

Re-raising the Barn

Winthrop's iconic community gathering spot needs some love

By Ashley Lodato

Back before Netflix, Facebook and Twitter; before the Westernization of Winthrop, before Sheri's Sweet Shoppe, before the inaugural opening of Highway 20; before all this, when the Methow Valley really was an isolated little municipality literally at the end of the road, the Winthrop Auditorium was where the community gathered.

Weddings and wakes, potlucks and proms, melodramas and meetings, basketball games and barn dances — the Winthrop Auditorium hosted them all.

With the opening of the North Cascades Highway as well as the information highway, the Methow Valley has become less remote. The Winthrop Auditorium, however, has become no less important to the community's social scene.

Owned by the Town of Winthrop and operated and maintained by a volunteer board of directors and three part-time staff, the Winthrop Auditorium has offered four generations of Methow Valley residents and visitors a place to gather, discuss, observe, learn, enjoy, scheme and declare their love.

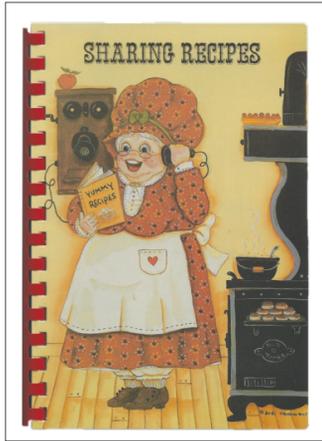
And now it's time to give some of that love back to the place that is the site of so much activity. To this end, the non-profit Winthrop Auditorium Association invites the community to a free "Love the Barn" appreciation night on Saturday (April 13).

Vital role

From its origins as a Quonset-style wooden structure built in the 1930s to its current state as a gambrel-roofed local landmark, the Winthrop Auditorium — often referred to as "the big red barn" or just "the Barn" — has filled a role critical to the intimacy of the Methow Valley community: It gives people a place to gather.

For tiny four-season communities like the Methow Valley, in the days before the internet gathering spots like the Barn were vital to combatting feelings of boredom and isolation. And despite the abundance of ways to occupy our time in the digital age, such gathering spots are arguably even more critical now for preventing loneliness. Because places like the Barn give us a sense of belonging.

Longtime Methow Valley residents



Barn supporters sold copies of a cookbook featuring recipes from local contributors to help raise money for the new building.

recall attending dances at the Winthrop Auditorium. When children tired of the event, they fell asleep along the walls until their parents were ready to pick them up from the floor and drive home. Others, like Carol Lester, attended their proms at the auditorium, or played in basketball games there.

So when the Quonset hut, which had weathered the 1948 flood that immersed the entire floor in muddy water, collapsed under the weight of a 1971 snowfall, rebuilding was not a question of "whether," but instead of "how."

The 'Auxiliary Seven'

"When [the building] went under," says Lester, "everybody was startled. We had no other place to go. It was the community place to go. It wasn't just me; everyone was touched by losing that place." Faced with the loss of the place she relied on for her sense of community, Lester, along with six other ladies from the American Legion Auxiliary, did what women in hardscrabble communities have done for ages: they rolled up their sleeves and solved the problem.

"We seven donated \$1,000 each to get started," says Shirley Haase, another one of the "Auxiliary Seven," of whom just half are still living. "That was a lot of money in those days. Some families had to borrow from Farmer's State Bank."

The remaining financing came from the community in the form of \$250



Above: The new Winthrop Auditorium — less formally known as the Barn — was completed in 1983, replacing an aging Quonset hut that collapsed after a snowstorm in 1971.



Left: members of the "Auxiliary Seven" — the group that launched the effort to build the barn — celebrated the retirement of the mortgage on the building. Members of the group each individually donated \$1,000, and sold \$250 bonds to the community to raise additional financing for the project. Other fundraising events included casino nights.

Photos courtesy of Herb and June Gatewood

asset to this community."

Northcott points to this sense of pride, derived from an entire community pitching in to accomplish something. "That community spirit of involvement and participation is so important," he says. "It would be nice to get some of that same spirit back, now that the Barn is in need of upgrades." The Winthrop Barn Association holds occasional work parties — such as a recent one where new kitchen counters were installed — and welcomes the public to join the effort. "Many of the projects are quite easy," Northcott adds. "No experience necessary."

Northcott acknowledges that making the Barn look and function better is ostensibly the reason to get involved, but notes the intrinsic value of pitching in to answer a community need. "When you pitch in you get to know people," he says. "And when you get to know people, you feel like you belong."

