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Maintaining a Rural, Pastoral Lifestyle in Spring Prairie, Wisconsin

I grew up in a cornfield. At least, that's how I always thought of it. From the front porch of our house, it was only a one-minute walk to the north, east, or south to reach a field. If not for the highway running through the valley in which I lived, the fields to the west would have been just as accessible. For most of my childhood, the fields rotated between corn and soybeans every year, but I seem to remember only the corn. Perhaps that's because it's a good deal less amusing to play in a soybean field than in a cornfield.

Today, the land I grew up on looks much the same as it did when I was a child. Beyond the fields are several hundred acres of wooded land, crossed by the small and winding Sugar Creek. Our four acres of land within the cornfields is typical of many other Spring Prairie, Wisconsin homes. A large brick house sits in the center of the lawn. Surrounding it are an old, dilapidated barn, several outbuildings, a windmill, vegetable and flower gardens, a small orchard, oak and maple trees, and a junkpile.

In Spring Prairie, people try to preserve the appearance and lifestyle of an agricultural community, even if they do not farm the land. A 1998 survey of Spring Prairie residents showed that the majority of respondents valued the agricultural community and country atmosphere of the area (Spring Prairie Town Board... 95). My home, and the way my family interacts with the land, is representative of the ways in which nonagrarian residents of Spring Prairie attempt to recreate the pastoral lifestyle of the farmers who were once the dominant group in the area.

The first European settlers moved to Spring Prairie, a township in Walworth County in southeastern Wisconsin (Fig. 1), in 1836. At the time, prairies and woodlots of oak and maple

covered the town. It was settled as an agricultural community, because according to an 1881 account of the settlement, the soil was "eminently suited to agricultural pursuits" and contained almost no "waste land" (History... 889-890). By 1870, the population of Spring Prairie was 1209, and it was considered the "banner town of the county" because of its "wealth and worth as a farming township" (Landowners' Index... 19)

In 1842, Daniel Whitmore moved from New York and settled on 480 acres in Section 17 of Spring Prairie. His father and brother settled on adjoining plots in Section 18. Daniel Whitmore was described as a "prominent and substantial citizen" (History... 920). He almost certainly had significant monetary means, because by 1864 he had renovated his one room log cabin into a large, two-story brick house-the same house in which I grew up. An illustration of the house was featured in the 1873 platbook (Fig. 2).

For over a hundred years, this house was the home to the farmers who made their living off the surrounding land. In the middle part of the 19th century, the fields were perhaps sown with wheat. By the end of century, the Whitmores were probably planting corn in their fields. In 1910, corn and hay were being grown on more acres in Walworth County than any other crops (Prairie Farmer's... 304). It is likely that the Whitmores were also growing corn and hay in their fields in the beginning of the 20th century. The barn that remains on the property today (second from the right in the right-hand corner of the Fig. 2) contains a large haymow in its second story. Because this barn is believed to predate the house by about ten years, the Whitmores were likely growing hay as far back as the 1850s. Although in this case, it might have been purely for their own animals to consume, and not intended for market. The 1873 platbook sketch of the Whitmore farm does not show any silos, but the two that are on the property now appear to have

been built in the late 1800s or early 1900s. These were designed to store corn, either to sell at a later date or to feed to livestock on the farm.

Periodically throughout my childhood, we found evidence of the farming practices employed by the land's previous occupants. Horseshoes were the most common testament to farm's past. Wandering the fields, especially after they had been freshly plowed, we found several horseshoes, reminders of the horses that were once essential in planting and harvesting the fields.

In addition to the horses used in the fields and for transportation, other animals were also present on the farm. The Whitmores perhaps began with pigs and chickens. Probably by the end of the 19th century they also obtained Holsteins as milk cows. The milk house that is now attached to the barn is an addition to the original building, so the Whitmores likely joined the dairy industry after their initial settlement. In 1919, the Whitmores were raising pigs, chickens, and Holsteins for profit (Prairie Farmer's... 162, 185, 176). From what other locals have told my family, pigs were not present on the farm after World War II. However, when my parents bought the property in 1977, the chicken coop had been maintained fairly well, which suggests that chickens remained on the farm up until that time. The chicken coop is large enough to house between 50 and 70 hens and several roosters. This is clearly more than necessary to provide a family with fresh eggs, so chickens, eggs, or both were probably sold for profit.

