

## Historic Barn Becomes Popular Event Site

The other day my calendar reminded me that it was my turn to submit an article. Since the Johnston Parks & Recreation Department has only existed since July of this year, before that Parks was a division of the Public Works Department, I was having trouble thinking of a unique program or facility to write about. I mentioned this to my wife who immediately suggested I write about the Simpson Barn. I guess it takes someone outside looking in to point out the obvious. After all, how many park departments have a barn?

When I started working for the City of Johnston in January of 2006, the Public Works Director was my boss. He showed me the barn in a park area called Johnston Commons and told me the barn was my responsibility and that it was going to be my “albatross”. He said it was moved there by the Johnston Historical Society, given to the City, and now it was my job to rent it out as a community event facility.

Now this was not just a typical 70 year old barn. The Johnston Historical Society had completely refurbished it after having it moved from a farm one mile away. The 30' x 60' barn, with original wood floor and all, was set on a new lower level foundation. The lower level was built with a kitchen, meeting room, rest rooms, storage area and an HVAC system. The walls were finished with barn siding and decorated with antique tools and interpretive pictures. The barn, once set on the foundation, was left as original as possible with the exception of adding electric outlets, ceiling fans and a new roof. A patio of donor bricks was installed in the front and a deck was built on the back.

The Historical Society, with donations, volunteers and county jail inmates completed the \$250,000 project and then gave the barn to the City on January 5, 2005. When the Historical Society purchased the barn, they also purchased the century old house which was on the farm. The house was also moved to Johnston Commons, refurbished, and is now home to the Historical Society's Museum.

The challenge was what could my administrative assistant and I do to get people to use this facility? With no money to advertise, we started doing everything we could. Fortunately, we were already responsible for renting out a community center. If the community center was booked when people called to check a date, we told them about the Barn and offered it as an alternative. We gave tours of the Barn whenever anyone was interested. We put pictures and information on our city's website. We allowed non-profit groups to use the Barn for free. We offered the Barn as a venue for performances during Johnston's Green Days Festival and a Bluegrass Festival. And, we jumped at the chance to have the Barn host Governor Vilsack on his “Walk Across Iowa” in 2006, and host Hillary Clinton for a town meeting during her campaign in 2008.

In an effort to make the Barn as user friendly as possible, we purchased equipment. Folding tables and chairs were bought and the Barn was stocked so there was seating available for 200. Picnic tables were added for outdoor seating on the patio and the deck. Since only the lower level is air conditioned, two large floor fans were purchased to help cool the Barn. With a furnace only in the lower level, a method was needed to provide some heat in the Barn. Kerosene heaters, rented from an equipment rental store, were found to work great. Our Fire Chief checked the operation of these heaters, testing the surface temperature on the wood floor and the carbon monoxide level, and approved their use. We purchased hearth pads to set the heaters on, but the Barn users must rent the heaters.

We have been pleasantly surprised by the popularity of the Barn. Use doubled from 2006 to 2007 and it is on pace this year to set a new standard. Word of mouth has proven to be our best advertising. The Barn has been rented every month of the year for events ranging from wedding receptions to family reunions, graduations to retirements, arts and craft sales to company picnics. The popularity of the Barn increased enough that we had to limit non-profits to only 4 free hours a month. We allow people to reserve it one year in advance and we literally have people calling first thing in the morning, one year to the date from their event to make sure they get it. The most popular months are May and June due to graduations, weddings and reunions. We have been talking about installing a forced air furnace to heat the Barn. If we do that, we will raise the rental rate some to help defray the cost. The trick will be to make sure the heating system doesn't detract from the rustic appeal.

I included some pictures of the Simpson Barn and if there are any questions, please contact me at (515) 727-8091 or [rward@ci.johnston.ia.us](mailto:rward@ci.johnston.ia.us). And by the way, I really enjoyed it when I told the Public Works Director that my “albatross” was self sufficient in 2007, with revenue exceeding expenses by \$788.

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<http://www.cityofjohnston.com/departments/parks/>

Simpson Barn in  
Johnston, Iowa

