Barn Stories #1

Subject: Social Studies: 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 format, and medium in developing written communication.

Anticipatory Set: The 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 stories about barns to understand the importance and the history of a barn on a farmstead.

Teaching to the Objective:

1. Teacher will duplicate stories and hand out to students in groups.
2. The students will read the stories 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 stories.

From "A Mile Down to Water" by Robert M. Lienert, a memoir of growing up on a farm near Harvard, Nebraska, during the Depression:

Haymows have been favorite places for farm kids to play since time immemorial. The best time is on a rainy day when the hay is dry and

sweet and you can hear the rain on the roof.

The trouble with our haymow was that usually there was little or no hay in it, the drought years being what they were.

Empty haymows were all right, too, and some of the farm boys rigged up basketball hoops and we'd play basketball in the haymow. It was like having your own gym at home if you didn't mind playing on a floor made up of warped boards.

Usually, a haymow had a huge door on one end of the barn. It extended up to the peak of the roof, but not down to the floor of the hay storage area. This door was hinged at the bottom so that when it was opened, it folded down against the side of the barn.

Right in the peak of the roof, running the length of the haymow was a steel track. Riding on the track was a wheeled trolley, which was used to carry sling loads of hay into the haymow itself.

When the big door was closed, a rope was attached to the pointed top of the door, and then it ran through the trolley, down the length of the barn, around a pulley, down the back of the haymow, through another pulley attached to the barn sill and, when hay was being put up, on out through a side door where it would be hooked to a double tree and in turn hooked up to a team of horses…

When a load of hay came in from the field, the driver would pull his hayrack up as close to the barn as he could get it and position it underneath the big open door.

The main rope would be lowered again and attached to the rings on the end of the slings. When this was done, the ropes on the slings would be untied from the posts on the hayrack.

Around the side of the barn, at the other end of the main rope, a driver would be waiting with his team for the signal to go. Receiving it, he'd drive his team away from the barn.

Back at the hayrack, at the rope started going up, it would pull the two ends of the sling together, and then lift the whole sling load of hay up to the very peak of the barn. When this reached the trolley parked at the end of the track, it would trip the trolley so that it could roll down the track and carry the sling load through the door and into the haymow.

From "Where are all the barns?" written by Gail Keeler of McCook and published in Nebraska Fence Post magazine, July 14, 2001:

Barns are becoming a thing of the past. Think about it! There are fewer and fewer farms and ranches. Barns were a priority in early days, being built before a solid home. Women made a home life in dugouts, lean-tos, small one-room cabins and other makeshift shelters while a sturdy barn was built.

It was imperative to have a solid place of protection for whatever livestock a farmer might have -- be it cattle, horses or sheep. A haymow was needed to store hay for the long winter months and other rooms held grain, tack and miscellaneous equipment. A barn was necessary for people and animals to survive harsh conditions and danger from both natural and human sources.

Progress has changed all this. Barns are no longer needed to store loose hay. Instead, bales, round and rectangular, are stacked in neat rows. Some farmers and ranchers use a weather-proof wrapping to keep moisture from rotting the hay. Large quantities of grain are stores in silos and grain bins. The farmer and rancher do not have milk cows as all dairy products are purchased from a grocery store.

I remember when our barn held 20 some cows, all milked by hand. If Dad was working late in the hay field, Mom milked them all herself. The milk was carried to another room reached by going outside and entering by another door. It was run through a separator, which was bolted to the floor.

The handle was turned in a slow, even motion by hand. Through some mysterious action of the milk running through a series of stainless steel discs at a certain speed, the cream was separated from the milk and ran out one spout while the milk ran out another.

We kept some cream for butter and cooking, and the rest was poured into a 10-gallon cream can, hauled to town and shipped on a train to a larger city where it was processed. Milk was kept for our own use and the rest either poured into the hog trough or large buckets to sour. The hogs, chickens and geese really liked the curdled milk and whey.

Another room in the barn was designated the grain bin and held various grains such as oats, ground corn and cake for the cattle. Another area was penned off for bucket calves or other critters needing special attention or a horse we wanted near at hand. A manger ran along one side for hay or grain, depending on what was in the pen.

A large sliding door accessed the haymow from the outside to facilitate storing the hay and then to pitch it out onto a hayrack for feeding as needed.

