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Plans Underway For Cabins From Ora Labora Colony To Be Restored

Mike Hardy

Planning is underway by the Pigeon Historical Society to relocate and restore two cabins originally located in the Christian German Agricultural and Benevolent Society of Ora et Labora. The 1800s German Methodist religious colony that was founded by Emil Baur. Baur was sent by the elders of the famous utopian Harmony Society colony in Economy, Pennsylvania, to create a new settlement in northern Michigan. One of the cabins belongs to the Baur family and the other to the Notter family.

The Ora Labora colony was located near the tip of Michigan's Thumb on Wild Fowl Bay just north of present-day Bay Port in McKinley Township. The community lasted from 1861 until 1871. At its height, the colony had over 288 German-speaking residents and about seventy-five buildings and structures. The town's streets were neatly laid out and the rows of cabins bloomed with fruit trees and gardens.

The town had a general store, church, post office, tannery, and gristmill. At the center was a community oven in the town's Stadtplatz or town square. Besides farming, the colony's primary industry was making telegraph poles, hewn lumber and roofing shingles from its sawmill. When the Civil War broke out, men enlisted or conscripted. The impact of the war taking the men into service shattered Ora Labora and it dissolved in 1871.

Ora Labora's Cabins Hiding In Plain Sight

Most folks had thought that the colony's cabins had rotted away or burned during the 1881 Great Fire that scorched the Thumb. It wasn't until 1984 when a tornado ripped away a lean-to on a pig pen on Hulda Baur's farm that a cabin was revealed. The cabin turned out to be the birthplace of Hulda's husband, Paul Baur, grandson of Ora Labora's founder Emil. The cabin was relocated to the family's farm and used as a homestead until a more substantial brick farmhouse was constructed. Transferring and reusing buildings was a frequent and sustainable practice in the 1800s. The cabin was then used as a pig pen and for horse tack storage. A great deal of team harness collars, Martindale's, and other tack is still in storage in the old cabin.



The Emil Baur Cabin.

Photograph courtesy of Mike Hardy, Thumbwind.com.

Cabins Still Sturdy After 150 Years

The Baur cabin consists of two stories with a great large room on the first floor and two smaller dormer rooms on the second floor. The timber used in the construction is over twelve inches high, and each end joined using dovetailing. Apart from the cabin covered with wood siding, this joining method is likely the primary reason that these cabins have survived. The joints are designated as “self-draining” due to all outsides of the dovetail angle down and out. This thwarts any moisture from collecting and freezing in the joint. This method also has the effect of inter-locking of each log and prevents the two walls from pulling apart, shifting or twisting away from the structure.



The Baur Cabin.

Photograph courtesy of Mike Hardy, Thumbwind.com.



The Baur Cabin, half-dovetail constructon is visible at the corner.

Photograph courtesy of Mike Hardy, Thumbwind.com.



The Baur Cabin, first floor interior.

Photograph courtesy of Mike Hardy, Thumbwind.com.



The Baur Cabin, second floor with horse tack visible.

Photograph courtesy of Mike Hardy, Thumbwind.com.



The Baur Cabin, looking up second floor (through collapsed first floor ceiling) with horse collars visible.

Photograph courtesy of Mike Hardy, Thumbwind.com.

Notter Cabin

Several miles away is the Notter cabin. After its move from the colony, the family converted the two-story cabin into a house. A kitchen and front room were added to the original cabin structure. Since its exterior was totally encased with shingles and siding, it's hoped that much of the cabin original timber is salvageable. Researcher Steven Schultz hopes that some of the original flooring and interior woodwork can be refinished and used in the restoration.

The Pigeon Historical Society is still in planning stages on the cabin restoration project. A cabin restoration expert has surveyed the structures and deemed them salvageable. A donor has stepped up to help fund the project, and the group is determining a suitable location in which to move the log cabins. We hope to be able to report the group's success in resurrecting this element of the old German colony in the coming year.



*The Notter Cabin,
two facades.*

Photographs courtesy
of Mike Hardy,
Thumbwind.com.



Hardy: Plans Underway For Cabins From Ora Labora Colony To Be Restored



*The Notted Cabin,
rear ell (above),
and interior view showing log
construction.*

Photographs courtesy
of Mike Hardy,
Thumbwind.com.