

# The Changing Farmscape

## A Case Study of German Farmers in Southeast Michigan

**T**raditional Michigan farm families have adapted their buildings to meet changes occurring in both society and technology. The varied architecture found on Michigan's farms reflects the saga of its settlement and the resourcefulness of its pioneers.

The story of the Raab family farmstead in Washtenaw County has been repeated on many Michigan farms. The buildings on the Raab farmstead are not monumental public structures of the kind recognized as "significant architecture." Nevertheless, they are significant architecture and should be preserved. Farmsteads like the Raabs' typify the structures immigrant farmers and their descendants built and remodeled to help them farm the southeastern Lower Peninsula.

They embody an important aspect of Michigan's heritage. Each building, with its specific and utilitarian functions, tells its own story about a lifestyle now rapidly disappearing.

face towards the water, are thoughtfully spread out on the scenic site taking complete advantage of the lake view.

Registered as a Michigan Centennial Farm, the Raab

barn, horse barn, carriage house, hog shed, chicken coop, windmill, smokehouse, granary, icehouse, corn crib, tool shed/woodshed/shop and privy. Most of these structures still stand today. The owners of the Raab farm no longer earn a living from the land, but hold jobs in the urban, industrial economy. Although the land continues to be farmed by others, the farm buildings have been rendered obsolete by changing agricultural practices.

Like many families in the area, the Raabs are of German origin. Many Germans left their homeland in the 1840s and emigrated to America. Once in New York, many of these German families took the train or steamship to Detroit and found jobs there in its factories. Others, wanting to stake their claim to the land

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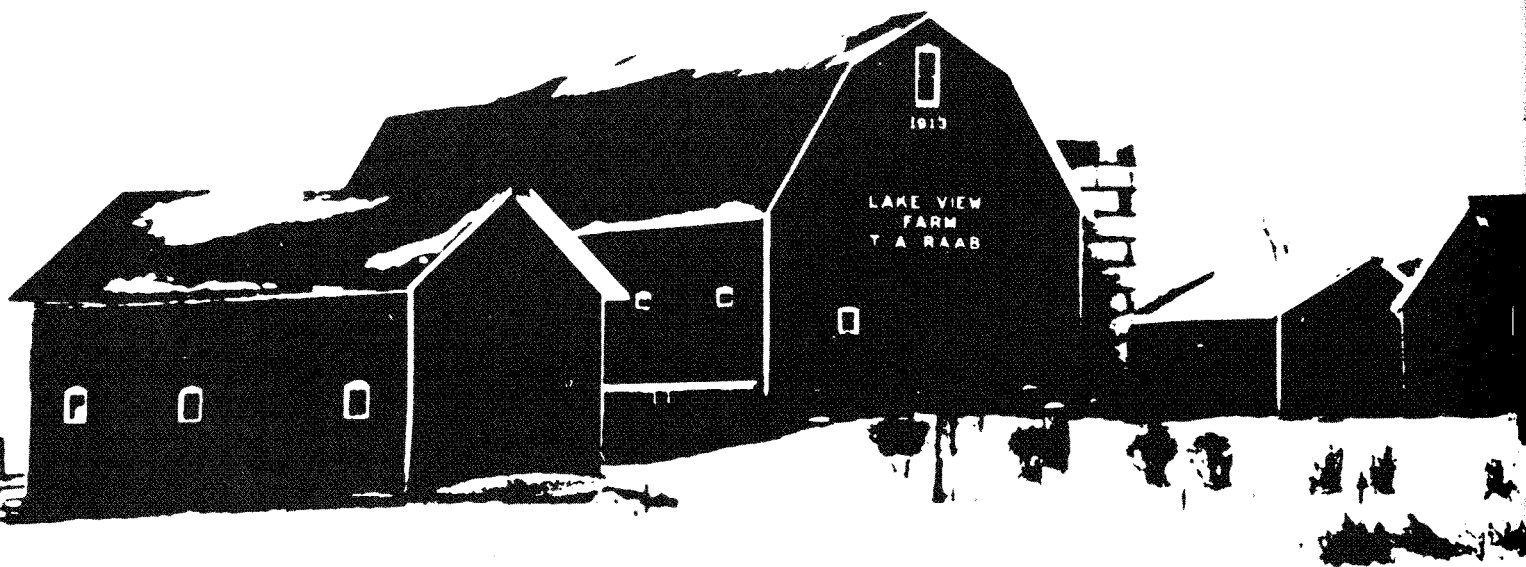
### The reputed domestic skills of farm women could make or destroy the reputation of their farm.