Barns were all shapes and sizes. Larger and more prosperous owners had larger barns. Barns revealed a lot about their owners. Red and white were the most common colors, but some were never painted and were left to weather as such. Some had hearts or other designs painted on them. Brands were popular as were the names of the owners or the name of the homestead. Some had Dutch doors where the bottom could be kept closed and the top opened for ventilation or a horse to look outside.

Some barns are kept in repair and in use, but others have been deserted and are falling down. Many have been torn down and replaced by metal buildings used to store large tractors and other machinery used for haying and operating a farm or ranch. Metal buildings have replaced the barn and other wooden sheds for sheltering cows calving in

bad weather. Of course, the metal buildings are cheaper than rebuilding with wood and require little upkeep.

Growing up in the country with a barn leaves a youngster with a lot of memories -- some good, some bad. When we were really little, Mom stuck us in the empty manger for safekeeping while she and Dad milked. Later, where we were able to crawl out, we were put in the calf pen and told to stay put so we weren't in danger of wandering too close to the hindquarters of a cow and being kicked. We were also admonished to be quiet so we didn't disturb the cows. If they got upset, they wouldn't led down their milk, plus the milker might get kicked.

Our barn had wooden stanchions on the north and south sides of the barn with individual feed boxes in front of each cow. She would enjoy a generous helping of grain while standing in the barn during milking time. The entire floor of the milking area was cement, and back of the cow near her hooves a gutter ran the length of the barn. The result of natural functions dropped and/or splashed into it. Scooping this out was a regular chore for Dad and my brother when he got old enough. The manure was thrown outside on a pile during the winter and when spring came was loaded and spread on the corn field or meadow for fertilizer. When John Deere became a producer of farm equipment they advertised that they would "stand behind every piece of equipment they made except the manure spreader!"

I liked dumping the grain in the feed boxes, and when we had some really gentle cows we would squat down and scratch their heads and talk to them while they ate. I especially remember a pretty brown Guernsey with big brown eyes and long black lashes.

We always had a cow known as a kicker. I guess they were a little touchy; anyway, a chain with a flat metal cuplike device for each leg held the back legs together so they wouldn't kick. We called them kickers.

In the summertime, pesky flies were attracted to the cows, and because God equipped them with their very own fly swatters, the milker occasionally got hit in the face with a dirty tail. Not only was it dirty, but it stung and greatly annoyed the unfortunate milker. If the cow was a kicker, the milker usually stopped and hooked the tail in the kickers so the cow couldn't swat.

I was six years older than my sister and had to look after her. One time I was in the manger full of hay and reached down to pull her up with me. Her arm came out of the joint, and of course, she set up a royal bawl. I got into trouble, which I thought was very unfair because I was only trying to take care of her.

Barns were a good place to hide after we got older, and it was fun to crawl up into the haymow. Our barn didn't have a ladder so it was a challenge and adventure to get up into it. Bull snakes were very adept at finding a way up to the haymow in search of a meal of sparrows or mice. It was a definite fright to look up and see one overhead.

We can't forget to mention the resident felines always present in the barns to keep the mouse population under control. They would patiently sit near the milker in hopes of receiving some squirts of warm milk right from the cow. Experienced milkers were good at taking aim so the cat enjoyed the milk.

Milking was done morning and night without fail. The buckets and separator were rinsed out at night with clear water that had to be carried from the house. In the morning buckets of hot, soapy water were carried to the barn, and the buckets and separator were thoroughly scrubbed and rinsed and turned upside down on a bench on the east side of the barn to dry and await evening milking. The big dairies that provide us with all of our dairy products today use all sorts of sterilization and sanitation methods to assure us of pure and safe products. What a change from the past!

Dances were held in barns, but I remember going to only one as a youngster. These folks had a large, really nice barn and easy steps to the haymow where the dance was held on the smooth wooden floor.

After Mom and Dad more or less retired, at least quit milking cows and raising hogs, they sold the home place to my sister and her husband. They continued to run cattle, but by then larger tractors and other machinery were being used for haying and feeding operations. The haymow and stanchions were torn out and the gutters filled in. A larger overhead door was installed so the large equipment could be driven inside.

The first time I came home after this was done and went into the barn, as usual for a feel of home, it was a tremendous shock. I understood why it had been done, but a little bit of home was gone, and it left an empty spot in my heart.

When the barn had been built and painted in the early years it was red with a large red heart painted on the white haymow door and smaller hearts on the tops of the smaller dutch doors. After remodeling it was still red, but no hearts. Sometime later when I came home they had sided and roofed it with shiny metal siding. It was the thing to do with an aging, deteriorating old barn, but now it was nothing like I grew up with.

