



## Barn and Fencing

# Turning old into new

What to consider when deciding whether to renovate an existing structure to house horses

by Cynthia McFarland

**B**ARNS ARE functional structures, but they can be more than just protection from the elements. From simple to extravagant and everything in between, barns house more than horses. Spend any time in a foaling barn, a successful racing stable, or the home of a legendary stallion, and you realize barns also shelter hopes, dreams, and memories.

Horse country is rich with barns of every sort, and many of them are far from new. Farms across the country have successfully renovated existing barns for use with horses. In some cases, constructing a new barn makes more financial sense than renovating a structure, but often using an existing barn can be both practical and efficient. We went to an expert to learn what must be taken into consideration for a renovation project.

ity should be providing a safe and healthy environment for the horse, Blackburn stressed. In addition, the barn needs to be efficient for your operation. If these major requirements cannot be achieved, even with renovation, then you should reevaluate the use of the structure for horses.

The barn's original use often determines if it can be effectively renovated for housing horses. "If it's been a horse barn in the past, you generally have things working for you, and it might just need simple refurbishing," Blackburn noted.

Barns that were built to shelter a variety of farm animals can present difficulties when converting them to horse barns. Old dairy barns, while attractive in their own right, might

### Refurbishments that can improve an existing barn

- ✓ Steel sliding stall doors
- ✓ Concrete flooring and rubber mats in stalls
- ✓ Concrete and/or rubber pavers or mats in aisle way
- ✓ Automatic waterers in stalls
- ✓ Automatic insect control system
- ✓ Fans/lights installed above each stall
- ✓ Updated hardware and stall furnishings (hayracks, feed bins, bucket hooks, etc.)
- ✓ Fire extinguishers/alarm system

not be able to be efficiently renovated to house horses. The placement of beams in most dairy barns is not conducive to a practical layout of stalls, and ceilings are typically too low. Although some architects are satisfied with a ten-foot height for beams and ceilings in horse barns, Blackburn prefers a 12-foot minimum. This applies to anything that will be above the horse, including ceiling, beams,



### KENTUCKY SCENE

Tobacco barns, which often are on a 12-foot module that correspond well with 12x12-foot stalls, have high ceilings and ventilate well, making them good prospects for conversion to efficient horse barns

light fixtures, and fans.

Bank barns are built into the side-or bank—of a hill and often do not ventilate well if the ground floor is used for stalls. In addition, the hayloft prevents much natural light from entering the structure's ground floor.

"These usually don't work well for an efficient horse operation," Blackburn said. "They're usually better for storage."

On the other hand, tobacco barns can frequently be converted to efficient horse barns. "In many cases, they are already set up on a 12-foot module, which can work very well with 12x12-foot stalls," said Blackburn. "Plus, they have high ceilings and ventilate well."

### Tricky details

Several factors must be considered in adapting an existing structure. Does the design provide adequate

natural lighting and ventilation? "These are two concerns that affect the health and safety of the horse," Blackburn noted.

Many old barns have haylofts, which Blackburn does not recommend in a horse barn. "This affects the ceiling height, natural light, and ventilation," he said. "If there is a hayloft, it may be possible to remove it, or if it's high enough not to present a problem, you can ventilate the barn in other ways."

In addition, the ability to clean and sanitize the barn, especially important in a breeding operation, will be compromised if you have an old wood barn with dirt floors.

Location is also an important consideration in renovating an existing barn. If the barn is poorly situated, is in a low area that stays damp and muddy, or is in the wrong location for efficient farm operation, it may not be worth renovating. Or,

you may decide to use it for something other than horses.

Blackburn points out that, even if using an old barn to house horses is not practical, the barn can be used in a variety of other ways. "We try to save them if it will work for the client's operation," he said. "We try not to destroy old barns if there is any way to save them and extend their life."

Barns have been turned into guesthouses, main residences, and recreational buildings for entertaining. Blackburn even has seen the hayloft of an old barn turned into a basketball court. In less extensive renovations, old barns can be used efficiently to store farm vehicles and implements, hay, and bedding. The building's integrity is maintained and the barn continues to be of value, even though it no longer shelters animals.

### Renovate an old barn

A renovation project does not have

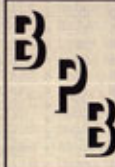
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## Some considerations when renovating an older barn

- ✓ Does it have sentimental or historic value?
- ✓ Is its architectural style compatible with other existing or planned structures?
- ✓ Is the barn and its location on the farm set up for efficient operation?
- ✓ Does current zoning permit the intended use?
- ✓ Is the building structurally sound?
- ✓ Is there good drainage away from the barn?
- ✓ Does it have adequate natural ventilation and light?
- ✓ Can the structure meet the health and safety requirements of housing horses?
- ✓ Is the ceiling, including beams and any fixtures, high enough for horses (no less than ten feet high, preferably 12 feet)?
- ✓ Are the wiring and plumbing up to date? Replace old wiring to avoid risk of fire.
- ✓ Is the water source adequate?
- ✓ Is there a fire alarm system and fire extinguishers?
- ✓ Are the stalls of adequate size and condition?
- ✓ If desired, can stall size be altered within the existing structure?
- ✓ Is there adequate space for service areas (tack room, feed room, wash stall, office, restroom)?
- ✓ Will an addition work with the existing structure?
- ✓ Will renovation costs exceed cost of new construction, or would it be more cost effective to build a new barn?
- ✓ Is your budget adequate for the necessary renovation?

To determine if a barn is structurally sound, or can be made so with reasonable expense, contact a structural engineer, an architect familiar with horse structures, or a contractor who has experience with horse barns.

However, even if the structure is determined to be sound, it could be out of date and inefficient.