In addition to the land that was used to raise crops or animals, the Whitmores used the other parts of the land as well. The forested land in the 1873 platbook sketch (Fig. 2) is still covered in woods today. Because many of the oaks in these woods are over 100 years old, it seems logical to assume that at least parts of the land remained wooded. Perhaps parts of the woods were cleared to make room for fields, and over time some abandoned fields returned to

forest. In general, however, the main pattern of forested cover surrounding the fields remains the same.

The farm's occupants used these woods for various purposes. It is probable that they hunted for deer, rabbits, turkeys, and pheasants in the woods as well as in the fields. Perhaps they gathered raspberries, strawberries, and asparagus from the woods. Asparagus is not a native Wisconsin vegetable, but it could have been brought to Wisconsin at any time since the settlement. The Whitmores needed to obtain firewood to heat their home, and the woods are the most likely source for this wood. At some point, possibly even the beginning of the settlement, a small dump was created in the woods along Sugar Creek. As a child, my siblings and I reveled in exploring the dump, searching for small treasures. We found chipped vases, silver spoons and knives, old tires, and animal bones. While the majority of the things we found dated from the early 1900s and beyond, this could be because earlier items were buried deeper in the soil, beneath the more recent rubbish. The Whitmores must have had a place to dispose of their few pieces of garbage during the first 60 years of their farming, and it could easily have been at that same dump.

While the woods provided the farmers with the aforementioned services, the land surrounding the house was used for different purposes. An 1881 account of the original settlement of Spring Prairie describes the gardens established by the first farmers in addition to their fields. The Whitmores probably also had a garden; to be convenient, this would have been located close to the house. Trees were planted in the lawn and surrounding the house; these would have provided shade, and perhaps fruit or sap to make maple sugar. The 1873 platbook illustration (Fig. 2) shows small saplings around the house. I believe that at least five of these are still standing. They appear to be in the same spot as shown in the sketch, and are over 100

years old. If I'm correct, the Whitmores planted red and white oaks, as well as sugar maples near their house. The sketch also depicts several pine trees throughout the lawn.

The modern day residents of Spring Prairie attempt to maintain as many elements of the traditional agricultural lifestyle as possible. This is most apparent when considering the overall land use trends in the township. Ninety-four percent of Spring Prairie's land is rural land: 72 percent agricultural lands, 20 percent natural or undeveloped land, and 2 percent quarry. Of the agricultural lands, most is used as pasture for dairy cows or to grow corn, hay, and soybeans. The remaining six percent of the town is used for residential, government, recreational, and other miscellaneous purposes (Spring Prairie Town Board... 45-47). Since its settlement, the major human land use in Spring Prairie has remained agriculture.

Despite this fact, the percentage of Spring Prairie residents who farm the land has dropped dramatically since the middle of the 1800s. An 1873 index of Spring Prairie landowners listed 83 percent as farmers (History... 19-21). Because farms at that time often require help, I expect that many of the residents of the town who did not own land also worked on farms. In 1990, only 92 people, or ten percent of the employed residents of Spring Prairie were farmers (Spring Prairie Town Board... 14). How does the other 90 percent of the township interact with the land in order to keep as many pastoral and agricultural elements in their lives as possible?

