Barn Literature #1

Subject: Social Studies: Agriculture: Language Arts: Agriculture
Grade Level: 6-8
McRel Standards: US History Era 6: The development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900)

Benchmark: Understands how the rise of corporations, heavy industry, and mechanized farming transformed American society.

Iowa Model Core Curriculum: Literacy: Writing: Uses writing as a tool for learning
Uses an effective writing process
Uses knowledge of purpose, audience formant, and medium in developing written communication.

Anticipatory Set: A barn on a farm has always been a hub of activity. The traditional barn in history might have been a place for a farmer to store his grain, shelter his livestock, repair broken farming equipment and milk the cows. Each barn has a unique story to tell, just as the livestock who lived and worked there, and the families that built and used the barns.

Purpose: Students will read the following excerpts from literature about barns to understand the importance and the history of a barn on a farmstead.

Teaching to the Objective:

1. Teacher will duplicate literature excerpts and hand out to students in groups.
2. The students will read the literature excerpts together in a group and come up with a list of characteristics of barns.
3. Students will share characteristics of the barns.
4. Students will then determine the author's purpose in sharing the story.
5. Students will be able to write a short paragraph on why they think that barns were important to people who shared their writing.

From "A Barn is More Than a Building. It is a Shrine to Our Agrarian Past," by Jim Doherty, Smithsonian Magazine, August 1989:

The first thing you notice is the tremendous amount of space. A barn feels a lot like a church inside. Even a small one seems big because when you stand between the haylofts and look up, your view of the roof is unobstructed, save for the massive timbers that support it.

The next thing you notice is the smell -- hay and manure, for sure, and perhaps, depending on the time of year, a whiff of apples or freshly split cordwood.

Something happens to the quality of light in a barn. Remember? It becomes softer, richer; it takes on the warmth of the beams.

If there are horses or cattle in the building, you can hear them moving around and sense their alert presence.

On a clear winter night, with moonlight flooding in through the open doors, you may also sense the presence of others who have been in the barn before you, the generations of families who worked in it and cherished it, the neighbors and craftsman who helped raise it a century or more ago.

From "My Antonia," by Willa Cather, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918:

It was eleven o'clock when I at last took my bag and some blankets and started for the barn with the boys. Their mother came to the door with us, and we tarried for a moment to look out at the white slope of the corral and the two ponds asleep in the moonlight, and the long sweep of the pasture under the star-sprinkled sky.

The boys told me to choose my own place in the haymow, and I lay down before a big window, left open in warm weather, that looked out into the stars. Ambrosch and Leo cuddled up in a hwy-cave, back under the eaves, and lay giggling and whispering. They tickled each other and tossed and tumbled in the hay; and then, all at once, as if they had been shot, they were still. There was hardly a minute between giggles and bland slumber.

I lay awake for a long while, until the slow-moving moon passed my window on its way up the heavens. I was thinking about Antonia and her children; about Anna's solicitude for her, Ambrosch's grave affection, Leo's jealous, animal little love. That moment, when they all came tumbling out of the cave into the light, was a sight any man might have come far to see. Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade -- that grew stronger with time...

From "Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie," by O.E. Rolvaag, Harper & Brothers, 1927:

Per Hansa had put a great deal of thought into this matter of building a house; ever since he had first seen a sod hut he had pondered the problem. On the day that he was coming home from Sioux Falls a brilliant idea had struck him -- and idea which had seemed perhaps a little queer, but which had grown more attractive the longer he turned it over in his mind. How would it do to build house and barn under one roof? It was to be only a temporary shelter, anyway -- just a sort of makeshift, until he could begin on his real mansion. This plan would save time and labor, and both the house and the barn would be warmer for being together... He had a vague recollection of having heard how people in the olden days used to build their houses in this way -- rich people, even! It might not be fashionable any longer; but it was far from foolish, just the same.

It will go hard with Beret, he thought; she won't like it. But after a while he picked up courage to mention her plane to her.

...House and barn under the same roof? ...She said no more, but fell into deep and troubled thought. ...Man and beast in one building? How could one live that way? ...At first it seemed utterly impossible to her; but then she thought of how desolate and lonesome everything was here and of what a comfortable companion Rosie might be on dark evenings and during the longer winter nights. She shuddered, and answered her husband that it made no difference to her whichever way he built, so long as it was snug and warm; but she said nothing about the real reason that had changed her mind.

