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History up in smoke

'Red Barn' was reminder of times gone by

By SCOTT HALL
DAILY JOURNAL STAFF WRITER
shall@journalist.com

The fire that destroyed a 1920s barn Friday at Lamb Lake also claimed a chunk of Hensley Township history.

The so-called "Red Barn" that sat at the lakeside community's boat ramp was built by the Roberts family, which farmed more than 100 acres of the land that now lies beneath the manmade lake.

Patriarch Jesse Roberts and his wife, Minerva, raised 11 children on the farm, and another child died as an infant, their great-grandson Bill Roberts said.

"The original barn and house were down in the bottoms, where the lake is now," said Roberts, owner of Roberts Excavating.

Minerva died in 1916, according to family records. Jesse moved in with his son Andrew at a new house built higher up on the hillside. Andrew, a carpenter, built the Red Barn in 1924 and kept livestock in it, Bill said.

The Great Depression hit the family hard, however, and that financial trouble apparently was a shame that 74-year-old Jesse Roberts could not face.

On the afternoon of Dec. 11, 1990, according to a news account from the following day, Jesse walked into the Red Barn and hung himself.

The Watson family acquired the property after the bankruptcy, and young Kenneth Watson tended the 124 acres from the early



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After a Friday-night fire, little remains of the big red barn that had been a landmark in the Lamb Lake area since the 1920s. Top photo, the barn as it was in the late 1960s. The barn was part of the Roberts family farm, most of which now lies beneath the lake. Below, Jesse Roberts, seated, and his 11 children pose for a photo in 1916 after the death of Roberts' wife. Andrew, in light-colored pants at left, built the barn. Jesse Roberts later hanged himself there.



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'40s to the early '50s.

"I farmed that ground with a couple of old gray mares," said Watson, who now lives in Trafalgar.

"The house and barn was all framed out of native lumber — beech, I think."

Watson recalled running the farm without electricity or indoor plumbing, milking 10 cows by hand and heading for the out-house — complete with Sears catalog — when nature called.

"I hate to see the old barn go," he said. "We filled it many times with hay."

Watson sold much of the property when Dr. Russell Lamb and partner Bob Hougham developed their plan to create a lakeside community. The dam they started building in 1966 left the barn right at the water's edge.

For later generations of residents, who now occupy more than 200 homes around the lake, the barn was a friendly landmark, sitting alongside the boat ramp. The lot owners' association eventually acquired the barn, using it for storage and as a focal point for community gatherings.

Current resident Diane Farmer enjoyed the sight

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of the barn while living at Lamb Lake during the 1970s. When she returned eight years ago, she and her husband bought the old white farmhouse that Andrew Roberts had built on the hillside just behind the barn.

The Farmers were out late Friday night, when a violent storm blew through the area and apparently unleashed a bolt of lightning that sparked the fire and destroyed the wooden barn. Diane did not realize the structure had been leveled until she woke up Saturday morning.

"I was in tears when we saw it," she said. "It was a very emotional loss."

The barn's evocative history, including Jesse Roberts' unseemly demise, has always interested her.

"We joke around, whenever something's missing, that old Jesse Roberts must be around," she said.

More importantly, however, the barn served as a reminder of the hilly, isolated landscape that preceded the current scenes of water skiers and upscale homes.

"We have a great reverence for this land," Farmer said.