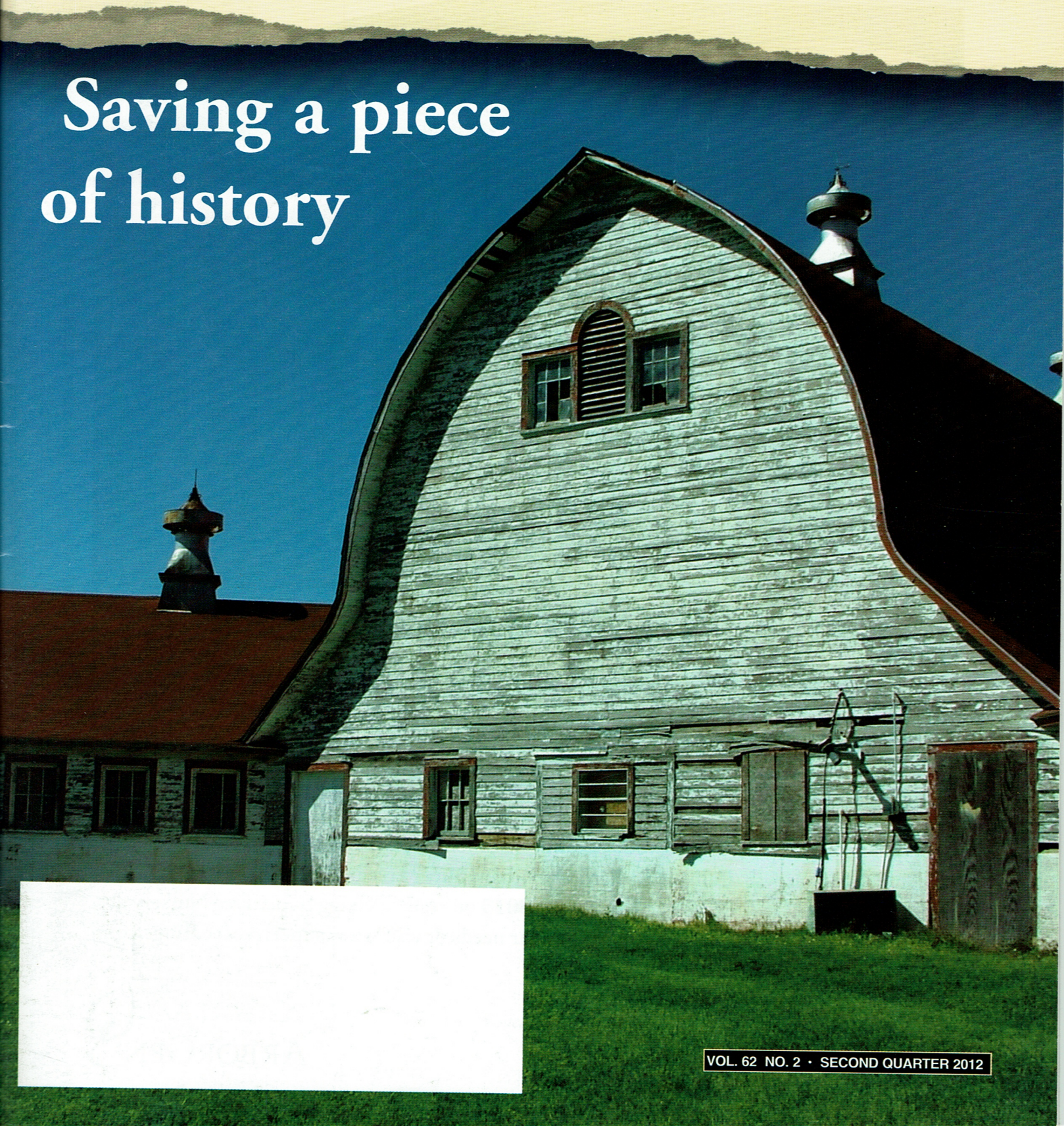


FORESTS & PEOPLE

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Saving a piece
of history





The dairy barn on the hill next to Buhlow Lake in Pineville is a landmark reminiscent of another time. This photo was taken in 1960. (Courtesy Ken Roy)

Supporters try to preserve historic wooden barn

By Melanie Torbett

Perched high atop a grassy knoll overlooking Buhlow Lake and busy Highway 71/165 in Pineville is an iconic landmark for motorists, fishermen, and pilots flying their small planes in and out of the nearby lakeside airport.

