

An old Chico barn lives again with its family

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CHICO — Back in the day, the DeMeyer family would throw harvest parties for workers and friends in their big hay barn in west Chico.

“We’d do it nearly every year,” said Ray DeMeyer, who would find the rare day of rest a welcome break from the usual routine on the farm. There would be tamales and music and dancing as another productive year on the farm was celebrated.

Decades later, the barn will again be used for celebratory events, but it’s not on Meridian Road on the west side anymore.

DeMeyer’s barn was dismantled board by board and has been reassembled in Meriam Park as a core community building.

Meriam Park developer Dan Gonzales pictures community celebrations, farmers markets, even birthday parties under the rafters of the DeMeyer barn. It is a community space that gives special flavor to Gonzales’ vision for the walkable Meriam Park residential and commercial development north of East 20th Street.

It also is a significant nod to Chico’s agricultural roots.

Surprise

The DeMeyer family had no idea this was happening until they saw an Enterprise-Record article about the barn, which was partially erected at the time off East 20th Street. Daughter Sharon DeMeyer of Chico emailed the newspaper to say the family was still around.

On Saturday, the extended family gathered at the still-unfinished barn at Meriam Park, some members seeing it for the first time, including Ray DeMeyer, who now lives in Willows.

It was a little hard for DeMeyer, who will turn 90 in a few days, to grasp that his working barn prized so much for its strong oak walls that kept feed, beans and hay dry is a community landmark.

“The minute I saw it, my back started hurting,” said DeMeyer on Saturday, seeing the relocated barn for



It was a large barn, with sizeable beams and posts. DeMeyer remembered the 8×8-inch posts were exactly that span, rather than the shrunken measure that new lumber is now. Huge beams form the rafters, and support the loft area that once brimmed with hundreds of hay bales.

DeMeyer's son Chris, down from Puyallup, Wash., remembered making forts in those bales, with brother Greg. He was about 12 when the family moved away. DeMeyer's daughter Dianne Suschil of Chico laughed at her memory of being tossed in an empty tank by her mischievous brothers.

Andy Ramirez of Chico, who worked for DeMeyer from 1961 to 1972, came to be with the family on Saturday.

"I did everything, disked and plowed. I used to deliver Ray's hay to a guy in Orland for his cattle. I put all those bales on the truck by myself," he recalled.

DeMeyer's former wife Dayle Perry joined the group, saying her children had lots of memories of the barn, especially of hours of playing.

For youngest daughter Sharon DeMeyer of Chico, the Saturday gathering was a bigger celebration. It was her birthday.

History

The first DeMeyer family in Chico — Basil and Lillian — moved to Chico around 1947 and purchased land that was a dairy farm on Meridian Road, west of East Sacramento Avenue.

The history of the property is a little blurry in a quick search, but E-R archives showed that Lewis Vincent had started Quality Dairy on Dairy Road in 1929, which may have been the dairy Basil DeMeyer purchased. While the DeMeyers operated a dairy farm in Blythe, they shifted to beef cattle and feed when they moved to Chico.

Why his parents took that path, Ray DeMeyer didn't know, but the couple moved to Northern California to be closer to Lillian's family in the Live Oak area.

Memories

The barn was the center of the world to the DeMeyer children, three of whom still live in the area.

"Grandma and Grandpa DeMeyer lived in a house on one side of the barn, and we lived in a house on the other side of the barn," said Sharon DeMeyer.

Ray DeMeyer, who now lives in Willows, close to another daughter, marveled at what's happened since the property was sold.

The original location of the wood barn on Meridian Road now hosts a huge metal shop to service farm equipment on the existing ranch owned by Joe Ernandes of Chico. Rather than tear it down, Ernandes sold the wood barn to Gonzales, who stored the boards in Orland for about a year before the Meriam Park site was ready. Grandma and Grandpa DeMeyer's house, somewhat remodeled, still sits on Meridian Road, but is owned by someone else.



As the barn was taken down, each piece was tagged and numbered so that it could go back up in the proper order, according to Brian Klinginsmith of Gonzales Development Co. Klinginsmith opened the locked fence on Saturday so the family could get closer to the barn.

It was the first barn tear-down put-up project he had encountered. As each board was removed, a tag was attached to one end and then where it came from so it could be pieced back accurately.

“It was like Tinker Toys,” said Klinginsmith of the project. “I wouldn’t want to do that again. It took a lot of head scratching.”

Gonzales wanted to bring “Chico’s old history to its new history,” Klinginsmith said about the barn in Meriam Park. “He has a vision.”

Pointing to apartments going up not far from the barn, Klinginsmith said, “This project is certainly different than those.”

Some wood did not survive, either because of age or condition, so the Meriam barn does contain new pieces. New metal for the big roof also needed to be found.

Modern Building is covering the ends of the barn, and the goal is to finish it by October, Klinginsmith said. When it would be open to the public is still an unknown.

Memories

To DeMeyer, the barn meant work — hauling the hay into the loft area via a pulley system, and then down again to be fed to the animals.

But to the youngsters, it was a wonderland created by vivid imaginations.

Son Chris DeMeyer texted before coming to Chico, “It was a great old barn. I spent many hours playing in there. Dad would park equipment, tractors, combines, old trucks, and I had my own personal playground. Remember the hay forts we made on the upper decks? A couple of times I’d be playing in there and it would start raining really hard, and instead of waiting for the rain to quiet down, I’d make a run for home.”

Suschil remembers the magic of the big barn.

“I love and miss that barn. Making straw forts in the lofts, jumping off the lofts into the trucks filled with dried beans or rice. Pretending the tomato harvester was a ship at sea and we would “catch” sharks with the header. We would stack hay with those hooks and I miss that smell. The barn was also a cool quiet place I would hang out before visiting Grandma. Nothing but fond memories.”

Sharon DeMeyer composed her memories into words, “Old Barn. The old barn separates Grandpa’s house from ours. The hay in the loft catches the last long rays of summer sun, streaming in through cracks in the faded slats, shimmering through the dust like a musty ghost, smell of damp and warm envelops us, hiding behind the bales with makeshift sails of red and blue bandanas, guiding us home.”

New history

As each went their different ways, the family lost track of the homestead and barn, so the news of the



It also marked the way for a family reunion, and a way for Ray DeMeyer to celebrate his 90th birthday with family at the barn that had been the backbone of his life.

According to Meriam Park, an unofficial unveiling and celebration of the barn is planned once all the construction is finished.

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