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Much of the Raab's 110 acres, including some six acres of Columbia Lake, has belonged to the family since Jacob Raab, Sr., bought the deed to the property from Volney and Cleo Chapin in 1850. The picturesque Raab farmstead, visible from Bemis Road, is near Manchester in Bridgewater Township. The farm buildings, especially the big barn, which has its long eastern

farm was in its prime from the turn of the century to the 1920s. At that time, the farmstead boasted the full array of buildings deemed necessary for a successful, diversified farm. It was a farm that not only met the subsistence needs of the Raab family, but produced products for local and regional markets. The Raabs' buildings included: the farmhouse, big barn, old

by Hemalata C. Dandekar and Mary Bockstahler



and to earn a living by farming, spread out into the countryside.

Jacob Raab, Sr., who left Germany in 1848, was from Morsfeld, Rheinbayern, in southern Germany. So were a number of other families who settled in Bridgewater Township, as well as in adjacent Freedom and Lodi townships.

Upon first acquiring his property, Jacob Raab, Sr., built a log house. Unfortunately, there are no remains, such as foundation walls or plantings, that give any indication of the log structure's exact location.

One of the earliest existing buildings is the sturdy farmhouse, built in 1858 to replace the log house. Its oldest portion is constructed of dressed stone masonry using stones found on the Raab farm. The front elevation makes a gesture to style with its Greek Revival-type cornice. The house was two-storied with a kitchen, a parlor and a dining room on the first floor; the bedrooms were on the second floor. The basement served to store crops, canned meat and other food. It was directly accessible from the outside by an exterior entry from the kitchen yard.

Typical of farms like this, additions were made to the house as the farm prospered economically. The first addition was a masonry chimney and kitchen. It was

followed by a wood-frame addition of a screened-in back porch and pantry. Both additions were made sometime before 1890, a good indication that the Raab family was well-established on the land.

**T**he farmhouse and the adjoining yard were the woman's domain. This is where the feeding, the cleaning and the providing of the family's subsistence needs were taken care of by the hard-working farm women. It was arduous work. At one time three rows of grapevines stretched between the windmill and the house.