One way that my family, and many others in Spring Prairie, attempts to maintain the image of an agricultural lifestyle is to continue to use the farm buildings. The most obvious of these is the house, which we still live in today (Fig. 3). Aside from several new roofs over the years, and a circular porch that was added sometime in the last 80 years, the house's exterior is largely unchanged. The house's interior has, of course, changed a great deal more. The addition of plumbing and electricity is perhaps the most obvious change. However, many things remain

the same within the home. The doors and several of the windows date back to the building of the house in 1864. In addition, we still use a wood-burning furnace to heat the house. For most of my childhood, we rented our haymow and silos to the farmers who own the fields around us; they stored their freshly harvested hay and corn in these buildings. We've always kept chickens in the chicken coop. While we usually had enough to supply only our family with eggs, from time to time we would keep enough to sell fresh eggs. Even the buildings that are not used for purposes similar to their original use still remain on the land. We use the barn mainly for storage and to do repair work on our cars (Fig. 4).

The spaces that do not contain buildings are also similar to how they might have appeared in the mid-1800s. We have several vegetable and flower gardens. The potatoes, sweet corn, onions, strawberries, and raspberries we grow could easily have been raised by the original settlers; although, they would have likely used different varieties of these foods. My father once unearthed a small millstone, which would have been used to grind grains. Because this is too small to be used on an entire field of grain, I believe that it was used to grind a small quantity of corn or oats that was grown in a garden. Our small orchard, containing apple, plum, and cherry trees could also be a replicate of one raised by the early settlers. As I mentioned previously, I believe some of the oak and maple trees in our yard were originally planted during the first few years of the Whitmores' settlement. Over the years, other trees were also planted, and we always plant a sapling when a tree dies. Today, the majority of the trees in our yard are red oaks, white oaks, and sugar maples. A few beech and pine trees are scattered over the property as well.

We also use the woods beyond the fields in ways similar to what early settlers might have done. My father hunts deer each fall, a relatively inexpensive way of providing meat for

the family. We pick berries and asparagus in the wood's clearings. We collect dead branches to use as firewood to heat our house, and we cut down dead trees to use as well.

There are some activities that can no longer be done in the woods, so we moved them to the land directly surrounding our house. For instance, the property owners of the woods would not appreciate it if we continued to use the dump to deposit our garbage. As a result, we have created our own version of the dump in our yard: the junkpile. This is in no way a phenomenon unique to my family; almost everyone I know in Spring Prairie has a junkpile. In addition to all the organic refuse such as egg shells and banana peels that would normally occupy a compost pile, the junkpile is also home to rusted bathtubs, broken saw blades, old appliances, and all manner of similar things. I cannot fully explain the purpose of the junkpile. Perhaps we use it because Spring Prairie does not have a public trash removal program. We have to pay a private company to pick up our garbage, and they don't include rusty bathtubs in their removal plan. Or perhaps part of the appeal of the junkpile is how similar it is to the old dump. It's one more way for us to perpetuate the land use of the farmers who first settled the land.

Spring Prairie has changed since its original settlement and conversion to an agricultural landscape. Most of our almost 2000 residents are not farmers (Spring Prairie Town Board... 7, 14). Yet we strive to preserve the agricultural nature of our lives. We protect the agricultural lands that dominate the landscape, and more importantly, we hold on to the traditional ways of interacting with the land that have been used by Spring Prairie farmers for over 150 years. I don't know how much longer we can preserve this pastoral lifestyle. The outside world is pushing in around us, pressuring us to build new homes and businesses on our cornfields. I think it will last a bit longer at least. Most of the Spring Prairie kids I grew up with plan to spend their lives in the town and continue to live their lives the same way as their parents. The recent master

plan for the town produced by the Spring Prairie Supervisors severely limits the prospect of urban growth and states that one of its main goals is to "maintain the rural character of the town" (Spring Prairie Town Board... 70). That is, after all, what we've been doing for the past 150 years.

