

Farm Couple Turns Old Schoolhouse Into Country Store

An old country school has a new life as a store and deli on the outskirts of Charlotte, Mich. “Besides selling cheeses, meats and other foods grown by the owners and area farmers, people who live in the city simply enjoy making the trip out to the store,” says Ben Tirrell.

He and his wife, Jessy, first opened a tiny store on their 300-acre farm across the highway from the school. When the building came up for sale, the couple purchased it and added \$70,000 of renovations to restore the original wooden floor and ceilings and add a certified kitchen to serve sandwiches and wraps.

Old school photos on the walls are a hit with curious customers and former students who come to see their old school. But the local food and competitive prices bring them back to shop weekly for basics like meat and milk.

“People who come here are interested in where their food comes from,” Tirrell says. Most are neighbors or from the local community, and the Tirrells are committed to keep their prices reasonable. They raise beef and have a 300-ewe flock of sheep, 100 of which they milk for the 15 types of cheeses they make. Poultry, pork, honey, syrup, wool items and other products are supplied by local farmers.

The couple does very little advertising, but holds a Spring Fling annually with free food, kids games, sheep shearing and educational activities about farming. They also support local charities, which gives them visibility and a way to give back to their community.

Tirrell is the seventh generation on the family farm, and his father, grandfather and great-grandfather attended the school that he transformed into Tirrell Farmstead Specialties store. He notes that farming and running the business keeps his family very busy. His wife, Jessy, offers daily lunch specials. Tirrell’s mother, Pat, is also part of the business.

“I think it’s helped us to be diversified,” he says. “It’s a lot of hats to wear, which is a challenge for us. And the regulations and red tape are challenging, but there’s a lot of interest in what we’re doing. There is a necessity to change with the times. This is a niche that allows the community to support us.”

Store hours, prices and daily menu items are posted on the store’s website.

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Ben and Jessy Tirrell turned an old country school into this store and deli. They restored the original wooden floor and ceilings and added a kitchen to serve sandwiches.



Robert Payne trains hawks and falcons to keep hungry birds from destroying high-value crops.

Birds Of Prey Protect High-Value Crops

Birds of prey chasing nuisance birds to prevent them from destroying crops is about as natural as you can get when it comes to pest control, says Robert Payne, part owner of Advanced Avian Abatement. He and his business partner, Justin Robertson, have figured out how to make their passion for falconry pay by contracting with large fruit producers to protect ripening fruit from swarms of hungry birds.

Payne travels from Kansas to Washington State in the summer with up to five birds that include Aplomado falcons, peregrines and Harris hawks. He stays with the birds from sunup to sunset, releasing one bird at a time to patrol and chase birds away from ripening cherry and blueberry crops. Contracts with producers usually last about two months, beginning before the fruit ripens through harvest.

While nuisance birds get used to propane cannons, noisemakers and scarecrows, they stay away from birds that can eat them, Payne says.

Because he works with protected birds of prey and is dealing with songbirds, the business is highly regulated. The Fish and Wildlife Service created regulations to allow abatement using raptors to control pest birds less than a decade ago.

“The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service protects the birds we are hazing and the

raptors. Everyone has to follow the letter of the law, of which there are many,” he explains.

Payne uses a whistle and food rewards to control his birds, which are trained to haze and scare the nuisance birds. They do occasionally catch and kill the birds they’re chasing, but those are usually the old or sick birds in a flock.

Still, he notes, far fewer birds are killed compared to other control methods such as netting and poisoning. Payne adds that using birds of prey is only cost efficient on high value crops and 60 acres or more, when covering plants with nets would be expensive and labor intensive.

“I’ve heard managers say they’ve lost million dollar crops in days. A lot of birds just peck into the fruit, but producers still lose the crop,” Payne says.

Using birds to control birds is a developing market; there are others doing similar work in other states. Payne says the biggest challenge is locating customers who can benefit from the service.

For him, it’s an ideal job to work outside with his beloved birds.

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“Harvest As You Need It” Barn Wood Craftsmen

When farmer and carpenter Tom Soberg needs wood for his custom rustic cabinets, he goes to his personal lumberyard — an old granary that’s still standing. Armed with a crowbar and hammer, he removes only the wood he needs for his project.

FARM SHOW has published many articles about old building recyclers, but we like the harvest-as-you-need-it method Soberg and his friend, Lee Brenna, use on some of the buildings they find around their hometown of Pelican Rapids, Minn.

“We want the wood to weather as much as possible,” Brenna explains. “I have a couple of buildings where I have arranged to take boards as I need them.”

He points out that he doesn’t take down entire barns — he doesn’t have time with his full-time job as a cement truck operator. But he’s found plenty of interesting wood in dilapidated chicken coops, granaries and other outbuildings that people don’t use anymore.

“Old granaries are great because there are well-worn planks on the inside as well as the outside,” Brenna points out.

While Soberg focuses mostly on cabinets, Brenna’s projects range from flowerboxes to office furniture to bar tops embedded with beer caps under layers of polyurethane.

Brenna points out that often only a small portion of the salvaged wood is used for projects. Either the wood is rotten or it gets damaged when it’s removed.

“We’ve tried using Sawzalls but they ruin the back sides of boards,” he says. “We have better luck just being patient and doing one board at a time with hand tools.”

For people interested in harvesting barn wood, he has two pieces of advice: Get a tetanus shot and cut wood slowly. The dry wood splinters easily. He’s found that miter saws seem to work better than table saws. Brenna also uses self-tapping screws to minimize splitting.

He creates items from the old wood during



Tom Soberg and Lee Brenna use a harvest-as-you-need-it method to make furniture out of old buildings that people want torn down.

the winter and admits it’s not usually a moneymaker.

“My daughter and wife take a lot of it,” he laughs, noting that the two women have different tastes. “If it’s for my wife, she wants it stained. My daughter likes it weathered,” he explains, noting he often pressure washes wood, then covers pieces with a sealer.

He consigns items to a local gift shop and says most people seem to have tastes similar to his daughter — the more weathered and grey, the better.

Brenna adds that building “accessories” such as doors and windows can sell well. Even wood not suitable for furniture or craft items has its use. While tearing down a building in the winter, Brenna often uses the rotten wood to build a fire on site to keep warm while working.

“I’m not financially motivated with this project, but it sure is fun,” Brenna says.

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