

Friends celebrate raising near Ovid

By MARK NIXON
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They had a party the other night, and among the gifts to the hosts were 10 bales of straw and four rolls of fly paper.

The guests supped from a table laden with 70 pounds of ham, 70 pounds of turkey, 300 dozen cookies, a cattle trough full of milk and a pickling crock brimming with punch.

You see, when there's a barn dance, people think big.

THE BARN at Brook Acres Farm looks as sprawling as the Chicago stockyards: a panorama of fence, gate, and stanchion poised beneath a forest of rafters. It is a mammoth new barn, and it needed a proper introduction to the community, just as a ship needs christening or a monument needs dedicating.

Off the Road



For Bill and Emily Brook, a barn dance was the way to do it up proper.

"When it was finished, our son, Doug, said 'You're going to have a barn dance aren't you?'" Emily said.

So... Word was spread throughout the Ovid area, and a week ago Saturday, more than 500 of the Brooks' neighbors turned out for the hoedown.

Square dance caller Bruce Sharp of Lansing stood atop a

pickup truck bed and skillfully guided the novices through the dos-dos and allemande lefts. While the older folks sat in cow stalls sipping punch, youngsters climbed over fence gates. Fiddling, foot-stomping music resonated through the rafters.

THEY ARE a rare spectacle these days, but what barn dances there are have changed little in nature in the past two centuries.

In colonial times, the celebrations followed a barn-raising. Barns were to the colonists a symbol of livelihood and status rolled into one. To afford a new barn was indeed cause to celebrate. It is not so different to today's farmers.

The barn dance became an excuse to visit with seldom-seen neighbors, especially after the harvest season. Here, the square dance was born, with its simple steps and a guide (the caller) to lead the way so all could join in. A lone fiddler in the hay mow was all there was to the earliest square dance musicians.

The music, naturally, was rooted in the farming way of life: "Plow the furrow good and deep," goes an ancient caller's phrase, "God help the man I find asleep."

As the American farm population waned, the little events that periodically drew farmers together also faded. The barn dance was just a minor casualty.

"We had a barn dance once in the 1930's in my dad's barn," Bill Brook recalled. "I was only eight. The old barn had burned down, and after we rebuilt, we celebrated with a square dance."

LAST WEEK'S dance came un-

der more fortunate circumstances. Working with his son, Doug, as equal partners, Bill embarked on his life-long dream this spring. He wanted a barn capable of milking 180 cows.

Located on Park Road southwest of Ovid, the shiny red metal pole barn could comfortably hold three houses inside it. It is 192 feet long by 90 feet wide, with an estimated two million nails driven into the wood framing.

While his city-dwelling guests marveled at the barn's size and veteran farmers scrutinized it carefully, Bill leaned against a gate planking, showing a smile as wide as his shoulders.

"It won't look this clean in a few weeks," he said.

No, and the strains of the fiddle may never be heard here again. But at least someday, some of the young ones can tell their children, "I went to a barn dance once. At Brook Acres Farms. And..."



Cow stalls good place to sit for lunch