

EWING FAMILY NEWS

Building a landmark ...

Early homesteaders in Marshall County, Kansas, were primarily farmers, due to provisions within the Homestead Act that limited the amount of land that could be acquired by an individual and the requirement that at least some of the land must be tilled. But it didn't take long for investors to become interested in the fertile grasslands of the Big Blue Valley. With access to funds, they were able to acquire parcels of land over time and assemble large enough holdings to support substantial cattle-breeding operations. Shortly after William Alexander Ewing established his homestead in Wells Township, a number of cattle-breeders were building large-scale operations in Marshall County.

But, not all of them were investors. Some were local people who had started out on a smaller scale, prospered in their efforts, and expanded into larger operations. One of those success stories was the Cottrell family. Immigrating to New York from England after the Civil War, Robert and Sarah Cottrell brought their family to Kansas in 1869, settling north of Marysville. Robert died in 1876, leaving his wife and six children (five boys and one girl) to manage the farm. The older boys worked for neighbors, herding cattle, as well as taking care of their own farm. As time passed, the boys rented additional land, expanded their farming operations and established their own herd of Hereford cattle. While the Cottrells had good winter quarters for their cattle, they had no pasture for summer grazing. So, when land became available in southern Marshall County, the

They bought 775 acres of native grass-land from a British land speculator in 1893, which was a hard economic year. Their new holdings were on the east side of the Big Blue River, just northeast of Irving, and not far from the Ewing homestead. They also bought additional tillable land adjacent to Irving. Two of the younger Cottrell brothers, Fred and John, built a shanty on the new pasture land where they would stay while building fences and tending the cattle during the summer. Every fall, the cattle would be driven back to the farm north of Marysville for the winter. In the spring, the 2-day cattle drive would be done again, taking them back to pasture. The

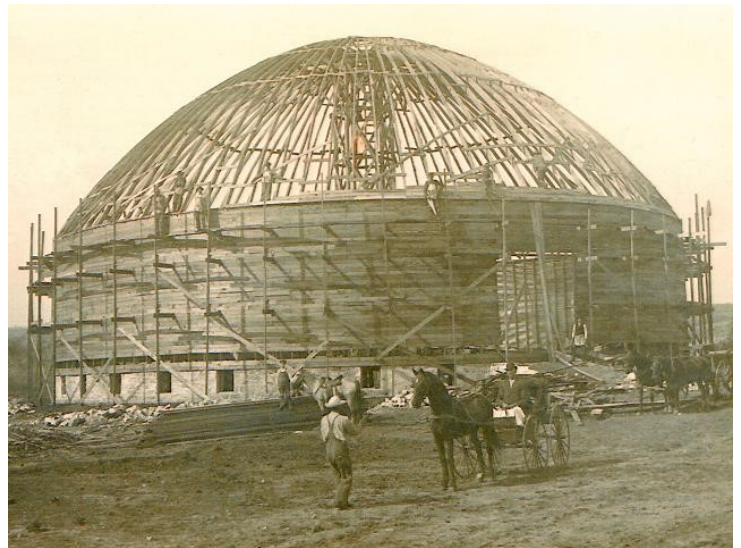
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routine eventually became tiresome to the older brothers, who preferred farming to ranching, so in 1907 the Cottrell brothers divided their holdings. The older brothers kept the farmland in northern Marshall County, gave the tillable land near Irving to John, and Fred got the ranch land along with a dozen registered Herefords.

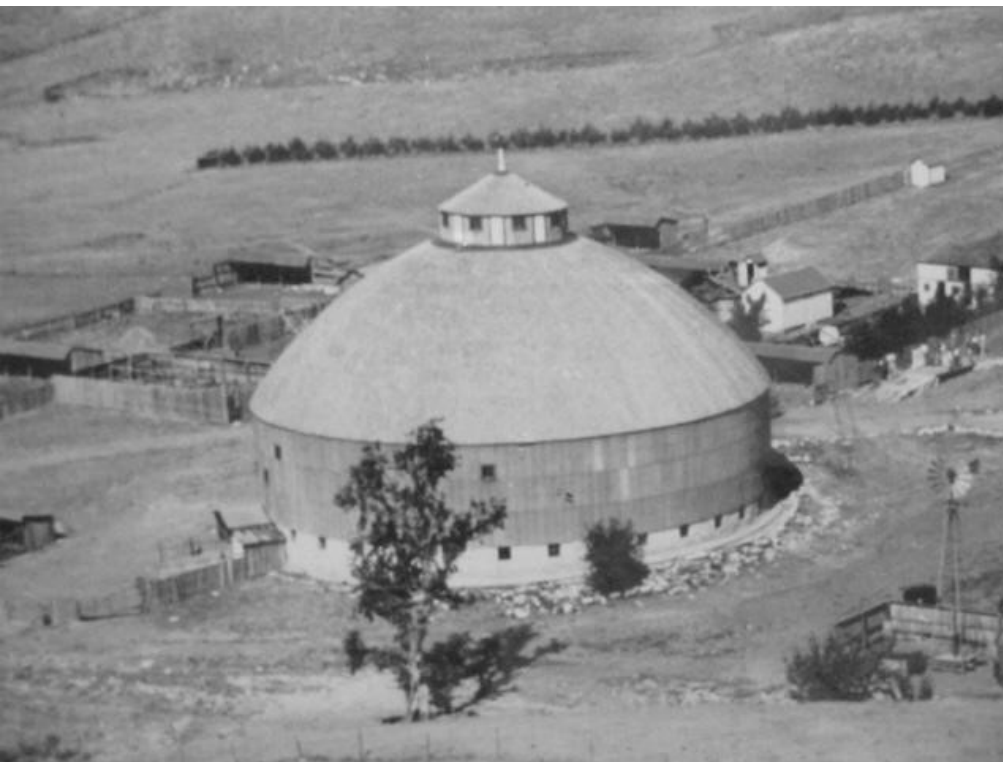
Fred Cottrell had married Kate Drennan, daughter of a neighboring family who also raised Herefords, in 1902. Through his association with the American Hereford Breeders organization, Fred had become successful in beef production. As his herd grew, the need for winter shelter became greater, so Fred decided that a barn large enough to protect all his cattle was needed. He set about the task of designing his barn.