This answer made Per Hansa very happy.

From "The People, Yes," by Carl Sandburg:

For sixty years the pine lumber barn
had held cows, horses, hay, harness, tools, junk
amid the prairie winds...
and the corn crops came and went, plows and wagon
and hands milked, hands husked and harnessed
and held the leather reins of horse teams
in dust and dog days, in late fall sleet 'til the work was done that fall.
And the barn was a witness, stood and saw it all.

From "Billy Ray's Farm," by Larry Brown:

There were some pieces of rusted tin lying out across the short pasture grass in front, remnants of the tornado of ‘84 that sucked the two-story barn up howling and spewed it back into thousands of pieces, and it was still lying here and there. Once in a while you’d run over a piece of it...

In winter the cattle are warm and happy in a well-lighted barn, a vast cathedral of timbers and stalls, racked hay, a tack room, a vaccination pen, a calving pen, a dehorning pen, a catch pen built of heavy pipe.

There is a cat—several cats—to keep the barn free of rodents and a few wandering chickens to pick up the ticks and fleas. The great center hall of the barn is loud late at night with the sound of Billy Ray's boots on the concrete, for there will be no slipping and sliding here in mud while trying to deliver a calf. Electric lights will furnish the brilliance required to work on mothers in trouble.

The Old Barn," by Twyla Hansen, from Palo Alto Review and forthcoming in "Rural Voices: Literature at the Millennium":

I see my brothers in the hayloft with kitchen matches
and tin, striking and taking turns, yellow flames licking.
Smoke curling up, ashes floating down the hay drop.

The overhead cave where we inhale field dust,
where the rope pulley-hook lilts along its full length,
where the feathertips of a bowl-faced barn owl

sweep past, a ladder rises from composted manure.
We are unable to halt the siding from its own ignition,
the ancient supports, 12 x 12s, a cottonwood tinderbox.

How will we extinguish it without being caught?
What will we explain to father, returning from the field?
We all believe in God and right now He is not happy.

They immigrated to this country for farming and freedom,
grandfather first, returning to fetch his young first cousin.

Grandmother isolated and frightened, this treeless flatland.
No one warned her about raking weather, the relentless wind,
no one knew of drought or typhus or how to save the children.

The new barn, its beckoning rafters, the only height for miles.
He kept the spare rope with him, hidden under the wagon seat.

My brothers and I tasting fear, smelling our own small demise,
one after another calves in the feedlot loping toward pasture.
The air full of shouts, father from a distance detecting trouble.

If our grandparents survived grief and nature, why can't we?
Water holy from the stock tank hitting the blackened wall.

"Destruction," by James Hearst, from "Snake in the Strawberries," Iowa State University Press, 1979:

The barn stood for shelter on squared corners with a tight roof until the wind sucked it up and spit it out in a shambles of splintered boards. I tried to salvage the ruins. While I pulled the nails and sorted out split studding, citizens of the barnyard clustered around -- pigeons fluttered where once the ridge pole hung, sparrows frisked through broken window frames -- let me sweat over the collapse of order. I lit my pipe and tossed the match toward the tumbled hay and let chance decide if it lived or went out. The flame caught, winked among the stems, then tongued the air until the draft formed a chimney and the fire went mad. I leaned against a corner post, the roar of the fire like music, the lunge of its appetite now beyond control.

"Barn Bridges," by Sandra Mann of Burwell, in memory of her father, Parmer Helmer (1911-1969) of Arthur:

Left over straw
Fresh meadow hay
Worn wooden stalls
Work horse harness
Split reins
Roping reins
Single broken reins
Bridles with geometric bits

Spider webs
Curry combs
Kid saddles
Old saddles
Trophy saddles
Halters and ropes
Horses stomping and munching
Grain
Meowing, leaning cats.

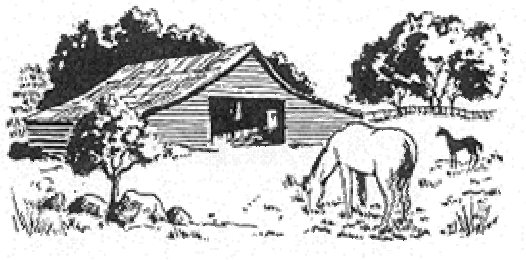
Dad, though gone, comes alive when I step into my barn.

