

Saddle & Leather Shop Hard Hit by Floods

by Chris Egan, Apples 'n Oats Reporter

"The first thing we saved was Dad's painting," said Nan, referring to the 2008 flood. "It was given to us by James Evans, a now retired art teacher, about three years ago. The painting was of Dad cleaning a saddle that belonged to James' wife."

Home from World War II, George Barta was walking home from work at the Wilson's Packing plant and saw a local Harness Shop for sale. He wanted to work in the horse industry, and purchased the building as soon as he could. For 62 years the Saddle & Leather shop has been in the Barta family, with his daughters Nan and Kris carrying on a tradition as rich as the relics on the walls of the store.

"Dad told me they dipped 250 harnesses in 1954. In those days you bought the Neats Foot oil in 50 gallon drums. We still have the original dipping tank," Nan said. That averages out to about 20 harnesses a month. According to the Saddle & Leather Shop website, most farmers brought in their harness on Saturdays only, their day off. Since those days, the

store has changed over to the recreational aspect of riding, providing a place for horse enthusiasts to learn more about dressage, showing, tack, health care, etc.

The repair shop was an important aspect of the business. The staff was very knowledgeable, and provided their customers with a place to pick up whatever they needed, at a moment's notice, complete with a cup of coffee and some chatting.

On June 12th, 2008, the Barta family tradition, the only complete tack store in Cedar Rapids, faced an uncertain future. The city was under water. When the burglar alarm at the Saddle & Leather shop went off at 1:30 am, the water was waist deep inside the store.

Said Nan, "We talk about how deep the water got; well, it



was up to 12 feet. Those of us that experienced flooding talk about the water level and compare notes, but the store looks violated. You have to see it to understand the magnitude of the disaster."

Throughout our interview, the words "violated" and "organized chaos" were terms we used to describe the flood.

"The outpouring of help from the horse community has just been

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Top Photo: Mark Casterton cleans a western saddle

Middle Photo: Historic photograph of the Saddle Shop

Bottom Left Photo: Volunteers Front row: Megan Green, Patti Morehouse
Volunteers Second row: Bonnie Fitzpatrick, Ellie Kriegel, John Lewis, Peggy Lewis, Charlie Larner, Barb Putnam, Carla Baumgartner, Leonard Fevold, and Barbara Hall

Right Photo: The Saddle Shop, after the water had receded

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RIGHT: Nan Barta and Jan Vlasak. They are holding a jar containing donations for the Cedar Rapids Animal Shelter. Somehow, the glass jar survived the destructive floodwaters.

AT LEFT: Frank works hard on cleaning.

CENTER RIGHT: Nick Loghren, EIDEA member, cleans leather items.



will be liquidated. [The floating pony is a 42" paper mache pony that has resided in the Saddle & Leather shop window since the 1940's. He was originally made in the 1870's or 1880's, in Germany. Nan exclaimed that, "He has been rode hard, and put away wet, but he is still with us.]"

Will the Saddle & Leather shop be rebuilt at its current location? "It depends on what the city will allow us to do. At first it was placarded Purple, which means unsafe, and now it is Red, which means it might be ok to repair. It would cost more than 50% of the assessed value to repair, and would need to be elevated one foot above the 100 year flood plain," explained Nan.

A number of Fundraisers have been organized by friends, and our heartfelt sympathy is with the Bartas. A sign on the window of the Saddle & Leather shop says it all - "Horse folks are the best."

We hope to see a sequel to Saddle & Leather soon.



overwhelming. When we were allowed to go back into the store, we had to park our vehicles a block and a half away, and carry things out by hand. I can't begin to name names, as there were so many folks helping in so many ways. Every volunteer—they just keep giving and giving. It's so hard to put into words, what and how to express the gratitude, the gratefulness, the commitment. I always tear up trying to put it in to words."

There was no way to organize. We were so thankful for our friends that helped keep us going," Nan said. "For four days, we evacuated the store, and have been working here every day since then," referring to her mother's garage. "Hundreds of items need to be cleaned and disinfected."

Back at "the shop," constantly dealing with recovery Red Tape is beginning to take its toll. The uncertainty; the Hows and Whys, Whens and Wheres, constitute a very involved, fuzzy process that makes one's head spin.

Nan stated that, "We had a new roof put on in March, and we had new thermal pane windows installed in November. Thank God we did have the new windows and the new east wall because that is what saved us. Without them, everything would have ended up in Columbus Junction!"

A temporary location at 5104 J St SW has been secured, starting sometime in September and lasting for as long as they have access to the building.

Plans are in the works for a "Floating Pony" sale on approximately September 15th, where flood-damaged merchandise, which has been gently cleaned and restored,



ABOVE: The sentiment in the flooded Shop window says it all: "Horse Folks are the BEST!"