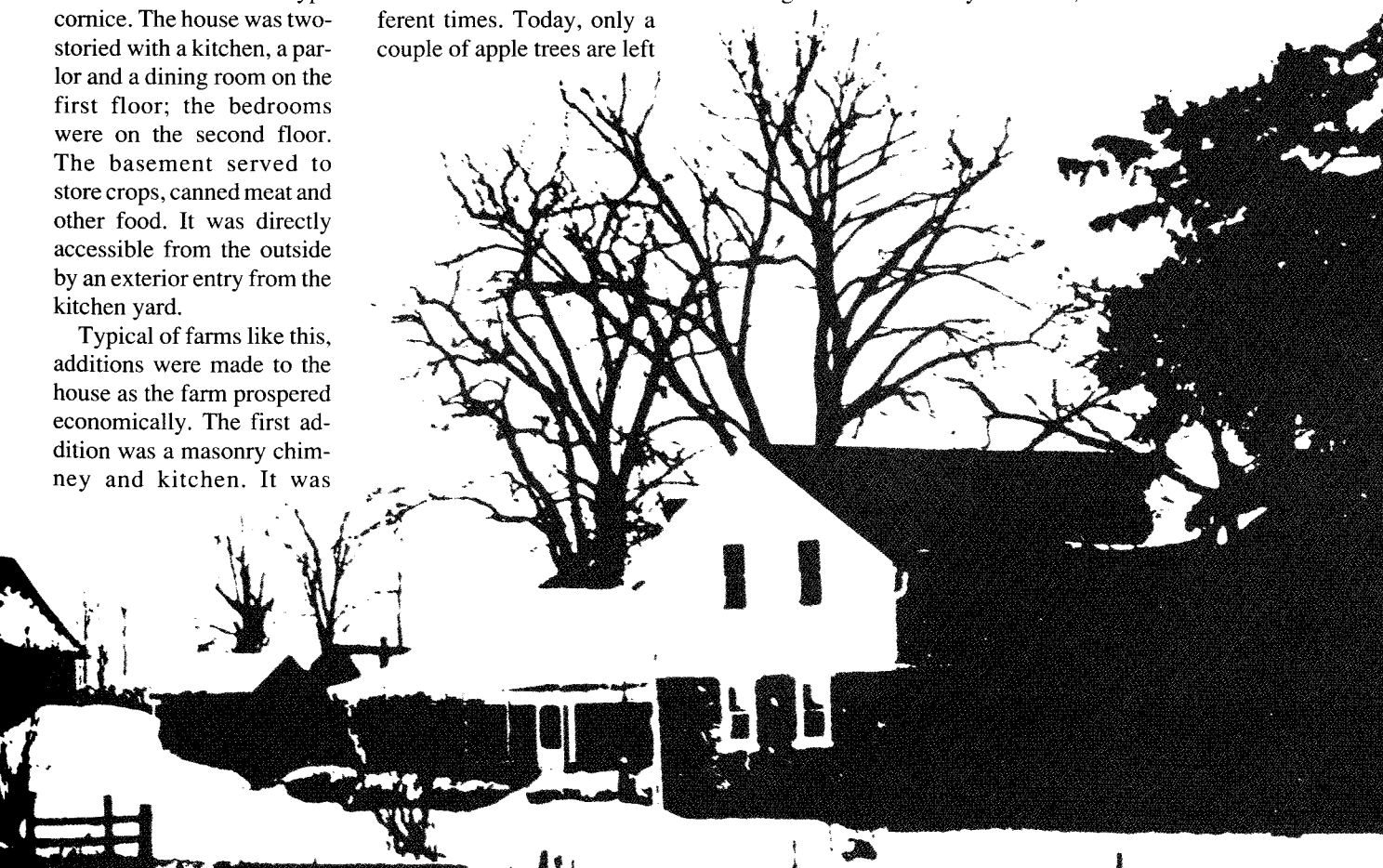
The farm's fruit was made into jelly, jams and home-made wine. Approximately four acres of apple orchards were planted to the west of the house. They contained a variety of old-style apple trees that matured at different times. Today, only a couple of apple trees are left

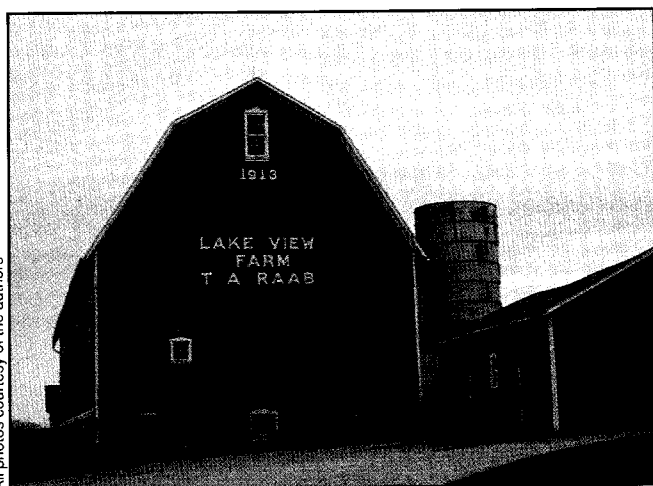
in the orchard today. The apples and the cider, vinegar and applesauce made by the Raab women were stored in the spacious basement.