Progress -- nothing ever stays the same. Mom and Dad are both gone now so home truly is not home anymore. I am glad my sister and her husband own the home place, though, and are keeping it up. I can still return to sit on the rail fence, wander the hills and reminisce about the good old days of bringing the cows in from the pasture, letting them into the barn, smelling the warm milk, teaching calves to drink out of a bucket, nestling into the fresh hay, and finding a new litter of blind mewing kittens nursing from a proud, purring mother cat.

Barns -- I love them, and when I see them I wonder what special stories they could tell of the people and animals who have passed through their doors.

From "Memories of a Simpler Time," written by Marcia R. (Montanye) Hora and published in the Thomas County Herald, May 31, 2001:

At the end of the lane, off the gravel road that you take off the highway west of Comstock -- there it sits. A big red and white barn.

A landmark of the hopes and dreams of a couple who moved to their new place in 1913. In 1922, my grandparents -- Forrest and Minnie Montanye, erected the large barn to store hay, and to serve as a shelter for their cows and workhorses. They also built a house at the same time and other outbuildings.

That barn! What a wonderful place to get lost in for hours. For me and my sister, it was an inviting place to hide. A place to search for newborn kittens. A place to check out the unusual fly nets and smell the leather in the tack room. To watch pigeons and barn swallows make nests.

The barn was a place to sit with your feet dangling out the smaller north door that overlooked the hay bunk far below. There you would watch the fat cattle in the pen below while my grandfather and father fed them. You could dream about tomorrow and somehow, up there in the hay mow, you could almost reach out and touch the clouds.

From "The Barn King," written by Ann Toner and published in Nebraska Farmer magazine, August 1999:

Fred Gauchat of Brock, Neb., collects barns. They're scattered around on the old farmstead sites of some of the cropland Fred ha acquired over his lifetime.

"I feel like the barn king of Nebraska," he says. "If I didn't like barns, they would go."

He's made an attempt to preserve some of the barns on the old Gauchat (pronounced go-shaw) home place. The others molder wearily, a haven for foxes and other wild things, while the elements bring them to earth one rafter at a time.

Property tax rates don't favor collectors of old barns. Fred says he can't justify the expense of fixing up old barns that have outlived their usefulness. But he's loath to tear them down.

He keeps the stark, wooden sentinels around much as one might keep a pensioned-off plow horse -- for whatever days remain in their life -- just because they've earned a reprieve. Yet he knows that later, if not sooner, some of his barns have a date with a bulldozer, unless vandals or lightning strikes first.

"Barns are our history," Fred says. The first thing a settler built after shelter for his family was a lean-to for his livestock.

As the family and succeeding generations flourished, you could measure a husbandman's substance by the number and size of his barns and the quality of the stock within them.

A small farmer struggling to care for his family might have just a chicken house and a single, multi-purpose barn that stored both hay, grain, the work team, milk cow and assorted sheep and swine.

A more prosperous farmer would have a horse barn or even two. There would be a barn for the cow herd, separate quarters each for poultry, sheep and swine and a blossom of other buildings: Granary, wagon barn, smithy, plus such niceties as a wash house, a summer kitchen, a spring house or ice cave and a smokehouse. Fred still has many of those outbuildings on the old Gauchat home place where Fred has his farm headquarters.

When Fred visits his barn collection, he touches history. Not the history of treaties and battles, but the history of the daily struggles of the ordinary people who went before us.

Fred traces the worn wood of one of the old barns on his family's home place like it was a history book. Notice the wooden pegs holding the original parts of the building together, he says. Over here, see the square, hand-forged nails.

Look at the way generations of boot-clad feed, Fred's included, wore the ladder rungs scrambling up and down from the hayloft in the old horse barn.

See the shovel nicks where generations of Gauchats sweated to shovel itchy oats into the narrow opening of the granary. See these hooks up here? That's where you hung the milk pails as you filled them so the cows wouldn't knock them over.

If barns could talk, they'd speak of the steady, relentless, exhausting work of farming in the pre-mechanized era. The barns would sound again with the nickers, stomps and jingles of horses hitched and unhitched and fed by lantern light. There'd be the swish-swish of milk into a pail, the cats meowing for their share.

There'd be smells, too: Prairie hay and cow manure, new-turned earth and rain. And groaning memories of cold hands and parched summer days and aching muscles... Memories of the good old days.