Having seen a number of large rectangular barns damaged or destroyed by Kansas winds, Fred settled on the idea of a round barn, which might better withstand the weather. He chose a diameter that was easy to work with – 100 feet. And the site he had chosen, near a large spring of good-quality water, had enough slope to allow the lowest level of the barn to be dug into the hillside, with basement access from the back side of the barn. On that level, he designed a circle of pens 15 feet wide against the outside walls, with an 8-foot feed alley and then another 12-foot ring of stalls and another alley. At the center of the circle was a small 6-foot diameter ventilating shaft that would go up through the entire structure to a cupola with a catwalk and a row of windows. He calculated that the barn would hold 300 head of cattle in the basement pens without crowding. The second level of the barn, above the cattle pens, would be accessed from the front, utilizing the hill into which the basement was dug. That level would have storage bins for up to 10,000 bushels of grain. And above that would be a loft large enough to hold 800 tons of settled hay. The cupola atop the barn was nearly 25 feet across, surrounding the center ventilation shaft which also provided ladder access to all levels of the



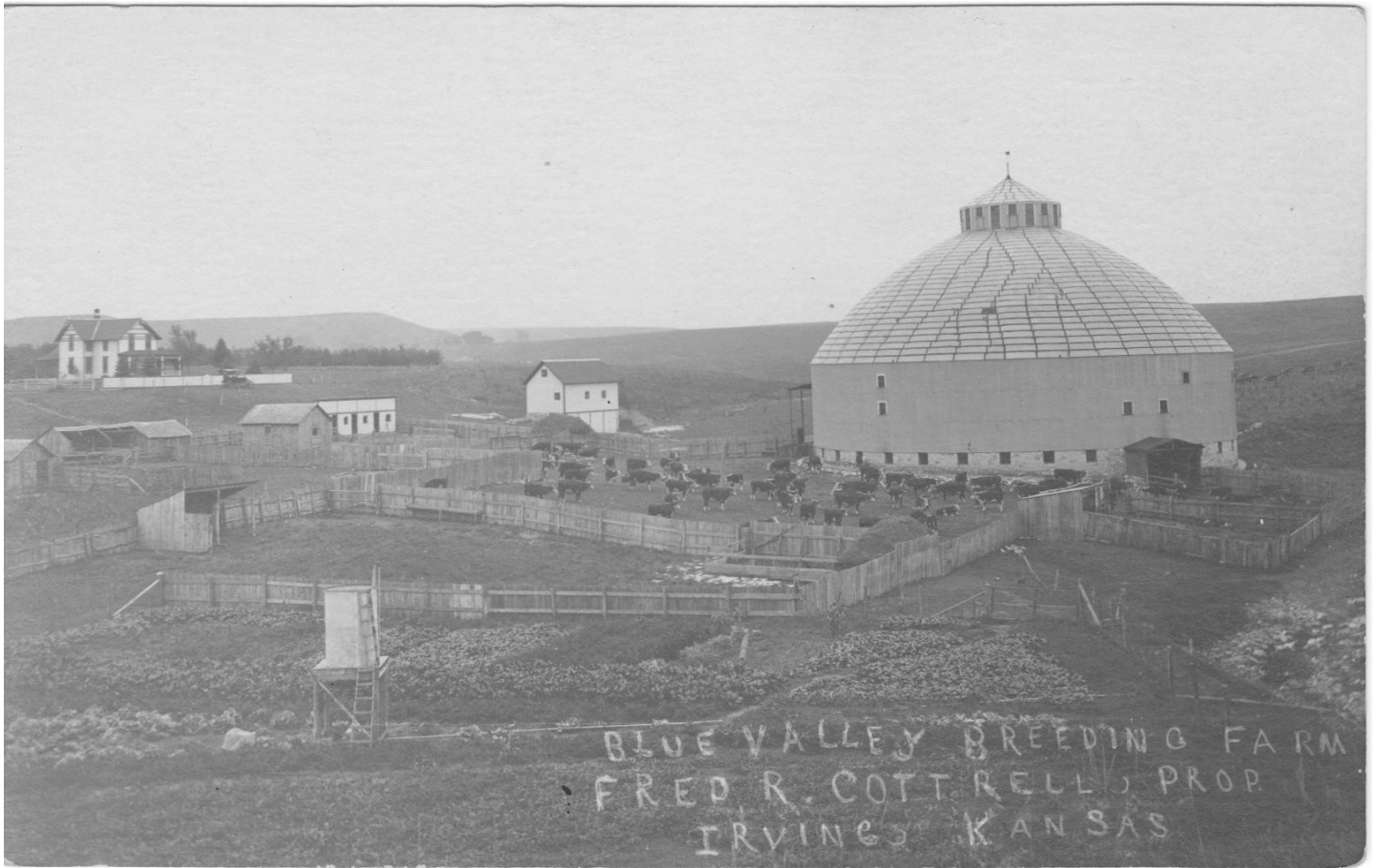
barn and could serve as an easy opening for dropping hay or grain to the cattle in the basement. And the whole thing was topped with a weather vane, holding a 3-foot replica of one of Fred's prize bulls, "Governor"... which was 85 feet above the basement floor.