The reputed domestic skills of farm women could make or destroy the reputation of their farm. In *Home Grown*, which contains reminiscences of life in a farming community in southern Michigan, Della Lutes notes that neighbors found out in many ways whether a woman was a good cook, could sew well or manage her chickens or children. The trading of food in lunch pails by children in the one-room schoolhouse, the suppers served at barn raisings and harvest times, and the jellies and preserves that exchanged hands when families went visiting, all provided good evidence of a farm woman's culinary skills. Farmers have noted that neighbors would stay

away at mealtimes when crop threshings and barn raisings were planned on farms whose women had poor reputations as cooks and housekeepers.

Eighty-five-year-old Rolland Raab remembers that his grandmother, who held title to the farm from 1888 to 1911 and helped to run it for many more years, "held the purse strings and was a good business woman." Her books contain meticulous notes of various loans such as eight dollars given to neighbors and the ten dollars they returned some months later. Although she did not speak a word of English, she was able to manage all her business affairs completely in German. This attests to the closeness of this German settlement and its adherence to old ways some sixty years after the group's arrival in Michigan. Mrs. Rolland Raab, whose father was the





minister of nearby Bethel Church, remembers that church services there were held in German until the late 1920s.

During Jacob Raab, Sr.'s, days, the Raab family grew corn, wheat, oats, hay and barley. The wheat, as well as the cream and eggs, were sold for cash, usually in nearby Manchester. These paid for the groceries and other products the family needed to buy. To support this productive activity, some of the first structures to be built on the farmstead—along with the farmhouse—were the outhouse, the woodshed, the smokehouse, the windmill, the icehouse, and the big and smaller barn. The outhouse or privy, a small white wood structure, was screened from view by a lilac bush judiciously planted next to it.

Another useful structure that helped to hide the outhouse was the woodshed. Since the woodshed had a fireplace and a workbench, it was also used as a shop and for storage. The woodshed burned down in 1970, but the smokehouse, located next to the woodshed, is still standing. It was convenient

to have these two buildings adjacent to each other. Once a hog or cow was butchered it could be cooked over the fireplace in the shop and then easily moved next door for smoking to preserve it through the winter.

**A**nother essential domestic structure on a typical Michigan farmstead was the icehouse. The original Raab icehouse still stands. During the winter, ice was cut from the lake when it was 10 to 12 inches thick, pulled up to the icehouse by the horses and packed by layer in sawdust. This would suffice as the Raab's ice supply for the following summer.

The present layout of the Raab farmstead is linear, a configuration efficient for farm operations as they became more mechanized after the Civil War. The driveway off Bemis Road passes along the side of the house and then jogs slightly left as it goes past the big barn. The farm structures are arrayed lineally along this axis, yet set back behind and downwind of the house taking good advantage of the view to Columbia Lake. The big

