

# Indiana round-barn builder lived in Sedgewick

By Ron Wilson

**Director  
Huck Boyd National Institute  
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Who is considered the father of round barns in Indiana? That distinction belongs to a barn builder and architect of yesteryear, who helped lead the movement that brought about construction of the remarkable round barns which can still be found occasionally across the heartland. This barn builder's name was Benton Steele, and he lived in rural Kansas. This Kansas Profile is the latest in our series about historic barns.

Johnny Steele is a grandson of Benton Steele, the man who was this innovative barn-builder and

architect. On a recent profile, we learned about the Drennan-Stump barn which celebrates its centennial year in 2011. That barn is one of only two remaining round barns built in Kansas by Benton Steele.

Benton Steele grew up in Indiana where he became a skilled draftsman, carpenter and architect. He was 13 years old when his great aunt built a new house, and she had it built in the shape of an octagon. He was so intrigued with this unusual shape that it sparked a lifelong interest in innovative types of structures.

Benton Steele went on to design and build round barns. In 1901, he built an 80-foot diameter round barn for a prominent banker in Indiana. It went so well that a local congressman had him build a 100-

foot diameter barn. Then another legislator wanted the largest round barn in the state, so Benton Steele built one that was 102 feet in diameter. The legislator wrote, "My barn is now completed and I am more than pleased with it. It is the largest and finest barn in the state. There have been thousands of people to see it and all pronounce it the most convenient barn they ever saw. The circular barn is a great improvement over the rectangular plan. I think there is no plan of barn to compare with it."

Soon, many everyday farmers wanted round barns. A 1902 tornado caused devastation in the region, but the round barn that Benton Steele had built survived. After that, some people dubbed the round barns as

"cyclone-proof."

Benton advertised heavily in such publications as The Indiana Farmer and the Breeder's Gazette, and his round barn designs were highly recommended by state agricultural experiment stations in Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Indiana. Benton wrote, "The circular form of building is and always has been and always will be, the ultimate in architectural form as well as the strongest shapes ever conceived by man. The Creator made and fashioned every known or tangible thing after the circular form..."

In 1909, Benton Steele moved to Kansas where he spent the rest of his days. He built five round barns in Kansas, of which only two remain. He went on to a career in architec-

ture and construction of all kinds of structures, in Wichita and beyond. He lived at the rural community of Sedgewick, population 1,549 people. Now, that's rural.

Benton's sons became excellent carpenters as well. When he passed away in 1943, his sons built a beautiful wood casket for him as a final tribute. Benton Steele is buried in the Sedgewick cemetery. Johnny Steele, his grandson, went on to an engineering career in the aviation industry in Wichita. Johnny still has his grandfather's Corona typewriter and a collection of square nails.

"He was a gentleman and a scholar," Johnny said about his grandfather. "I'm amazed at the number of people interested in round barns," Johnny added. "Peo-

ple drive in from Oklahoma and Missouri and anywhere, asking about them."

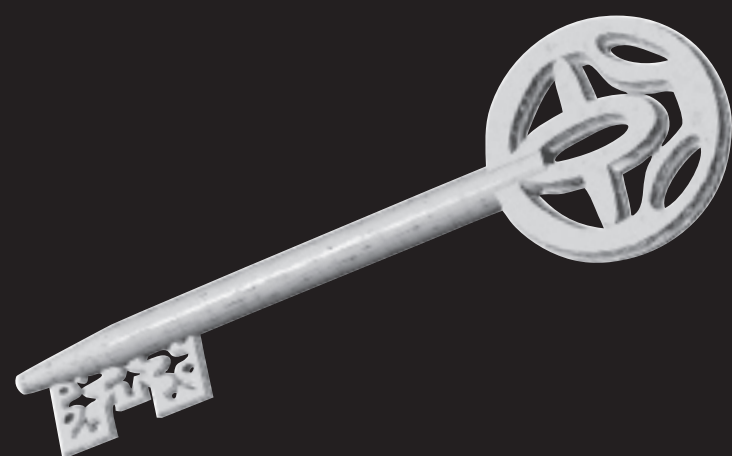
So who is the father of round barns in Indiana? Benton Steele of Sedgewick. Mr. Steele has been described as the "Frank Lloyd Wright of barn-building" and "the foremost designer, builder and promoter of round barns" during this era. We salute Mr. Steele's descendants and all those who are making a difference by preserving this part of our agricultural heritage. I'm glad there are still people keeping these barns a-round.

Next week we'll learn about the other remaining Benton Steele barn in Kansas.

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