From "The Witness of Combines," a collection of essays by Kent Meyers, University of Minnesota Press, 1998:

…The west barn wasn't much. It was old, it was sagging, it had holes in the cedar shingles. It was an old dairy barn, with stanchions for milking cattle and cement troughs to collect urine and manure. Before I was born, Dad switched from dairy to beef cattle. The stanchions became useless, and the gutters, no longer cleaned every day, filled with straw and manure. Several times a year we had to clean the entire barn out with pitchforks, one of our least favorite jobs.

Above the barn was a haymow, or loft. The roof of the barn sloped down on the west side and we stacked straw there, cramming the bales into the slope, leaving the large main space for hay.

Baling took place in June, July and August. By the time the sun had dried the dew from the hay, it had also turned the haymow into an oven. The bales came up the elevator and we pulled them off the side, gripping the twine with gloved hands, and carried them, in the stifling heat, to the stack.

Back and forth, one by one, the elevator screeching, we hauled hundreds of bales of hay, each weighing about sixty pounds, and stacked them on top of each other until the stack reached the ceiling of the haymow and there was only a narrow crawl space in the apex of the roof. Over the years the weight drove the pillars supporting the loft right through the concrete in the barn below, so that the concrete buckled and rose.

Evening after evening through the year we emptied the haymow, throwing out five or six bales of hay a day to feed the cattle. As the loft emptied, its topography changed; we found tunnels between the stacked hay and the slope of the roof, played hide-and-seek in them, invented games to play on the towering cliffs stepping down to the floor.

From NebraskaLand Magazine's "The Road Home," by Arlyn Davison, retired Dundy County rancher-farmer:

They call it the old Brown barn. It was bigger than most, probably the biggest barn in Perkins County. It didn't have a two-by-four in it. It was all two-by-sixes and two-by-eights and four-by-sixes. You wouldn't build a barn that stout today.

The Browns were dancers, the whole bunch, so it was built with regular house flooring in the hay mow so they could dance on it -- tongue-and-groove flooring, straight-grained fur, no knots in it. They never hired an orchestra, just passed the hat at midnight and then went on and played until morning. Just local talent, a fiddler and a drummer, whatever they could round up.

From "Grass Roots: The Universe of Home," by Paul Gruchow, Milkweed Editions, 1995:

When I was eight or nine, I stole a book of matches, which I had been strictly forbidden to have. As I was lighting them in the hayloft of Ed Will's barn, I dropped one, still burning, into the loose hay that filled the loft and could not retrieve it. The place exploded. By the time I reached the stairs, the interior of the loft raged with a searing light. The flames were already piercing the roof as I escaped though a main-floor door. I ran frantically to the pump, drew a single pail of water, and threw it at the barn, recognizing the futility of the gesture even as I carried it out. Then I ran hysterically toward the house, crying, "The barn is on fire! The barn is on fire!"

Neighbors and passersby, drawn by the smoke that mushroomed above us like a bomb cloud, formed a bucket brigade and kept the roof of the house wet, saving it, but every other building on the place was by nightfall either destroyed or damaged. The animals in the pasture, smelling the smoke, panicked and fled into the barn for safety. Not one of them, not even the cat, survived. Grain, tools and machinery were destroyed. The embers smoldered for a week. The bitter smell of charred flesh lingered even longer.

I was out of my mind with grief and fear. I imagined being sent to prison. I had, young as I was, a faint sense of what my carelessness would mean to a family already dangling by an economic thread. The smell of smoke and burned flesh nauseated me. I took to my loft and could not speak or eat for days. Ten years passed before I found the courage to talk about that afternoon.

The fire inspector came a few days later. I cowered in the house while my father went out, as he had said he must, to tell the official and Ed Will that his son had accidentally started the blaze. I could not hear the long, murmured conversation from the little window of my loft. When a story appeared in the local newspaper a couple of days later, it reported that the inspector had determined that the fire had been set off by spontaneous combustion. A few days later, Ed Will visited the farm again. He was not a wealthy man, and he was getting old; he would not rebuild, he said.

He had two nickels in his pocket, one for my sister and one for me, and he gave us both big hugs.

The community in which I grew up was pious to a fault -- I came to believe that piety ought to be counted among the deadly sins -- but even there, rectitude, out of consideration for a child, sometimes gave way to compassion.

These stories courtesy of the Nebraska Humanities Council as part of their Barn Again program.