Works Cited

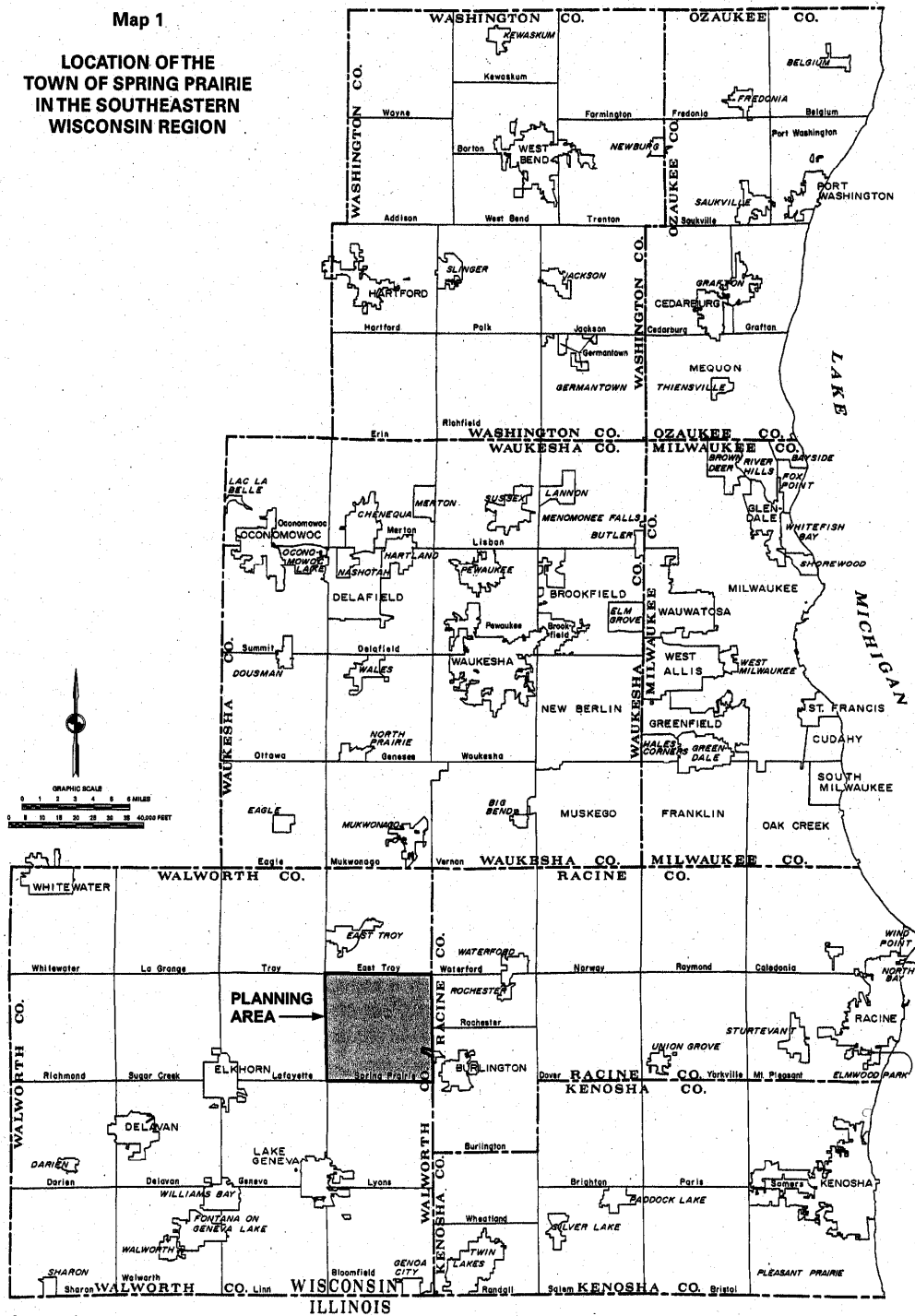
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Map 1
**LOCATION OF THE
 TOWN OF SPRING PRAIRIE
 IN THE SOUTHEASTERN
 WISCONSIN REGION**



Source: SEWRPC.

Figure 1. Location of Spring Prairie within Southeastern Wisconsin. Spring Prairie Town Board of Supervisors. A master plan for the town of Spring Prairie, 2020, Walworth County, Wisconsin.

