

Barn demolition evokes memories

BY DIANE GALE ANDREASSI
SPECIAL WRITER

A wrecking ball that took down the landmark at 12 Mile and Orchard Lake, where the Farmington Players Barn performed, did more than demolish a building — it jarred the memory of a 60-year-old man who once played on the property.

It affected Bill Mitchell so much that he wrote a letter to the editor expressing his emotions: "It was sad to see the story about the demolition of the Farmington Players Barn," he wrote. "The barn and the farm house next to it were, at one time, my grandmother's."

The barn was built in the late 1930s or 1940s and was a replacement to an original barn that was probably built around the 1880s when the large building known as the Samuel Davis House on the property was erected. It was demolished last month to allow the amateur theater group to rebuild a "New Barn" for their productions, explained Phil Hadley, Farmington Players Barn project manager for the New Barn.

Old barn, new problems
The theater was on the second floor and was not barrier free. It didn't have the capacity for a modern restroom; it was difficult to heat and impossible to cool. The new barn won't be a "radical change," said Hadley, a 22-year member of the Players. "It literally was a dairy barn and we determined we could not expand or improve upon it sufficiently to meet our needs."

The new barn is going to add to the group's abilities to present amateur theater to the public.

"We hope it will provide essentially a place for more creativity and more involvement for artistic growth by our current mem-

bers, as well as new members," Hadley added. "It's an evolutionary change."

Mitchell, who lives in Grosse Pointe, knows all about change. When he was boy visiting his grandmother he remembers there was nothing in the area except the big house, the barn and a small house his family lived in for a short time while helping his grandmother care for the property. There was no traffic on 12 Mile Road, which was a two-lane highway with an eight-foot ditch on both sides.

Family history

He was a baby when his parents, Barbara and Rennie, moved there to help his grandmother, Mabel McWilliams, a nurse who ran a retirement home out of the Samuel Davis house for elderly women who needed nursing care. His family moved by the time he was 3-1/2 years old, but they regularly came back to visit McWilliams.

"There were two guys, I remember as Sam and Mel, who had a farm a little further west and it had a combine on it," Mitchell explained. "And for an 8-year-old kid a combine is cool."

His grandmother was another interesting character with an amazing ability to transcend herself from her dirt poor background growing up on a poor farm in Canada. She became a nurse and in her mid-20s she married Mitchell's grandfather, James McWilliams, who was a nationally known expert in animal husbandry. He also ran the Detroit Creamery Farms in Mount Clemens.

McWilliams bought the property, that would later become the Kendallwood Subdivision, in the late 1940s and sold it in 1959 or 1960, Mitchell said, adding that his grandmother

died when she was in her mid 90s in 1983.

"The area will always remain in Mitchell's memory as a great place to romp as a child."

Change inevitable

As Hadley pointed out, members of the Farmington Players Barn know change is inevitable, but they're dedicated to maintaining the design integrity of the old barn for the new.

"It will be a theater first, but it will look like a barn," Hadley said. "That's extremely important to our identity."

The location was moved to make room for the Farmington Players' Barn partner on the site, Sunrise Assisted Living.

The house is used for GMA Capital, an investment banking firm and the remaining four acres is owned by the Players Theater and Sunrise.

"I think it's great that the house is still there," Mitchell said. "It's nice to see part of a previous culture still preserved. I often think I would like to take some of the pictures I have and walk in there and show them that this is what the house looked like in the '50s."

In his letter, he wrote: "My grandmother sold the property in the late '50s and moved to Florida, but every time I drive by it (which isn't often as I'm an Eastsider) my thoughts drift back to those carefree days spent picking strawberries and tomatoes in the garden or jumping from the hayloft in the barn onto a large pile of hay on the floor."

"That's a life that most kids in Farmington can only read about," he concluded.

During construction plays will be performed at the Barnes & Noble Bookstore, 6800 Orchard Lake Road. The box office phone number is (248) 219-0800.



STAFF PHOTO BY SHARON LEMLEY

Shining example: Catherine and Wayne Beerbower and their kids, Chase and Ethan represented Michigan as a "tax family." They are considered a family typical of those who will benefit from President George W. Bush's tax plan.

