**Round Barn memories brings family wedding**

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By Betty Johnson (in her column for the Kiowa County Historical Society)

I told you in an earlier column that there was to be a wedding at the Round Barn in December. By the time you read this, the wedding will be over. It was to take place on December 1, and the following is the story sent to us by Kevin K. Stevenson explaining his desire to me married at the Barn, regardless of the weather.

“South and west of Mullinville, Kansas, stands a majestic round barn with sixteen sides and a beautiful weathervane, out among the fields of waving wheat. The barn is all that remains of what was a picturesque country farmstead built by a Kansas farm family. The barn was built in 1912, was put on the National Register of Historic Places and was completely restored in 1996.

As a child of about twelve years of age, I visited that farm with my grandfather. He wanted me to see that beautiful barn while it was still standing. At that time, it hadn’t been painted in probably half a century, and standing in the loft you could tell that the shingles were slowly washing away in the rains that had fallen on the roof in the years that it had stood there. Gramp was certain that when more of the shingles had fallen away, that the rains would ruin those sturdy beams, and that the barn would fall in upon itself. He lamented the fact that no one cared enough to restore that old barn, and when I asked him why it mattered to him, since it wasn’t his and had never belonged to his family, he turned to me, and with a sparkle in his eye and a smile on his face, told me the story…

“When I was twelve years old, and this barn was new, I got a job working here for the farmer hauling feed to some draft horses that he kept in this barn. I drove a wagon inside through those big doors, and filled the trough in front of each stall with hay. It was the first job my dad let me take, away from our farm, and I worked hard at it. I worked so hard that this farmer kept me on, and when harvest time came, I got to drive the ‘header barges’ where the shocks of wheat were gathered to be fed into the threshing machine.

That summer, the family hired some extra help to cook meals for the harvest crews, including a 10-year-old girl with pigtails who lived at a farm a few miles east of here. She helped cook the meals and wash the dishes, and she worked very hard, too.

The first time I saw her, she smiled at me, I knew I was in love. I teased her about her pigtails, and she laughed, and I knew then I would find my way into her heart. I did… and I married her eight years later.. that 10 year old girl is now your grandmother.”

Suddenly I could see him as a youth of 12, in a straw hat and jeans with suspenders, with his shirt sleeves rolled up, pitching hay out of a wagon into the feed troughs that seconds ago had stood empty before me but which were now full and were being grazed by tall and sturdy workhorses.

As I turned toward the big door, which had been partially open and hanging precariously from their hinges, but which were now brightly painted, fully open and hooked in place, I could see a girl in a flowered dress and pigtails walking gingerly through the doorway. She was holding a glass of lemonade out in front of her, trying to keep from spilling it until she could get it into the hands of this red-headed freckle-faced boy with the big brown spot on his nose who just couldn’t resist teasing her.

I looked into that freckled face, and before me wrinkles appeared around his eyes, his hair turned from bright red to white, and his face became the face of the grandfather I had come to know and love. “This is where I met her.”

I had heard the stories as I grew up, about Grandma cooking breakfasts for eight harvest hands the morning after she was married, seen pictures of her in coveralls driving a steel wheeled tractor pulling a plow, and pictures of her feeding the blind baby pig she kept as a pet.

I touched the weathered and faded but beautiful script from her pen on the back of their marriage license, recording the births of their four children, their childhood illnesses, and the events of their life together.

I saw that beautiful script again in a painstakingly handwritten genealogy that she penned and gave to me when I was eight. And on the inside of the Bible she gave me as a gift a week after John Kennedy died.

The night man first walked upon the moon, after my grandfather had gone to bed mumbling about what foolishness it was, Grandma sat up with me in her hairnet, robe and nightgown, watching those first steps and marveling at how far we’d come.

She said “When I was little, we used to sing a song in school that went, ‘There’s music in the air… there’s music everywhere. We never imagined that in a few years, there would be… but there was, when radio was invented.”

We watched together as Neil Armstrong walked on what she grew up being told was made of green cheese, and heard him talking about it through those same radio waves. When I finally got tired and stumbled off to bed, she scruffed my hair and said, ‘I love you.”

Four years after our trip to that barn, on a windy day in March, I went to my grandfather’s side on the saddest day of his life, the day he lost her.

I will forever have etched in my memory a vision of Gramp and my Uncle Karl hugging each other as they wept together, my grandfather sobbing, “Marna’s gone…” As unbearably sad as that time was, at the same time I felt deep within me how strong his love was for her.

They had been married for 49 years, and I knew as I fought back my own tears that they had loved each other completely for every day of their life together…. through thick and thin, in good times and trying times… they walked together had-in-hand, heart-to-heart.

In time I came to realize that he’d never really lost her… she was alive in his heart and she waited for him in that place where there are no more tears. A few years later he went to her… and I smiled, again through my tears, knowing that they were sitting together somewhere, under the shade of a huge oak tree, her head on his shoulder, his hand on her cheek… and they were talking quietly with each other, laughing every now and then overjoyed to be with one another… forever.

When I’m near the place, I go to that old barn, which now looks as it did when the freckled young man with the muscular arms and the quick wit was pitching hay into the feed troughs.

Someone did care, and they put their hands to saving it.

I stand in the doorway and look toward the stalls, and when I close my eyes I can hear the rustle of a flowered dress, the crackling of footsteps in fresh straw, and the shy giggle of a 10-yearold girl bringing a cool, sweet drink to the boy she hopes will like her.

I think about the love they shared, and share still, that began in this place so many years ago… and I long to feel what they felt, and share what they shared, with a woman as beautiful as she was in mind, body soul, and spirit.

These old beams and rafters standing here so silently and so long are more than just an old barn… they bear silent witness to the lives of the people who put them here and who worked here beneath them… and the lives of two special souls who met here, and became one.

They symbolize what I know from watching those two special people as I grew to manhood… that with compassion and tender care, love truly is eternal, and that sun, wind and rain only add character and strength to it.”

Kevin K. Stevenson, December 2001