**The expansive gambrel roof of the big barn provided more space for hay storage than a gable roof.**

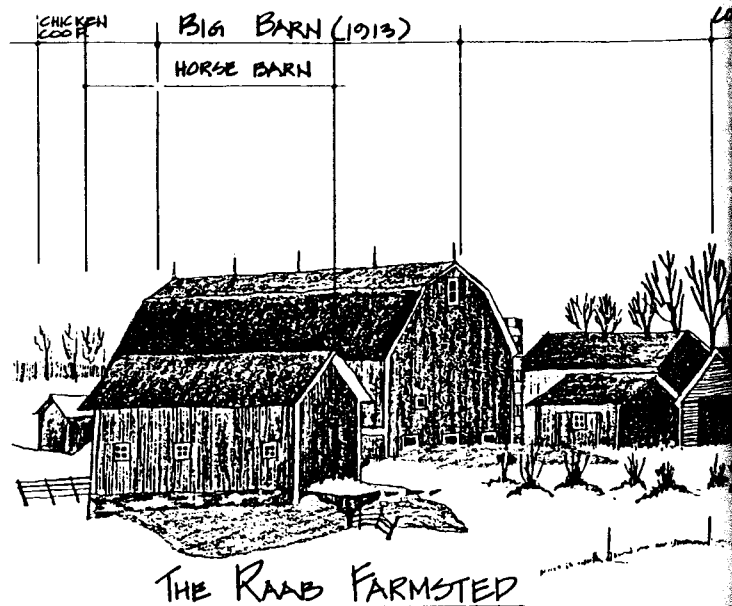
barn has a "pride of place" with its northern elevation facing Bemis Road. The inscription, **1913, Est. 1850 Lake View Farm, T. A. Raab**, is visible under the gambrel roof.

The present big barn occupies the original site of a gable-roofed, English-style barn that was relocated downhill from the big barn, where it now functions as a tool and machine storage shed. The present big barn, which is 32-by-88 feet, was reincarnated in this form in 1913. Its southern half is older and consists of the original big barn that was constructed before 1900. It was a three-story, banked structure used to house equipment, livestock and hay. It was located perpendicular to the southern half of the present big barn.

An additional 32-by-44 foot addition was constructed to the north. The structural beams and columns of the older, southern half are of hand-hewn white

oak. The flooring consists of planking that is significantly wider than that of the later half and ranges in width from 18 to 24 inches. The white oak used for the structure of the older and the newer sections of the big barn was obtained from thirty-two acres of land that the Raab family owned across the road in Freedom Township. Wood was cut on the site and sawn in a nearby sawmill. The tongue-and-groove vertical white pine siding was probably brought by railroad to Manchester from northern Michigan.

Between 1910 and 1916 many barns were built in this portion of Washtenaw County. Raab recalls that in 1913, when construction activity on the farm was proceeding at a furious rate, there was a crew of ten to twelve men who lived with the family from Monday to Saturday. They slept in the Raab farmhouse and ate with the family. "It was quite a chore for my grandmother



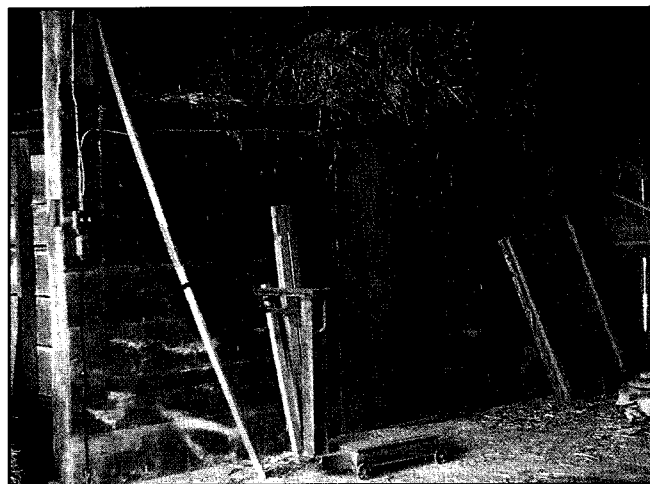
**The granary is located on the big barn's second level and was accessible by an earthen ramp.**

and mother to feed all of them and to make the beds and such." Two men, the boss and his helper, laid and leveled a track with rollers. Using horses, they pulled the old small barn some eighty feet to its present location. More men were needed to swing the original big barn off its foundation and over to its present position where the foundation and concrete work had already been completed. Even though he was only seven years old at the time of the barn raising, Raab remembers the neighbors got together to help; the men built and the women cooked. The bents went up first, the sections having been put together earlier on the ground. The frame of the barn was erected in a single day.