"You may need to tear out all the stalls and just get down to the basic structure," said Blackburn. "Then you can install new stall systems that are better, safer, and will work for you."

If the barn has dirt floors, you may want to replace them with concrete, or at least install rubber mats to make stalls easier to clean and to extend the life of your bedding. Have a professional check the wiring and plumbing; old wiring can be a fire hazard and old piping can be replaced.

As Blackburn explained, it all comes down to what will work for your operation. "What will work for one farm won't work for another," he said. "You can get 100 farm managers in a room and they will have 101 different ways to operate a farm."

"When we work with clients, we have a lengthy questionnaire and go through an extensive process to see what they need and how they want to operate the barn and farm. We go over

everything from how many bucket hooks they want in the stall, to how much time horses spend in the stalls, how horses are turned out, if they are fed in the stalls or paddocks, etc. A lot of times owners don't even know what they want until you sit down with them and go over these questions."

Sentimental or historic value often plays a role when a farm owner considers renovating an old barn or converting a structure for use as a horse barn. It is possible to invest more money into a renovation than it would cost to build a new barn. Getting a quote for new construction is not usually as difficult as estimating the square-foot cost of renovation, which depends greatly upon the individual structure.

There is a wide range in the cost of constructing a new barn, said Blackburn, whose firm designs barns from as low as \$60 per square foot. Costs can vary greatly according to the materials and finishes used.

It is important to note that an owner does not have to spend a great amount of money to meet the safety and health needs of the horses. A well-built, basic barn without a lot of "bells and whistles" can run efficiently and accommodate horses perfectly well.

"A lot of the time, the more expensive barns have very nice

finishes and upgrades that are important to the owner, but don't make a lot of difference to the horses," Blackburn explained. A slate roof, fancy tack room, or a nice office with oak flooring will not improve the quality of the horses' environment, but they

certainly will add to the aesthetics.

"A lot of the extra costs are for the owner's pleasure, which is nice if you are spending a lot of time in the barn with your horses," he added.

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to alter the barn's structure to increase efficiency and attractiveness. But, depending on the building's original condition and the owner's goals, a renovation can involve major structural changes, additions, removing and/or adding walls, gutting the interior, and replacing the roof.

No matter its age, an existing barn must be structurally sound to be safe for horses. "Many old barns were built on a stone base set into the ground. You want a good foundation to start with," Blackburn pointed out. "If it's a pole barn, you need to check and see if posts are rotted and need to be replaced. If a structure is too far gone, you can put a lot of money into it to save it, and find out later that it's starting to lean."

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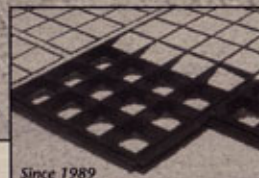
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## Refurbish an existing barn

Sometimes an existing barn just needs to be refurbished to bring it up to date and make it more efficient. Installing new doors, adding automatic watering systems, changing stall hardware, replacing hay racks and feed bins, adding or changing light fixtures and fans, and changing finishes to stall fronts and doors can be considered refurbishing.

"You can change the entire look of a barn by doing such an overhaul," said Steve Kenworthy of Big Sun Equine Products in Ocala. The family-owned business specializes in equine construction consultation and enables farm owners, contractors, and architectural firms to purchase all materials from one source. "Once the structure is determined

to be sound and brought up to code, and this includes updating the plumbing and wiring, if necessary, then you can proceed with refurbishing."

Kenworthy encourages clients to start by creating a budget, even for simple refurbishing projects, to save time in choosing materials and options for such areas as:

- **Flooring.** Adding concrete and rubber pavers or rubber mats in the barn aisle will increase safety, traction, efficiency of cleaning, and attractiveness. Cost will depend on the length and width of the aisle, and specific materials chosen. You can improve stalls by adding concrete flooring and rubber mats, starting at about \$300 for a 12x12-foot stall.

- **Stall doors.** Replacing stall doors



Courtesy of Blackburn Architects

## BUILDING MODIFICATION

Plans call for the 15-stall barn at Ernie Oare's farm in Camden, South Carolina, to be converted into an eight-stall barn in a new west wing with a show ring in the center of the courtyard

is a simple way to make a barn more efficient and safer.

"Swinging doors take up more room and can be dangerous because they can interfere with the horse," said Kenworthy. "And a determined horse can actually get the door off the hinges."

A conventional powder-coated steel stall door and hardware start at about \$350. "Of course, you can spend much more if you want wood doors," Kenworthy added. "The sky's the limit

on what you can do."

If you like the look of the traditional double stall door, you can purchase a sliding door with an opening or yoke in the top, and you do not have to worry about hinges dragging and sagging, he added.

- **Watering systems.** Automatic watering systems range from about \$30 to \$300, depending on style, model, and materials.

- **Air and light.** Fans with lights above each stall can run anywhere

from about \$50 to \$300, depending on the style and materials preferred.

- **Insect control.** With the increased concern about West Nile virus and other insect-spread diseases, an automatic insect control system is a wise choice. Kenworthy said a complete system for a six-stall or larger barn starts at about \$1,000, installed. Maintenance costs are relatively minimal, and you can do this yourself, or hire it out.

- **Updates.** Update the appearance and safety of feeders, hayracks, and stall hardware by choosing sturdy, long-lasting materials such as stainless steel, powder-coated or galvanized steel, and poly-type products.

- **Fire prevention.** Be sure your barn is equipped with fire extinguishers that are easily accessible at all times. Contact your local fire department for recommendations on how many fire extinguishers you need and where they should be located, according to the size and layout of your barn. ☛

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Cynthia McFarland is a free-lance writer based in Fairfield, Florida.