Originally built in 1903. The barn was located in Jones County, Iowa, on a farm owned for five generations by the Folkers family. The Folkers farmland was originally surveyed in 1837. The longest tenure on the farm was by H.W. G. Folkers, born in 1902 and residing on the farm until his death in 1996.



The barn was donated to the Bourbonnais Township Park District by the Folkers family, dismantled timber by timber, and transported across the state. The barn was then re-assembled and updated on the Whispering Willows Park.

Original Use or Purpose of Structure: Originally the major function of the barn was its use as winter storage of harvested crops which fed the animals during the winter months. Another important role of the barn was to shelter the animals from the elements.

Original Materials and Architecture: The barn was constructed of old growth yellow pine without the use of nails, most likely built by local woodworkers and neighboring farmers in Jones County, Iowa.

The barn’s timber frame was rough hews 12’ x 12’ timbers with wood pegs and mortise and tenon joints. Some yellow pine timbers were as long as 36 feet. The 44’ x 72’ structure had long beams and a hay loft with 1’ x 12’ floor boards.

There are a number of restored 1900's barns in Iowa showing similar architecture. The timbers most likely came from old growth trees found on the Folkers farm in the late 1800's.

Current Owner: Bourbonnais Township Park District

Current Location: The property that is now known as Whispering Willows Park was acquired in 1999 as a donation of seventy acres from the family of Roman "Smitty" Smietanski. The Whispering Willows Park officially opened in 2006 with the completion of the roadway and the Willowhaven Interpretive Center.



Smietanski was well-known in the community and part-owner of S&M Gas Service. Smietanski purchased the land in the mid-eighties. Immediately following the donation of the Smietanski property, the Park District purchased sixty-one acres of land adjacent to it. The acquired land was at one time used for agricultural purposes before it was converted to a more natural setting to attract wildlife.

Barn at Current Location: The barn has been turned into the Willowhaven Interpretive Center, a facility of the Bourbonnais Township Park District. Thanks to master restorationist Bob Przewlocki and his company, Preservation Trades, Inc., the barn was dismantled, transported and reassembled on the Whispering Willows Park. Preservation Trades, Inc. and the Bourbonnais Township Park District helped give this old barn a new lease on life as an updated educational facility. Much of the building is constructed from recycled materials from the concrete floor to the timber framework. Updated with an eco-friendly, geo-thermal heating system, the nature center uses heat from the ground to help save on electric heating costs. From the windows providing large sources of natural light, to the recycled wooded façade, the entire center was designed to be a teaching tool for environmental awareness.



“Preserving the past, enriching the future”, has been the Bourbonnais Township Park District’s motto for over 20 years. Willowhaven Interpretive Center was designed around that motto to become a restored, environmentally friendly facility.

Willowhaven provides a place to discover, learn, and explore the natural splendor of the outdoors. Current exhibits include hands-on display tables with real pelts, feathers, nests and much more. Other displays include microscope tables, children’s reading nook, live animals, wetland, prairie and historical displays high-lighting the history of the interpretive center.

Additional Interesting History/Information: The original barn was typical of the prairie style barns that one of the side bays was a milking parlor for the dairy herd and the other side was for the draft horses.



The section of the barn known as the milking parlor is where the cows were herded into their stalls every morning and night. The cows were milked by hand and fresh milk was poured into a “separator” that separated the cream into one container and the milk into another. The cream was kept cool in water tanks and picked up by local haulers and transported to a nearby creamery

that made and sold butter and other dairy products. The family’s dairy made milk a staple beverage and ice cream a special treat. Later on, with the advent of electricity to rural areas, most dairy farms milked their cows by machine. However, machines for milking were never used on the Folkers farm because the farm converted to growing crops and beef cattle before electricity became available.



In the late 1990’s, the buildings on this family farm no longer provided any real service to the farm operation. The family worked with the farm manager and farm operator to remove some of the smaller buildings to create more workable areas of farmland and removed deteriorating old structures that had become a liability and hazard. It was the owners’ desire

to recycle and reuse as much material as possible. The Folkers family arranged with Mr. Bob Przewlocki of Preservation Trades, Inc. to survey the barn and locate an interested party. The Bourbonnais Township Park District contacted Mr. Przewlocki about the possibility of creating a barn into a nature center a short time later.

As a result, it was most rewarding to the family when the opportunity for another use for this barn was found. The dismantling and reconstruction of the barn was a most exciting project for all those involved.

According to his family, the donation of the building to be used as a public Nature Center is one which H.W.G. Folkers would be especially proud. He truly loved the land, which exemplified his care and conservation practices. We know he would be delighted to see part of his legacy continue for future generations.