

OUR ANTRIM FARM NEIGHBORS

Iron Horse: Keeping the farm a farm

By JEFFRAY KESSLER
Contributing Writer

ELLSWORTH — Preservation. It seems to be a common value woven into the fabric of Antrim County, especially when applied to its farms.

Protection. It also is a recurring theme in the county, with its vast open spaces, vistas and waterways.

The partners of Iron Horse Farms have found a way to uniquely and effectively capture both of those attributes and make them cornerstones of what they call their "Equine Dreams" venture.

"We have just under 500 acres here that encompass three, 100-plus year old farms," said co-owner Mark Gebhard. "We are dedicated to preserving these farms as farms: their woods, fields, facilities, heritage and the horses that live here now and in the future."

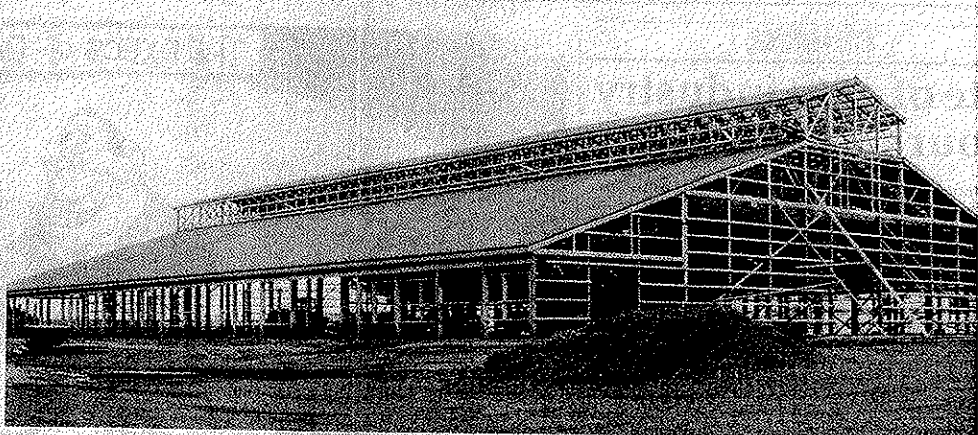
Encompassing almost two miles of Wilson Lake frontage, the historic homestead properties of Waldran, Postmus and Veldkamp are now joined in partner-

ship along the Ellsworth Road on the Banks and Central Lake Township border. These are lands that were settled and worked as far back as the early 1900s, some of the earliest homesteads in Antrim County. Two railroads steamed inside its borders, parallel to this portion of the Chain of Lakes, and it was also a stage-coach-crossing place.

Owners are Debbie and Russ Ulrey and Anna (Postmus) and Mark Gebhard. They each express great respect for the land's rolling hills, wetlands, woodlands, pastures and water-

front. It is the core of a partnership that began seven years ago when Ulrey approached Anna Postmus' father about an easement change that would allow him access to the land he had recently purchased (the former Veldkamp and Kuiper property).

This partnership started with a handshake, and has never wavered," Gebhard said. This is first and foremost a working horse farm. There are



A new barn is being constructed at Iron Horse Farms that will house a riding arena and seven "mini-barns."

Photo by Jeff

86 acres of rotating pastures. There are spacious galloping fields and more than seven miles of trails. An older barn that is being preserved will house manure-handling systems (the plan is to use only natural fertilizers).

A new barn is underway that will house a 72' x 140' riding arena as well as seven "mini-barns." There will be 26 stalls available in the mini-

barns. "One hundred years from now, we want people to know we built this barn with a purpose," Gebhard said.

To that end, the facility is progressive in its design. The mini-barns are individually climate controlled with underground geothermal heating and electricity. Each has skylights to capture natural light. The roof is made of recycled

composite material and features power windows that allow heat regulation. "We will offer the highest level of horse care and relationship between animals and handlers," Gebhard said.

A tour of the trails soon reveals grand overlooks of the Chain of Lakes carefully sculpted into its moraines. Fire pits at the end of trails spur memories of guitar and harmonica campfire tunes of the Alba.

Boardwalks the Ulreys hope to start construction of a new home on the property. Mark Gebhard grew up on a Wisconsin dairy farm. He had a long history in the automotive industry including stints with Jeep and the American Sunroof Corporation. He has owned Spring Ridge Stables in Bellaire, and it was through that business that he originally met his wife, Anna.

Anna has the deepest historic roots in the area, being a Postmus. It is her rich Dutch heritage, going back several generations, that anchors the farm. Russ Ulrey comes from a long background with the World Food Program of the United Nations.

He and Debbie met in Florida, and have lived all over the world, spending a great deal of time in Africa and the Midwest. Debbie is a retired registered nurse of 35 years.

They came to Antrim County after a sailing trip that took them around the planet. Here they reunited with Russ' sister, Mary Richards, who is a long-time resident of Bellaire and a former teacher in the Alba. This summer the Ulreys hope to start construction of a new home on the property.

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have already sold. The farm of unique opportunity for horse lovers. They can also bring world-class care facilities, environmentally-conscious management with wide spaces at their disposal. "The real aspect of the property supports our effort to keep this farm," Anna says. "We feel about Mark and Anna."

With the important aspect of her family and its history in mind, Anna explained, "As this relationship took shape, Mark and I wondered how it would affect us as farmers first. It was most important to my siblings that our land remain a farm. Russ and Debbie have always respected that. A compromise was indeed necessary to cement the relationship because the Ulreys were interested in offering some of their lakefront property as home sites."

But Anna described this agreement as "the best of both worlds." Iron Horse Farms offers a slice of land right along Wilson Lake in the form of 26 individual properties. Debbie is still amazed Three of those lots

For more information, you are encouraged to explore Iron Horse 1 Web site: www.horsefarms.net. phone number is 588-2438. Jeff Kessler can be reached via email at perkins90@hotmail.com.



Mark Gebhard pauses to take a phone call at the end of a boardwalk on the Iron Horse Farms property.

Photo by Jeffrey Kessler