The new big barn boasted a billowing gambrel roof that provided more space for hay storage than the gable roof. It was a handsome three-level banked barn in the German tradition. The

lower level was used to house animals. The west wall of the foundation was built into the side of a hill. This sheltered the animals on the lower floor from the northwest winds and took advantage of the insulating qualities of the earth. The east wall, leading out to the barnyard, was punctured with doors enabling the animals to take advantage of the warmth of the sun during the winter months. The middle level, made accessible by an earthen ramp to thrashers and other machinery, was used for winnowing and storing grain and for tool storage. The upper level was used for storing hay and straw. The big barn, along with the other farm structures, was painted with red oxide paint.

As farms prospered, more structures were added. The Raab farm has a horse barn with six stalls, a granary for storing the oats fed to the horses and a loft/second story for storing straw that



provided bedding for the horses. There was a harness room to store the yokes and trappings. This was a functional layout. At harvest time, the oats and hay were loaded into the horse barn, which provided feed for the animals during the winter months.

The hogs also had their own barn, which was located next to the horse barn. This was a two-story structure that housed the hogs on the ground floor and provided storage space for corn on the upper, which could easily be tossed down to the hogs at feeding time. The hog barn was torn down in the 1930s when the family stopped raising hogs; the land it occupied then was added to the garden.

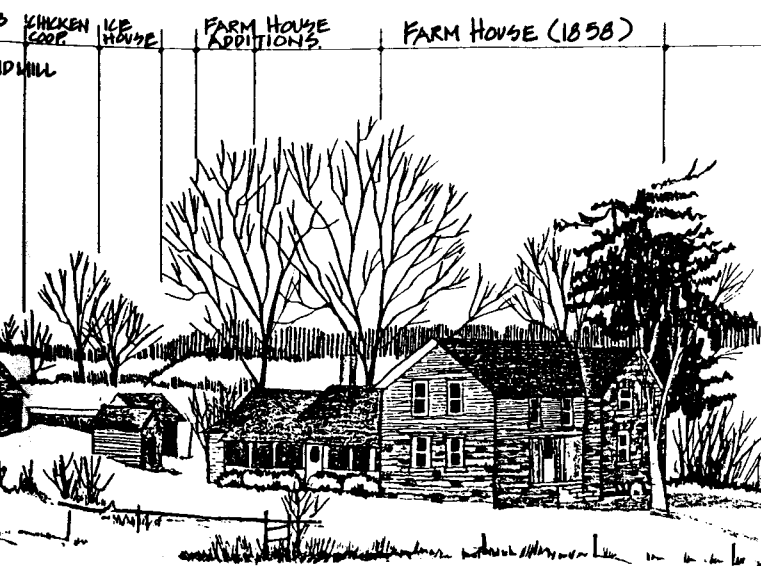
A carriage house was built to the north of the big barn; further north a corncrib and tractor shed were also erected. The small chicken coop to the south of the big barn was augmented by an addition to the old icehouse in the 1930s so the family could increase the number of chickens it raised.

The animals raised by the Raabs provided food for the family. The surplus, once

marketed, earned the needed cash income for the farm. In its heyday, the Raab farm raised five or six cattle. The Durham or Herford cows provided milk. Whole milk was kept for the family's consumption and cream was sold at the market. The calves were fattened and butchered for meat. Three of the twenty to thirty hogs kept on the farm would be butchered each winter to sustain the family. Fifty to sixty sheep were also raised on the Raab farm. They were sheared in mid-March and the wool sold.

**M**anchester served as the hub of commercial exchange for the community. Supplies for the farm were usually charged at the one grocery store in Manchester and the amount owed would be paid off in December when the winter wheat was harvested. The wheat was sold to the owners of a flour mill in Manchester; the eggs and cream to the grocery store.