Though familiar to residents in Central Louisiana, this 89-year-old dairy barn on the grounds of the public mental health hospital is an unusual sight in the deep South. With a massive, curving gambrel roof over a stunning, two-story hay loft and twin wings that jut out on either side, the wood frame barn has an architecture and history that make it unique.

The “Old Dairy Barn,” as it is known, once housed a thriving dairy operation for the residents of Central Louisiana State Hospital, the mental health institution that has served the north-central region of the state since 1906. Named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1986, the barn has now been placed on a considerably less honorable list. In 2009-10, it was chosen by the Louisiana Trust for Historic Preservation (LTHP) as one of the most endangered historic sites in the state.

“It’s very, very unique,” says Michael Wyatt, field officer for the LTHP. “I’ve never seen anything like this in the Southeast. It’s good that it’s still there.” The Trust’s endangered list, he

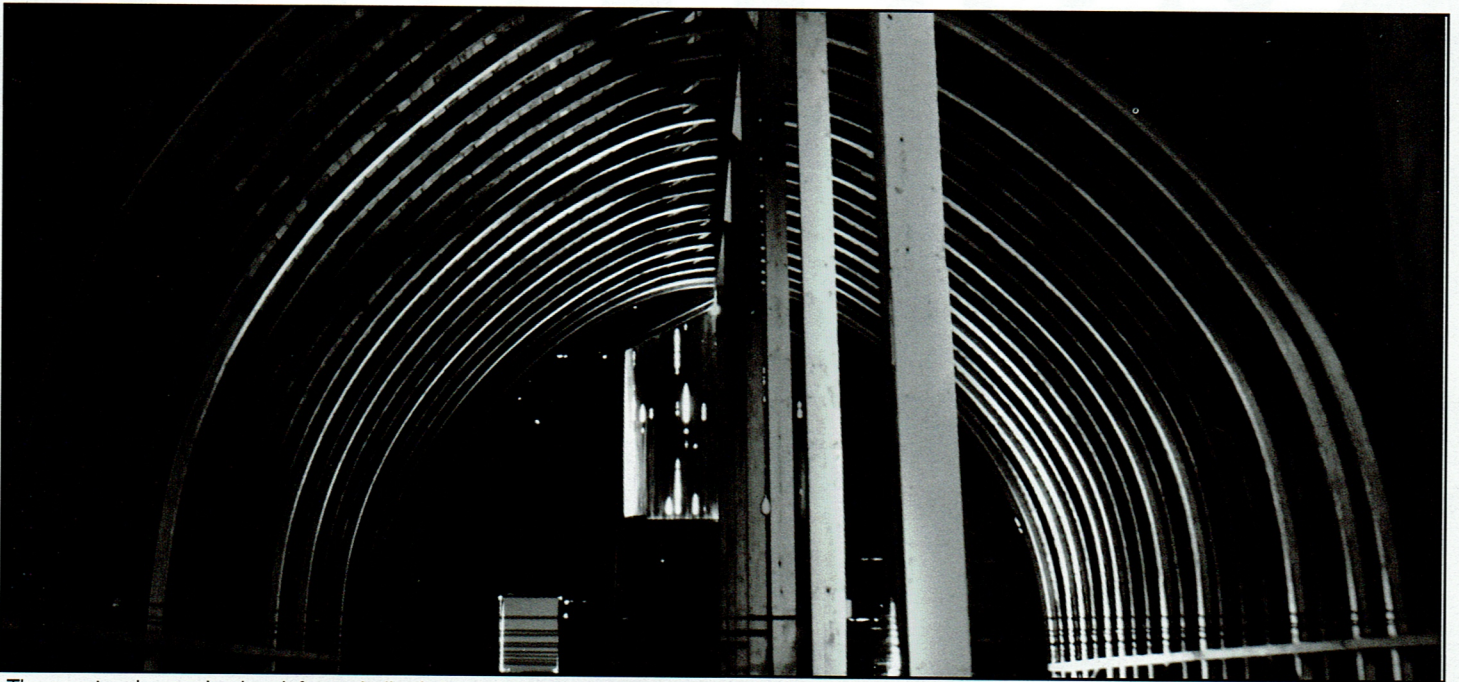
explains, is to draw attention to “irreplaceable assets in the state that will never, ever be built again.”

