



BARN QUILTS

Jim and Irene Leuenberger Shawano County, Wisconsin

Watching paint dry is the epitome of dull activities. Except for Jim Leuenberger. Jim paints barn quilts, quilt-like patterns painted on sheets of plywood that are mounted on barns. "I still get a thrill each time I pull the painter's tape off a section I've painted and see the pattern developing," Jim says. He's painted over 400 quilts.

In 2010, Jim and his wife Irene started a barn quilt project where they live in Shawano County, Wisconsin. They had no idea it would grow so fast, that the county would become the barn quilt capital of Wisconsin — perhaps of America.

"It's truly been a 'beyond our wildest dreams' thing," Jim says. "When we started, we were asked how many quilts we expected to get on barns the first year. We said 20. It turned out to be 96. It kept growing."

Barn owners often have their own ideas for their quilts. For others, Jim and Irene, using photos, books, and websites, help them find their patterns. "Intricate details should be avoided," Irene says. "The quilts are usually viewed from the road. Simple, bold designs are best. They should 'pop' out at you."

Not everyone understands at first how barn quilts work. A lady once said, "You expect me to stitch a quilt while trying to balance myself on a tall ladder leaning against a barn? I have enough trouble doing this when sitting in my quilting chair."

People from all over America come to see the quilts. It's the first time many have been to Wisconsin. A side effect is farmyards are being tidied up and barns repainted. Shawano county is being beautified.

Jim volunteers his time. "Although I'm not paid monetarily, I'm paid in much better ways hundreds of times – beaming smiles, handshakes, hugs, even tears."

Materials, plywood and paint, for a quilt cost around \$200. Sometimes they are sponsored by local businesses or individuals.

"Recently, as I was leaving an installation of a quilt sponsored by a bank, the bank president came up to me and said how much the quilts mean to people. He added at the end, 'Three weeks ago I lost my wife. One of the last things she wanted me to do for her was to drive around and look at the barn quilts. I just thought you'd like to know that.' I was speechless."