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group."

Once the family was selected, Bush's campaign people contacted the Beerbowers asking them to appear on stage with Bush, then Senator Spencer Abraham and Gov. John Engler during a rally at the Romeo Beach Festival on Labor Day. "Gov. Engler was taking our picture with Bush," Catherine recalled.

The family first met Engler at POAM events and at his inaugural ball. "We actually went to their house," Catherine said. "Michelle (Engler) and I were both pregnant with our kids."

In January, Bush's people wanted to fly the Beerbowers to Washington to help introduce the tax bill. Those plans fell through and local Washington D.C.-area families were asked to attend instead.

The Beerbowers were called again about 5 p.m. June 4 and asked if they could come down the morning of June 7.

They drove to avoid a huge plane fare cost and covered all of

their own expenses.

"We were totally on our own," Catherine said. "We had to figure out how to get there and where to stay. We had to figure out how we would get to the White House in the morning."

Catherine was humbled by being in the White House. "It had the feel of a big church," she said. "It's a beautiful old building, a lot smaller than I thought."

They had more than an hour to wait and talked to other tax families before the ceremony. "With everybody, it was the same thing," Catherine said. "They got the call and made hectic preparations. The farthest came from Florida and Missouri."

Now that the Bush tax plan has been signed into law, some Americans will begin getting refund checks next month and the refund process will continue through September, according to a White House communications spokesperson. Tax bills are

expected to go down for the next 10 years as well.

This fall single taxpayers will get a \$300 refund check, single parents receive a \$500 refund check and married taxpayers will get a \$600 refund check, according to printed information Beerbower brought back from Washington D.C.

"Distribution is according to your social security number, according to the last two digits," Raczowski said of the checks. "Money will be received next month."

For instance, a person who has 03 as the last two digits in his social security number will get the check July 3. Raczowski, whose last two digits are 23, will get his on July 23.

The new law cuts taxes for all taxpayers in all rate classes, repeals the death tax, provides relief from the marriage penalty and doubles the child tax credit to \$1,000. It also raises IRA contribution limits and simplifies the tax code.



Leafing: A damselfly in Derek's yard.



Visitor: Craig Tufts marveled at the Derek's backyard habitat.



STAFF PHOTO BY SHARON LEMLEY

On film: Joe Derek interviews while Dave Tietmeyer videotapes Craig Tufts.

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newspaper.

"It's great," Tufts said while looking around at Derek's backyard, which consists of a manicured lawn surrounded by patches of native vegetation.

"I could just walk around all day and take things in," Tufts added.

Derek echoed Tufts' excitement.

"I would gauge it, if I were a golfer, as being like having Arnold Palmer visit me," he said.

Derek said he is most proud of his butterfly garden, which contains stinging nettles, ideal for caterpillars to cocoon in, and milkweed, which provides food. Another pride and joy in Derek's yard is his frog pond.

"There's one there that you can pet," Derek said, pointing out one of the more friendly amphibians. His frogs hibernate successfully in the 6-foot pond and have been there for several years.

Derek's wife, Judy, said their yard is a great place to play.

"I don't need to get away, I can just come back here," she said. One of her and Joe's favorite activities is lying on their footbridge and throwing food at the fishes swimming in the creek below.

"I'm glad our neighbors can't see us or they'd think we're crazy," she said.

Apart from the trimming and mowing, the Dereks don't spend a lot of time maintaining the

"habitat." That's because nearly all the vegetation is native, not planted.

The Dereks' yard is one of 1,000 National Wildlife Federation-certified "backyard habitat" yards in Michigan, and one of nearly 30,000 nationwide. To be certified as such, the yard must have food-producing plants and water sources for wildlife, as well as places for critters to raise their young, such as birdhouses, among other things.

The NWF, which is based in Reston, Va., publishes the magazine *Ranger Rick, Your Big Backyard and National Wildlife*. It is the nation's largest member-supported conservation group, according to its Web site, www.nwf.org.

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