

The Lutze Housebarn

by Karyl Enstad Rommelfanger

Located in what has become known as the “Saxon Corridor” in southern Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, the Lutze housebarn is a monument to the Gottlob Lutze family who dared an uncertain future and carved out a livelihood in the middle of a wilderness.

Johann Gottlob Lutze, his wife Fredericka and their three children emigrated from Saxony in the year 1849. Likely the political turmoil in their homeland was an impetus to their departure. They and a number of other Saxon families purchased land close to one another in a vast, thick forest that lined the lakeshore of eastern Wisconsin. Gottlob and Fredericka bought 80 acres of land in section 19 of Centerville Township. For the earliest immigrants to Manitowoc County life was very difficult. Local historian John Nagle wrote in 1876:

Those who settled here during the years ranging from 1846-1855 suffered perhaps the greatest privations of all the pioneers. They were at a distance from Manitowoc and Sheboygan, and after the store of provisions which they had brought with them were exhausted, they had to rely principally on the meager products of their diminutive farms. Potatoes were the staple article of food; bread was a luxury and milk was very scarce.

By the end of 1850, however, Gottlob and Fredericka Lutze had cleared 30 acres of land, were raising substantial amounts of wheat, rye, oats, potatoes and hay and were producing 250 pounds of butter a year. The Lutzes had also built a magnificent three-story rectangular structure that housed the family in the front and the animals in the rear. Reminiscent of homes in their native Saxony, the Lutze housebarn served as the abode of both man and beast until a brick house was built on the property in 1896.

The Lutze housebarn sits on an east-west axis and has a length of 72’ 9” and width of 28’ 5”. An 18’ 5” long machinery shed was attached later. With the exception of the shed addition, the housebarn is of German *fachwerk* construction. The basic framework is of hewn oak timbers mortised, tenoned and pegged together with oak pins. The spaces between the oak timbers are filled with a mixture of clay and straw laid over vertically-placed wooden staves. However, unlike German *fachwerk*, the exterior walls were covered with lengths of thin clapboard, an American adaptation which may have served to protect the more fragile Wisconsin clay, or may simply have been a later renovation done to make the housebarn look more modern.

The Lutze housebarn is in remarkably good shape for its approximately 140 years of service. Nearly all the original woodwork and hardware remain. Also still visible is the wood grain painted into the woodwork as well as the blue pattern irregularly sponged onto the interior's plastered walls.

The first floor living area contains an entry-way with stairs leading to the second floor and to the cellar. Also on the first floor are kitchen, a dining room and a living room. The original brick floor can still be seen in the kitchen. A door on the west end leads directly to the barn.

On the second floor are three bedrooms as well as another living room. An unfinished entry and storage area are at the head of the stairs. Off to the left is a hallway with second floor access to the barn.

The third floor remains unpartitioned and was used for storage. Still visible here is the large sun-dried clay brick chimney.

Below the first floor is a remarkable 8' x 20' food-storage cellar with an arched brick ceiling. Several hand-forged meat hooks still protrude from the cellar walls as if awaiting the next butchering.

The attached barn occupies the west end of the building. The first floor held large livestock while the second floor was outfitted to house small livestock and grain. A separate barn stairway on the west wall allows for movement of humans and small animals from one floor to the other. The 1860 U.S. Census indicates that Gottlob and Fredericka Lutze owned three milk cows, four oxen, four swine, and one "other animal."

The concept of the housebarn dates back to prehistoric times when it was discovered that the heat from the animals could help warm the living area of the humans. Housebarns, though far fewer in number than a century ago, can still be found in Germany and other countries today. Only a handful are left in the United States and the Lutze Housebarn is one of the best preserved.

Gottlob Lutze was 37 years old and his wife 29 when they came to Wisconsin. Fredericka bore a total of nine children. In 1874 ownership of the farm passed to the eldest son, August. When August built the new brick house in 1896, Fredericka refused to leave the housebarn and maintained her residence there until her death.

Teachers who would like to arrange a student tour of the housebarn and see the restoration in progress should contact Janet Lutze at (414) 964-0319