"An Icelandic Woman Visits Minnesota," from "Prairie Days," a collection of essays by Bill Holm, Saybrook Publishing Company, 1987:

She and I go to an old round barn by the river. The barn is full of the smell of old hay. Wind whistles through missing shingles in the high dome. Iron stalls are empty now. We see hoof prints on black dirt, made by cattle long since dead and eaten. From a nail she takes down a horse harness, leather dried and cracked. "From Iceland," she says, and caresses it. We walk into the empty hayloft, fifty feet high, shaped like a cathedral dome. The last sunlight blown into the holes of the dome by prairie winds shines the floor like a

polished ballroom. I walk under the dome, open my mouth, and sing -- an old Italian song about the lips of Lola the color of cherries. The sound rolls around the dome and grows. It comes back to me transformed into horse's neighing.

“The Barn” By George Schiller



The old barn was my favorite place to play, especially on rainy days. When the neighborhood boys came over, we would make up games ranging all the way from Blackbeard the Pirate to Tom Mix and his horse Tony. We spent many happy hours in that old barn, both working and playing.

The barn was built out of native lumber, just like the old house. The frame work was made of solid oak beams, eight inches square. They were held together either with mortise and tenon joints or by round oak pins driven into holes. The outside sheeting was native elm or cedar. It was well built and very sturdy.

When Grandpa moved the old barn from where it originally stood on the creek bank, Grandma insisted he locate it some distance from the house. She complained, "I want that barn far enough away so that I can't smell it when the wind is from that direction.” So Grandpa put it nearly half a block from the house. In fact, it was far enough between house and barn that my cousin Marsh and I made a practice of tethering a pony at each place so we wouldn't have to walk either way.

There were eight horse stalls with a wooden feed box and a manger for each horse. Behind each pair of horses there were wooden pegs on the wall that held two sets of harness. After a hard day's work in the field, the horses would come in all hot and sweaty. As each one was turned loose, he would roll in the dirt and then drink his fill of cool water from the large round tank that was filled from the pump at the windmill. Then he would head for the barn and his ration of oats and hay. After all were fed, they were free to graze in the pasture until morning.

The back part of the barn, on a lower level, was a shed for the cows. In the winter time they were secured in stanchions, fed and milked. However, in the summertime we simply milked them out in the corral. Most of them would stand to be milked, but a few had to be tied. I remember one cow in particular that we called Shorty. She was quite short, stocky and close to the ground. We never knew how much milk she would give -- sometimes a lot and other times very little. This strange mystery was solved one morning as I came down to milk a little early. One of the piglets from the nearby pigpen had

wiggled through a hole in the fence and was busily gorging himself with milk from one of Shorty's spigots. Grandpa patched the hole in the fence and Shorty was again on a full milk production schedule.

The best part of the barn was the haymow. It covered all the second floor of the barn and held a lot of hay. I never did know how many tons, but I know it was a lot I got the job of moving that hay back into the corners. That was dirty, hot work, and we were always glad when all the hay was in and we were ready for winter. Our barn didn't have a traveling hay fork like some, so we filled it with pitchforks and strong muscles.

Very often the haying work would be interrupted by thunderstorms. I recall one particular afternoon when a storm blew up and the men drove the horses under the sheltered driveway between the barn and the corncrib to wait out the storm. Marsh and I stayed up in the haymow and we lay on the fresh hay watching the downpour. Suddenly there was a blinding flash of lightning and a loud clap of thunder. For a moment we could neither hear nor see. As we gathered our senses together, we could see that lightning had struck the large willow tree just below the barn. There was a smoky blue haze rising from the tree stump and pieces of tree trunk and bark littered the barnyard. Grandpa came climbing up the wooden ladder to the loft yelling as he came "Are you kids all right?!" When we could catch our breath, we assured him that we were. Then Grandpa hurried out to examine the tree stump. It was still smoldering, but the rain quickly put out the fire. Even when it was dry, willow wood never did burn very well.

Adjacent to the barn was the corncrib for storage of ear corn. The two were connected by a driveway for unloading corn and grain for the livestock. It also served as a work area to repair equipment and as a loafing spot for the various poultry that roamed the farmyard. We always had lots of pigeons on the farm. They usually nested on the ledges in the haymow and we could easily capture them. I once found a pure white one and made a pet of it like Mary's little lamb, it followed me to school and was a hit with my schoolmates. But when it began to roost in the cloakroom it had to go -- the teacher said so.