Horses were used into the 1930s to cultivate the farm. There were usually five horses, two teams of work



**BRIDGEWATER TWP. WASHTENAW COUNTY**



**Rolland Raab (left) recalled that when Ford tractors appeared, “we let the other guy try it, before we bought ours.”**

horses and one “odd horse.” The odd horse pulled the buggy or was added as a third horse to strengthen the power of a team during difficult tasks such as pulling the plow. Three separate steps requiring the use of the horses were involved in preparing the land. First, the top six inches of topsoil would be plowed up; then a heavy roller was dragged across the furrows to break up soil lumps; finally, a harrow was dragged across the soil to loosen it.

Raab recalled that some of their neighbors acquired the first steel-wheeled Ford tractors early in the 1920s. “We were more conservative,” he noted, and “we let the other guy try it out, before we bought ours.” After machinery replaced the horses, only 80 of the 110 Raab farm acres were planted; the more difficult hilly land lay idle. A silo was added to the collection of Raab farm buildings in the late 1920s, probably about the time the first tractor was bought. The tractor was used to power the silo filler, which chopped whole corn and blew it into the silos. Made of aluminum panels,

the Raab silo, which stands on the west side of the big barn, is now missing its roof.

**B**y the 1920s, Rolland and his brother Oscar owned the farm jointly. The Raab family’s move off the land began during the Great Depression. After graduating from high school, Rolland obtained a job as an accountant in Ypsilanti. He still enjoyed working on the farm and went back to help his brother whenever he could, but his main income was from his city job. Oscar had also acquired off-farm skills. In 1911 he had learned the newly evolving trade of plumbing and began installing bathrooms in the Manchester area. That same year he installed a hot-water furnace and a bathroom in the Raab farmhouse. This original furnace still heats the house, but it is now fueled with oil, instead of wood.

Today, the Raab farm, like many of the farms surrounding it, is no longer a diversified farm meeting many of the family’s needs. Most of the farm structures stand empty, except for

those that can be used for storage. The carriage house is a garage and the horse barn is a tool shed. The silo stands roofless and empty. The farmhouse is rented. The present Raab farm owners, the families of Rolland Raab’s son and daughter, are in more lucrative, off-farm occupations. Since 1930 the land has been cultivated by other farmers on a sharecropping basis. During the summer, the Raab family occasionally rents cabins on the lake to vacationers, but liability concerns often render such arrangements unattractive.

Many family farms in this area, and across Michigan, face the same dilemma that confronts the Raab family today. As a family they have realized Jacob Raab’s dream when he arrived in the United States in 1848. His descendants prospered on the land. But they have moved from its riches to stake a claim from more urban, industry- and service-related work. They represent a national trend. In the United States today the farm population—only five million people (two percent of the population)—is as low as it was in 1850.

Successful family farming today is primarily based on crop specialization and on expanding the scale of operation to stay competitive with the corporate farms that control an increasing share of the market. Buildings, such as those on the Raab farmstead, so carefully fashioned for the specialized and particular needs of

diversified, primarily subsistence farming, do not meet the more neutral, factory-like needs for storage space of these currently viable larger farms. When smaller farms, like the Raab’s farm, are acquired and consolidated into bigger ones, their buildings are often perceived as a liability, leaving the new owner vulnerable to personal injury claims. Few tax incentives encourage the preservation of these structures. On the contrary, there are disincentives to improve and maintain them in increased property assessments. An “economically rational” response is to bulldoze these buildings away. The emotional pleasure evoked by the sturdy integrity of an old barn beautifully sited on fertile land may be lost to the younger generation.

**T**he loss of the traditional Michigan landscape of diversified family farms and their structures impoverishes and robs us of a tangible connection to our agrarian heritage. Families like the Raabs are proud of their farms and their buildings. Despite economic disincentives, they have continued to cherish their farmsteads. Other farm families, unable to make or justify such private investments in preservation, have left their buildings to their fate.