The barn’s status as a threatened historic structure has recently gained the attention of history buffs, state officials and local residents who want to save it from further decay or destruction. No longer in use by the hospital, the building sits empty, except for a smattering of stored odds and ends, and abandoned, except for occasional visits by the curious.

Peeling paint, a few missing shingles and damaged siding make the red-trimmed white barn appear in worse condition than it actually is, says Ken Roy, a local amateur historian who has adopted the barn’s preservation as his personal cause. “It’s really in very good shape,” he says. “We just can’t let it go by the wayside.”

For the past three years Roy has been working to raise awareness of the barn’s importance, researching the structure, writing a detailed history, and seeking support. His concern for the barn’s future is heightened now by the announced intention of the state to relocate the mental health services of Central State Hospital to a site a few miles away, and to dispose of some or all of the hospital’s property. Roy says hospital administrators and

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The spectacular curving hay loft was built of virgin pine but was shored up about 10 years ago by Tudor Construction Company. (Photo by Kitty Ledig)

local governmental officials endorse efforts to save the building, yet it will be up to the state to determine the barn's future.

"I would like to see the state donate the building to the Central Louisiana Historical Association, and then it could ultimately be sold and used for some purpose," he says.

The 12,500 square foot dairy barn was built in 1923 on a four-acre plot to produce dairy products for the residents and staff of the hospital, and to offer "occupational therapy as complementary to psychiatry, as it had the promise of meshing humanitarian values with science."

Central, which opened soon after the turn of the 20th century as Louisiana Hospital for the Insane, was a large operation which at its zenith in 1959 included a residential community of more than 3,000 patients. To provide food for residents and employees, the hospital raised cattle, swine, poultry and other agricultural products on nearby farms.

While dairy operations had been in place before 1923, the grand barn we see today came into being through the efforts of a former patient at Central, a



This photo shows a carrier system above the old stalls that probably was used to feed the cows. The patients at the mental hospital worked in this barn from 1923 till the operation was moved in the Fifties.

man named Joseph H. Carlin of Rayne, La., who was treated at the hospital from 1909 until 1912, according to hospital records.

Though documentation is sketchy, Carlin remained at Central after his treatment, working in the maintenance department, where he applied drafting and carpentry skills previously gained in his family's construction company.

Besides building the dairy barn, Carlin is credited as the designer and builder of the hospital's pathological lab and morgue, built in 1917 and now known as the Rose Cottage. (This building still stands on the hospital grounds and now houses a small museum that chronicles Central's past.)

According to a report sent to the Louisiana governor in 1918 by the hospital's superintendent, "Another two hun-

Cover Story Continued

dred ton silo has been added to the dairy outfit and additional milk rooms have been installed to meet the requirements of the State Board of Health..." Soon after Carlin supervised the building of the new barn (with the labor of Central patients) in 1923, the 54-year-old man died, and was buried in his hometown of Rayne.