"I love the Barn and what it was built for," says Haase, referring not to the specific events hosted at the Barn, but instead to what such a gathering place represents for the community. When a community prioritizes a place for people to come together, it remains a community where people show up for each other.

Fun and appreciation

The members of the Winthrop Auditorium Association hope that people will show up to the Barn Appreciation Night on Saturday, for each other and for the Barn. "It's going to be a fun event," says Northcott. "We'll have a great dinner — chicken, ribs, baked beans, salad — music, door prizes, entertainment." The event will also feature historic pictures and artifacts from the reconstruction effort, including photographs of the Auxiliary Seven, copies of the \$250 bonds, and recipe books sold in early fundraising efforts.

A celebration of the Barn's role in the Methow Valley community, the event is a membership drive as well. "You can't keep the walls standing if you don't maintain them," Haase sagely advises. And membership — ranging from \$25/individual annual membership to \$350 family lifetime membership — is critical to the Winthrop Auditorium's maintenance budget.

Northcott hopes the event will generate not only funds for the Barn's intended improvements, but also renewed enthusiasm for the Barn as a community asset. "We really want people to feel like the Barn belongs to them. We should all feel invested in making sure the Barn thrives," he says.

Admission to the Barn Appreciation Night is free to all guests who pick up a ticket at no charge at the Hank's Harvest Foods customer service counter or at the Winthrop Store (inside Winthrop Motors, downtown). Doors open at 5 p.m.; dinner begins at 6 p.m. For more information about the Barn Appreciation Night or about getting involved with the Winthrop Auditorium Association, contact info@winthropbarn.com or call 996-2117.



A human chain of volunteer workers carefully placed roofing panels on the Barn as its form began to take shape.

bonds. "We sold bonds to people in town," says Lester. "And when the Barn was finished, we paid back the bonds by hosting casino nights." The casino nights brought in \$10,000-\$12,000, says Lester — \$10,000 from each event was used to pay back bonds; the remaining revenue was distributed as door prizes to bond holders.

The community financing was just the tip of the volunteerism iceberg, however. The Barn itself was constructed by volunteer labor, with contractor oversight. This type of civic involvement was typical of the Methow, says Haase: "If you lived in the Methow, you had to work hard. Everybody wanted to have our place back. There was no question about not rebuilding."

Haase, who owned a western store in what is now the Old Schoolhouse Brewery, says "I'd close up the store at 5 p.m. and go over to the Barn to work until dark. Everyone pitched in."

Volunteer efforts

"Everybody volunteered their time," agrees Lester, "my folks, my kids — we were all over there all the time. I think everyone in town put at least one nail in a piece of wood. It was the main place to be every day — working on the Barn. We got the footings in, and then once the actual building started going up, people got really excited."

"Barry Stromberger built us a wood stove," says Haase, "and it was a good one. We had a wood getting party every fall." This image of a community wood-gathering party is one that is echoed in every phase of construction of the new Barn, from footings to framing to finish work. "We all helped with everything," Haase says, "even if we hadn't done that

kind of thing before."

Haase recalls that "there'd be a day when somebody wouldn't show up to help, but by the next day curiosity would get the best of them and they'd be back."

In 1983, the Barn was complete and paid for. In the nearly 40 years since, the Barn has hosted events as varied as corporate trainings for Zumiez sportswear store managers, blood drives, and wild-fire information centers, in addition to its mainstay happenings like Winthrop Town Council and Kiwanis meetings, auctions, arts performances, educational talks, visits from Santa Claus, and '90s Days dances. With a capacity of more than 500, the Barn is the largest indoor venue and banquet hall in the valley.

The Barn is, however, showing its age. "It's starting to show wear and tear," says Rick Northcott, currently president of the Winthrop Auditorium Association. "It needs some love."

Improvements needed

Although significant donations from places like the Moccasin Lake Foundation and Red McComb's estate have enabled the Barn to make upgrades over the past decade, the project list of desired improvements is substantial, ranging from generator replacement, to upgraded Wi-Fi and sound systems, to interior and exterior painting, to improved chair carts.

"The sense of pride in this project is palpable," says Northcott, who has talked extensively with the remaining members of the Auxiliary Seven about the Barn reconstruction experience. "Keeping the Barn alive really has been a community project over the years. The Barn holds such a special place in so many people's hearts. It's an essential



Volunteer labor and other local contributions made construction of the new building possible.