

Audubon County Advocate Journal

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Ross Elevator Receives Iowa Barn Foundation Grant



Submitted by Bob and Janet Nelson

Ross is a small hamlet just north of Audubon. The two things that make it memorable are the Ross Methodist Church and the towering grain elevator. The 130-year-old Ross elevator may be around for another century thanks to owners Bob and Janet Nelson, the Betty Sievers family, and the Iowa Barn Foundation who awarded a \$25,000 matching grant for its restoration.

Years ago, nearly every small town in Iowa with railroad access had a grain elevator. The local economy revolved around these elevators as they were invaluable to the local farmers, towns, and its citizens. This grant underscores and recognizes the historical importance of the Ross elevator and its significance as the Iowa Barn Foundation has only awarded 119 grants in its 17 year history and few grants this large.

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Today, few all-wood elevators remain. For those that do, many have been severely modified and modernized. Thanks to the Sievers family, the Ross elevator largely remains as it did originally. Fred and Betty's vision years ago to restore the elevator began the process. Unfortunately, Fred passed away before much could be completed. Due to his effort, the elevator still stands. This is a testament to the durable construction of this old building and of a family with an appreciation for agricultural history.

Bob Nelson, who lives in Ross, has fond memories of spending time with Fred, Betty and Chuck Siemsen visiting about the elevator and what it was like when operational. They recalled all of the activities, business dealings, and camaraderie that took place and the many friends and family members from miles around that benefited from its existence.

Betty Sievers recalled back in the 1930's during the depression that the elevator was significant in that it was a way for farmers to sell a load of corn or oats to get a few dollars for groceries each week.

However, time and weather have taken its toll. While the elevator shows wear, Bryan Olson of Gray, who agreed to be the general contractor, feels it can be saved. He says, "This old structure is probably the only original grain elevator still standing in our area and I'm really glad to see someone wanting to preserve it. The old architecture is very interesting and it shows how business was done back in the early 1900's. It's part of our heritage. I'm glad I have been given the chance to get involved."

The Ross elevator is a remarkable piece of history due to its age, architecture, and construction site. The main elevator structure was most likely built in the

1880's on the western edge of Ross along the Northwestern/Rock Island Railroad line that once ran through Audubon County.

Bruce Selyem of Montana is the Founder and President of the Country Grain Elevator Historical Society and a vintage grain elevator expert. Bruce says the Ross elevator is one of the oldest and quite possibly THE oldest elevator left in Iowa. He visited 5,200 places in North America and hundreds in Iowa relating to vintage grain elevators, including Ross. Bruce says the Ross elevator is different from anything he has ever seen regarding its shape, age, and construction.

He pointed out the elevator's foundation is constructed of stacked limestone, while the vast majority of wooden elevators had poured concrete. This is a good indicator of its elderly status and rarity. The elevator is built into the side of a hill bank-barn style while most were constructed on flat ground. Bruce stated "Grain elevators were first built in North America beginning in the 1860's. The Ross elevator is from this era, it may be the oldest example in Iowa with few left in the United States". The Country Grain Elevator Historical Society website with photos of the Ross elevator can be viewed at www.grainelevatorphotos.com.

The elevator consists of three separate buildings: the main structure, brick scale house, and a crib bin on the south side built around 1900.

This same piece of property once contained another elevator, train depot, stock yards and numerous other outbuildings but this elevator is the only building yet standing. The elevator is historically significant not only due to its unique construction, but more importantly, it helped increase the settlement of the area by giving farmers a convenient place to sell and buy goods, greatly increasing the local economy.

The Ross elevator is historical for many reasons:

It was built before the turn

of the 19th century where most wooden elevators remaining were built in the 20th century.

There were two ways to build a wooden elevator at the time—cribbed or balloon framing with cable bracing. The Ross elevator is constructed of the much more desirable cribbed construction. Cribbed elevators were known for their strength and expense as an enormous amount of lumber was needed to build them. After the foundation was constructed, dimensional lumber was laid flat, log cabin style, with ends overlapping alternatively then spiked together with large nails. The Ross elevator's first layer is 2X8's, then 2X6's with the upper reaches eventually becoming 2X4's.

Lap siding covered the cribbed construction and was painted red, but due to so many wooden elevators burning to the ground from steam engine sparks, new elevators built after 1900 were covered with steel—the Ross elevator was sided with steel at that time.

Most wooden elevators were built on a flat piece of land with a poured concrete foundation. The Ross elevator is special in that it was built into the side of a hill similar to a bank barn. The main section of the elevator's foundation is constructed of stacked limestone.

Most of the few remaining wooden elevators have been modernized or surrounded with newer construction. The Ross elevator remains mostly original with the exception of a grain dryer and electric motor (both could be fairly easily removed) that were installed in the 1940's.

It still has the original elevator mechanisms, bin spouts, directional hopper, hydraulic wagon lift, "Fairbanks scale" wagon scale, train car loader spout and outgoing grain scale.

Bruce Selyem stated that it is possibly the only historically significant elevator of its kind built in Iowa in that era that still exists. The relevance that it had for the agricultural

industry of that time bares no equal.

No modern buildings exist to take away from the original character. It continues to define the "Sentinel of the prairie" term of many years ago.

Now that fundraising is underway to match the \$25,000 grant, one of the most common questions is "What's the plan after it's restored?" The main goal is to get it restored and keep it as original as possible and then take it from there. For now, the Iowa Barn Foundation will include it on their tours list. History tours from the local schools and others are also a possibility. *Gene Alt, a local farmer, expressed his interest in the elevator and offered his help in any way. Gene is pleased to see the elevator being saved. He expressed his appreciation for Fred putting a roof on the head-house years ago to help preserve it.*

We are in need of assistance in order to keep the costs down. Of course, monetary donations are needed, but if someone is willing to donate equipment (excavator, backhoe, skid loader, etc.), or skills (brick mason for the scale house comes to mind) please let us know! Also, old pictures or stories prior to 1940 that involve the Ross elevator would be greatly appreciated.

We do not want the elevator to become a lost piece of history. Audubon County should be proud that it still exists. The Iowa Barn Foundation has given us one year to raise the \$25,000 and all work must be completed within two years. This will be quite an undertaking for everyone involved, and it will be an exciting adventure!

Then, in two years when the question arises, "What are you going to do with it?" Audubon County will have another 130 years to decide!

For more information or questions about the Ross elevator, please email Save.Ross.Elevator@gmail.com, visit www.SaveRossElevator.com or call Bob Nelson at 712-304-5809.