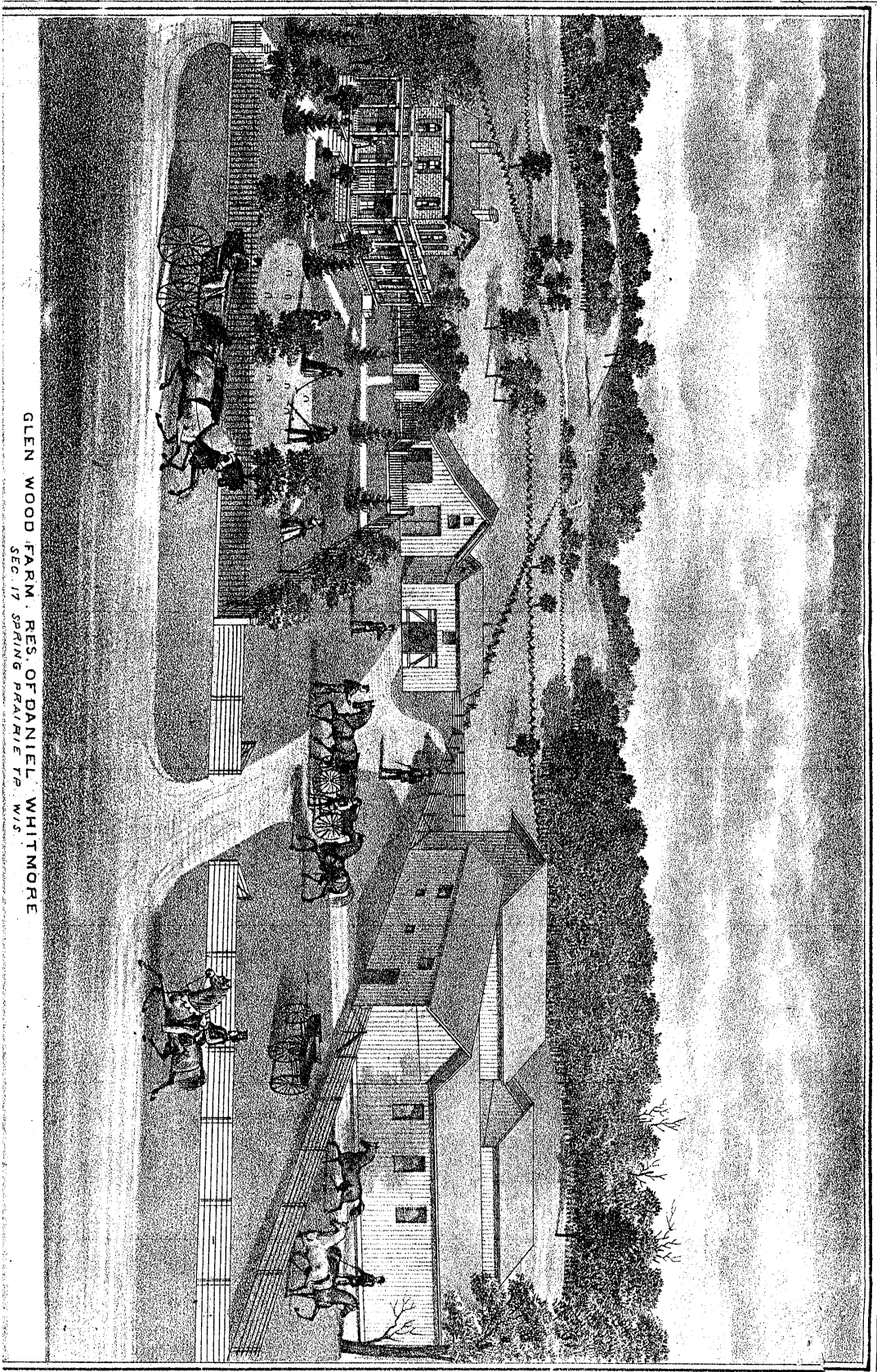


Figure 2. Sketch of the Whitmore residence. Platbook of Walworth County, Wisconsin, 1873.



Figure 3. My family's house today. Personal photograph.

