

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article profiles the effort to create the new, national barn TV series and is useable at no charge to all local or national publications. Contact Tom Laughlin with any questions or requests at: Kovia Productions, ["mailto:kovia@genevaonline.com"](mailto:kovia@genevaonline.com) email, or 262-248-9650 office line

Possible Headline: PBS Barn Show A Big Hit With Viewers

When someone hears about the PBS documentary I produced about old barns one of the first questions I get asked is, "Why barns...?". The answer is pretty simple, cameras love barns. And lots of people do, too.

Having the idea to shoot the program a handful of years ago, I put a Press Release out to the Wisconsin farm papers saying that I was looking for special barns with special stories. Soon I had responses from dozens of people from all corners of the state asking that their barns be included in the project. Some of the barns were indeed special, others were just plain old barns that their owners considered to be special simply because they had shared so much time and life together. The structures seem to take on their own life and a personality, even at a glance, as many people whizzing past them on the freeways will attest.

So as able, I packed up my BetaSP broadcast-quality camera and happily set off to talk to many of the people who had contacted me to get their individual barn stories. I traveled to Briggsville, Wausau, Whitewater, Lima Center, Hortonville, Honey Creek, Janesville, Madison, Elkhorn, Sheboygan and many other Wisconsin locales picking up footage and interviews with people involved with barns in one way or another. And what I ended up with is a warm, family-friendly program that looks at the history and heritage we all share in these grand old 'prairie schooners'. And although it was a very pleasant production experience, it wasn't as easy as it might sound.

The first challenge came in the overall timing as I shot most of the show just prior to 9/11. That meant I had to shelve the effort for a couple of years until the world settled back down. Wisconsin Public Television (WPT) in Madison then offered the necessary editing time to get the program done, so I spent many days traveling the seventy miles on I-90 from Lake Geneva to Madison to spend long days in the edit suite, tapping the skills and talents of many of the very capable WPT technical people.

As the editing process played out I met the next challenge and made some last ditch calls from the edit suite to potential sponsors I'd been cultivating for weeks and months prior to completion. I pled my case saying '...the time is now, show or go, please help...' etc. and was able to acquire Culver's Restaurants as a main sponsor and two others who all ponied up enough budget to help me keep going. There is not a lot of money to be made producing most documentaries and when people say it is usually a labor of love, believe them. There are definitely not limousines hauling wheelbarrow loads of cash to the door. So the program was completed and in the end we had a nice, thirty-minute program that I am very proud of---in fact, the program was just used for the Milwaukee PBS pledge drive and elicited a very strong response from viewers. The show visits with farmers, preservationists, historians, academics, a family rehabbing their barn into a family rec center and more. It's a very warm program that gained the Dove Foundation Seal of Family-Friendly Approval and is currently airing in a number of Midwest PBS markets. It was also recently up-linked on one of the PBS satellite feeds that deliver programming content to PBS stations across the country. Following that feed the program will soon be showing on numerous national PBS stations in 2007. It was also aired on a DISH satellite

network called RFD-TV, on DISH Channel 9409 in August '06.

Following the very enthusiastic overall response from viewers, and being a glutton for punishment, I am now taking on the task of creating a thirteen-week series about the subject of old barns. One of the responses that convinced me to do this was when a little old lady from way up north in Wisconsin called me to order a copy of the show. In a squeaky little old lady voice she said, "I loved your show---it reminded me of when I was a little girl---you made me cry."

Now, I'm not in the business of trying to make little old ladies cry but the fact that she, and so many others, had such an intense reaction to the program convinces me that there is very much reason to continue. As anyone who writes, paints or otherwise creates knows, it is a world of critique---and when positive, deeply emotional responses come back, life as a creative doesn't get much better. This is something that I've gained through the first barn show and it provides enough spiritual sustenance to tease me forward to the next level.

The big difference with this new effort is that now I want to look at barn and related stories across the entire country, as opposed to the initially localized Wisconsin content. There are some truly amazing barn stories out there that I've discovered while walking this path. I've become very fluent with the groups and organizations that are doing things nationally to try and save as many old barns as possible. (If you know of a barn story that I might appreciate being made aware of anywhere in the US please feel free to contact me via email at "<mailto:kovia@genevaonline.com>" or drop me a line at N2856 Walden Lane, Lake Geneva WI 53147).

Through the process of creating the first barn program I, of course, met a number of farmers and ended up becoming good friends with one of them. He's an older farmer in southeastern Wisconsin and is quite a character---in fact, I think he's a show in himself on a couple of different levels. Since the wife died a few years ago he's been running his small, thirty acre dairy farm all alone and faces the day to day challenge of maintaining a herd of over forty Jersey dairy cattle. You just wouldn't believe the physical workload he struggles with daily. I help him when available but it can never be enough.

As are many farmers, he's very religious and, in addition to creating a straight barn program, I am also trying to create a show that profiles this old farmer and how his faith keeps him going---I find it fascinating. Additionally, a younger friend of his is an Iowa farm boy and an up and coming Christian musician. Put the two of them together and you've got a unique show from the Heartland. The Christian satellite networks like the concept quite a bit and as I pursue funding for the national barn show, I'm looking for support for this program as well. Finding dollar support is always the hardest part of the process and time will tell whether or not I am able to raise enough sponsorship for either show from corporations or individuals--by nature there are far more 'no's than 'yes's. The farmer's story, by token of its faith-based focus, is intended for placement on one of the Christian networks.

In addition to the possibility of the barn program airing on PBS, there is also some thought of placing it on the DISH satellite network mentioned earlier, RFD-TV DISH Channel 9409. RFD-TV is a rather unique television entity offering programming geared mainly to the rural demographic of the country. But, as more and more urbanites address their human need to be in touch with the land, the RFD-TV rural numbers are being complimented by that all-too-cherished demographic category which ad agencies and

companies currently love, that of the 'rural lifestyle' folks. These are the people who work in the metro areas but then retreat at the end of the day to their hobby farms and places in the country which are within commuting distance. They are a very hot advertising commodity right now and help explain why a program that looks at old barns is so popular. RFD-TV recently paid for a Nielsen-type study and found out that they average 6.9 million weekly viewers with a 32% Rural Lifestyle demographic. Those are big numbers in the ad agency world and I'm hoping to catch someone's advertising budget attention with them---are you out there?

I think it's funny that a very real facet and subsequent need of being human is now being categorized and packaged as an advertising demographic. The distance between people and their direct connection to the land is a factor for so many now that they are actively seeking to address it. At one point in our country's early time virtually everyone was in touch with the land. Now, only about two percent of the population are farmers (which helps explain why gardening is so popular, too). I really believe that people gotta have their hands in the dirt to stay sane.

It would seem that a program that puts us back in touch with our American and human roots such as the barn show does is something people desperately want to experience right now. With timing being everything, I will do everything I can as a small, independent Producer to make sure that it happens. And if it's in your heart to help, I'd love to hear from you, too.

As they say, 'Check your local listings...'

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