The barn's design reflects the style common to Midwestern dairy barns of the early 20th century. Ken Roy believes it was built using mail order plans or perhaps even a "building kit" from the Loudon Machinery Company of Iowa, which once offered architectural plans for barns along with accompanying machinery.

"We identified some of the cow stanchions, pulleys and railings with the Loudon logo," says Roy. A 1926 report from the hospital's superintendent refers to the new barn: "It is built and equipped on what is known as the Loudon plan and it is hoped will meet the demands of our institution in aiding the dairyman to provide more milk for our institutional use."

However, one Alexandria man whose grandfather served as Central's superintendent when the barn was built says the barn's design came from Wisconsin. Windsor Thomas, Jr. relates that his grandfather, Dr. John N. Thomas, sent his son, Windsor Thomas Sr., to the University of Wisconsin to study modern dairy operations prior to 1923. He returned with a master's degree in dairy science, plans for a new barn and insights to help Central improve its dairy management. (His son Windsor Jr. eventually spent six years supervising Central's feed mill.)

Whatever its genesis, the barn's design was neither typical nor necessary for Louisiana's mild winters. Originally built to accommodate 75 cows, the barn's first floor wings were lighted and ventilated by a series of small, nine-light casement windows, and serviced by big sliding plank doors. A concrete foundation extends up the sides of the

building to just under the window sills and clapboard siding. Inside, the remnants of an overhead tracked "carrier" system still run throughout the first floor, probably used for feeding the animals and removing manure. The foundations of two silos that once served the barn can still be seen today. The spectacular curvilinear hay loft, six distinctive roof vent stacks and part of a rooftop crane on the eave of the north side of the barn reflect the style of the old Loudon barns.

Because central Louisiana had a wealth of timber and sawmills in 1923, it would seem logical that locally-sourced wood was used in the structure, says Bill Johnson, vice president of Tudor Companies of Alexandria. He and other observers believe the barn is mostly constructed using virgin pine from Louisiana. About 15 years ago, his company—which is in its fourth generation as a general contractor in the region—performed extensive renovation work on the barn's loft when it was in danger of collapse. They made laminated beams on-site to replace about 10 of the original curved wooden ribs that support the roof of the structure and resemble the underside of a massive wooden boat.

"It is a very, very unique building, and the project was a challenge to do," says Johnson, who has been with Tudor for more than three decades. He explained that rotten wood had caused the center line of the barn's roof to sag in the middle, which threatened to eventually pull the entire building down. Workers used 20 10-ton jacks to stabilize and hold the roof, then made "virgin pine equivalent" replacement ribs by laminating small pieces of select pine together. Steel tension bars were placed horizontally throughout the loft's interior to satisfy engineering recommendations for extra reinforcement.

The project, he says, "really worked out beautifully." He believes the building to be structurally sound now, and could "last for another 100 years," if properly cared for. "It's a beautiful old building."



Central's records show that the hospital's herd of dairy cows once included Holstein, Jerseys and Guernsey breeds. Long-time residents in Cenla remember the cows regularly trekking through a tunnel that once ran under the adjacent highway to pasture on low land that is now known as Lake Buhlow. Central patients tended to the cows as well as the hospital's other agricultural enterprises.

It's Windsor Thomas's recollection that Central State Hospital moved its dairy operation to property in Grant Parish in the late 50s when Buhlow Lake displaced the cows' pastureland. New government rules eventually prohibited the use of patient labor for agricultural production, and changes in the treatment of the mentally ill began to diminish the hospital's population. No longer needed for its original purpose, the dairy barn was converted into a paint and glass shop, and later used for storage.

Today, the historic old dairy barn's future remains in question. If there are enough advocates who care about this endangered wooden landmark, yet another reincarnation may just be possible. But that will take new vision, development savvy and money.

Sums up Michael Wyatt with the state preservation group: "It's a great building, and something should be done with it."

(Melanie Torbett is a writer in Alexandria.)