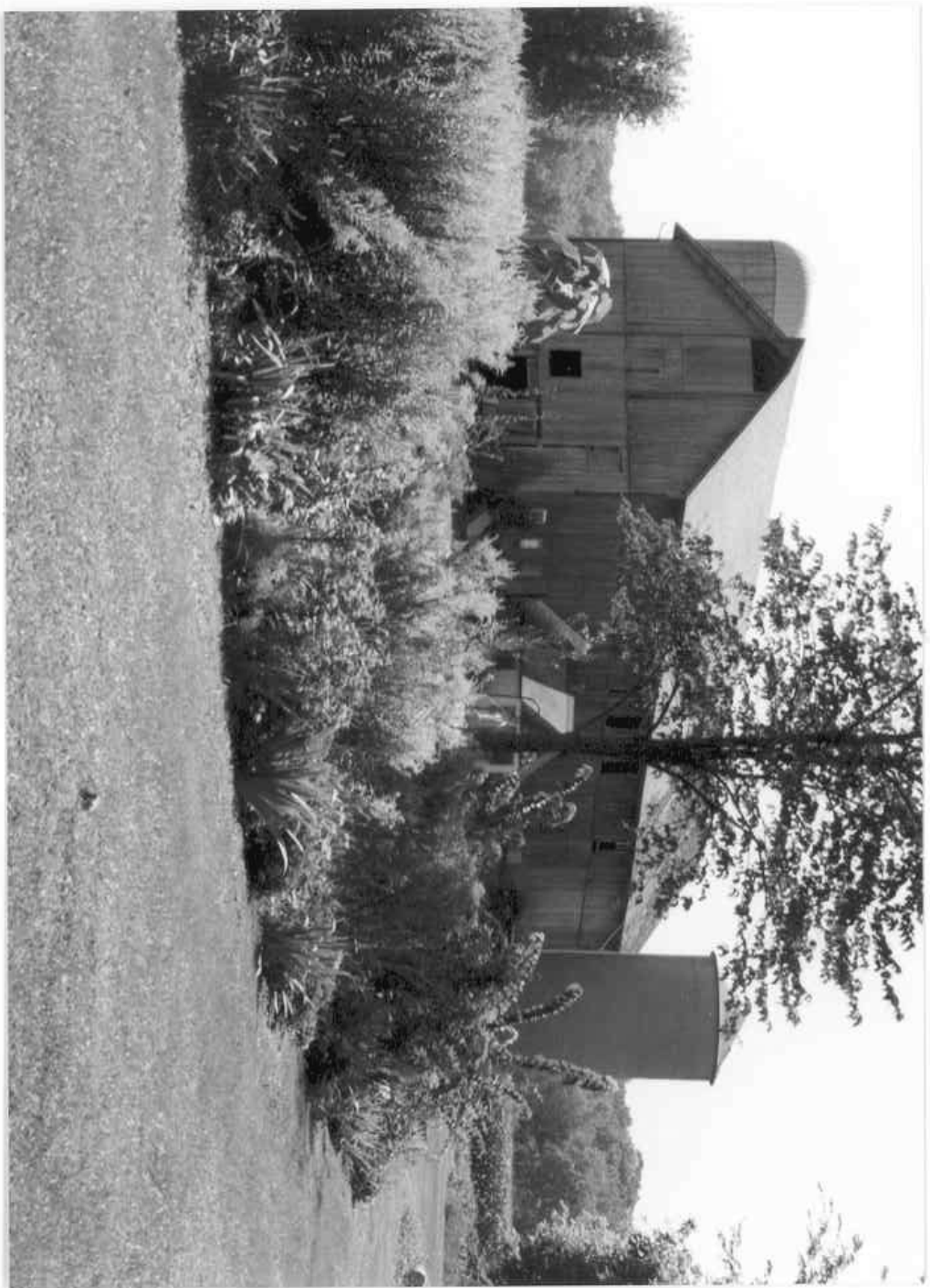


Figure 4. My family's barn in the present day. Personal photograph.