Fred served as his own general contractor, but hired Clark Stewart to supervise the construction, which began in the fall of 1908. Blessed with a mild winter, August Johnson and a crew of stone masons were able to lay the foundation and basement walls... 24"-wide lime-



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stone blocks from a nearby quarry, to a height of 10 feet, and completed the stone work by mid-March, 1909. Fred made a trip to Chicago to acquire lumber, corrugated metal, sheeting, other material and more than a ton of nails. It is estimated that the barn cost \$5,000... a huge sum in 1909.

Simon Strader headed a crew of carpenters and at times as many as 20 men would be working on the barn at the same time. Miraculously, there were no injuries or serious mishaps throughout the process. Fred Cottrell, who had lost his left hand and part of his forearm in a corn-sheller accident as a young man, worked along with the crews. In spite of his one-handed limitation, he was able to do almost anything. Using ropes and pulleys, he would hoist buckets of tar and paint to the cupola, tether himself and go out onto the roof to help with construction.

The barn was nearly finished by mid-summer, 1909. Fred and Kate hosted an "Open House" barn dance on August 3, inviting a wide circle of friends. It is estimated that 400 to 500 people attended what must have been the social event of the year. Seventeen automobiles were parked in the lower level of the barn (with lots of room to spare)... the largest group of the "new-fangled contraptions" that most people had seen at one time.

Fred Cottrell's huge barn was the topic of conversation for quite a while, and was featured in Ripley's "Believe it or Not" column. But, better than that... it served him well, doing for his cattle operation what he had intended for it to do. In fact, it worked so well that it served as inspiration for Fred's in-laws, the Drennan family, to build a similar barn, on a slightly smaller scale, a few miles east of Blue Rapids. That barn, now owned by the Stump family, is still in use today and was honored in a centennial celebration in 2011.

Fred's Blue Valley Breeding Farm continued to prosper for decades. A number of Marshall County men and boys worked on the ranch at one time or another. About 1915, a young Frank Ewing would work on the Cottrell Ranch briefly, chopping weeds in the corn fields for 25¢ a day and lunch, served at the Cottrell home. That gave him the opportunity to see the magnificent barn up close.

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When Kate Cottrell died in 1939, Fred had been in the cattle business for nearly 50 years. Registered Herefords from Blue Valley Farm had been sold in almost every state west of the Mississippi River. Fred and Kate had no children to continue the business.

Fred remarried to Grace Smith in 1941 and moved to Irving. He sold his equipment in 1944 and leased the ranch to a rodeo promoter from Kansas City. Huge crowds would go to the rodeos, many just to see the large barn. In 1953 the ranch was sold to the Wacek family, who were large-scale cattle producers. They were more interested in the good grassland than they were in the buildings, so the magnificent barn wasn't used and began to fall into disrepair.

Fred Cottrell died in 1959, and the Wacek family continued to utilize the ranch land, but the buildings set empty most of the time. The landmark barn was situated nearly a quarter-mile off the main road and was only visible at one brief vantage point, obscured by the rolling terrain, so most people forgot that it ever existed. By the 1990s it had deteriorated to the point that it was not economically feasible to repair it... OR tear it down. It finally collapsed in a wind storm in the late 1990s, without fanfare or much recognition and was removed. The magnificent structure was gone.



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