The arguments for creating institutional structures and passing enabling legislation for farmscape preservation are not merely



sentimental and emotional. Such arguments have little appeal in the "bottom line" orientation of modern societies. In European countries, such as Switzerland, Germany and France, agrarian landscapes have been recognized as an all-important asset of the tourist industry. Their significance has been acknowledged with the passage of legislation that protects traditional farm buildings, farm lands and farm practices.

In Michigan, tourism is a major and increasingly important industry. It behooves us to consider whether we can afford to allow the rapid and accelerating loss of our barns and farmscapes to continue unabated, or if we should take measures to protect structures such as the Raab farmstead for the enjoyment and appreciation of succeeding generations. □

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## Saving Michigan's Agricultural Architecture

**P**reserving the majority of Michigan's agricultural architecture will not be significantly aided solely by strategies such as entry on the National Register of Historic Places, State Register of Historic Sites or Michigan Centennial Farms.

Preservation efforts must go hand-in-hand with; 1) initiating regional planning efforts to maintain Michigan's family farms in the business of farming through direct links to urban markets; 2) making owners of farm buildings aware of the architectural significance of their buildings; 3) providing technical, architectural maintenance, structural repair, and design guidelines and analysis in publications. (These would be useful to individual owners of farm structures in their efforts to adapt and reuse and to do preventive maintenance of their farm buildings); 4) raising awareness in urbanizing communities and regions of possible farm preservation actions that can be taken at the local level to protect farming and the farmscape; 5) exploring and promoting modifications to tax structures that would provide incentives to owners of traditional farm structures to preserve these buildings even though they may be obsolete in current farming.

The preservation of Michigan's farms, farming and farm buildings are interlinked. A collaboration and coordination of public and private efforts is needed in order to achieve success. In this context, examining the Raab farm case is instructive. The Raab farm land is presently rented out to a tenant for cultivation. The rent charged per acre does not cover the cost of the property tax bill on the farm, which in 1988 was almost \$5,000.

The farm buildings are not in farm use, but continue to be maintained only because, Rolland Raab said, "I'm too proud to let them go." Last year all the farm buildings were repainted at a cost of \$4,800. Since the Raab family does not use the farm buildings for production, this maintenance expense does not qualify as a business-related tax deduction. The buildings require repainting every eight years; the last time they were painted it cost the Raabs \$2,400. The oldest barn, probably built in the 1860s, needs structural repair. Technical information about possible modifications,

ways to tighten up the hand-hewn joints, and brace and support the building at the lowest cost possible is desperately needed. Despite the barn's sentimental value, the owners do not know where they can obtain good technical help to save the barn in a cost effective manner. Strategies that would be useful in the continued preservation of the Raab farmstead, and others like it, include:

1) Developing enabling material, such as a series of technical notes, that would help owners of old barns and farm structures to make cost-effective repairs or adapt them to new purposes without destroying the historical characteristics of the building.

2) Developing a series of recommendations for changes in tax structures that will induce the private property owners of these historic resources to invest in their maintenance and upkeep. In the Raab case, the ability to deduct a portion of the maintenance or repair costs from their tax bill as an investment or contribution to historic resource preservation might be a sufficiently attractive incentive. Forgoing property taxes or reducing them on those farm structures that are obsolete and used only for storage would also act as incentives.

3) Promoting changes in the tax structure to disallow raising the valuation of the farm property because the obsolete farm structures have been painted or otherwise improved.

The Raab family's dilemma regarding the cost and benefits of maintaining the farm property is one that other owners of farm structures in the state share. In heavily urbanized counties, the increasing suburbanization of the countryside has resulted in a number of home owners buying farmhouses for primary residences. Some farm structures are often included with the house. The new owners are not involved in farming and do not use these farm structures. They need inducements to maintain these buildings as a historic resource. Lacking the Raabs' family pride in the structures that were built by their ancestors, they tend to let the buildings decay. Not only do they lack technical information on cost effective repair and maintenance of these properties, but they also have little financial incentive to invest in them.