



CHECKING OUT EVERYTHING before moving the restored windmill head were Varlan and Catherine Neal (above), who delivered it to the Cottonwood Ranch. The original windmill, (below left) was located nine miles southwest of Selden on the Shea farmstead.

— Herald staff photo by Dave Bergling

Oberlin couple moves windmill to historical ranch

By MARY LOU OLSON

An old wooden windmill head, a landmark at the Shea farmstead nine miles southwest of Selden for years, has a home at the Cottonwood Ranch State Historic Site, thanks to Varlan and Catherine Neal of Oberlin.

Mr. Neal said his mother, the former Nellie Shea, recalled that her parents, John and Belle Shea, bought the farmstead and moved there in 1902. All of their five children were born in a sod house there, he said, and the original tower and windmill were erected in 1918.

Mr. Neal said he remembers his mother telling that for many years there was a horse single tree attached to the windmill with No. 9 wire inserted into a hole drilled in the center on which kids enjoyed swinging.

"My mother said that one time when she was swinging, she fell, landed on a hog and killed it. Her father told her, 'Now, you have to help skin it, so get a knife so we can butcher it right away.'"

Varlan's uncle, Flerry Shea, and his wife, Vesta, lived in another house on the farm. Mr. Neal said that the steel tower was sold, but his brother, Allen Neal of Hoxie, saw the windmill head at the farm one day and asked his uncle if he could have it. It had been stored inside since.

His parents, Charles and Nellie Neal, lived in Hoxie. Varlan said his father worked for Mickey Hardware for 28 years before opening his own business, Neal Plumbing, Heating and Air Conditioning. Later, another son, Allen, took over the business.

Mr. Neal said that Allen is active in Hoxie and serves on several boards, including the board for the Cottonwood Ranch.

When other board members learned that he had the windmill head, they suggested he donate it to the historic site.

However, the wooden head was in poor condition, with the original holes and parts worn out and most fins and fans broken. His brother asked Varlan if he would restore it for him.

Varlan took on the project, and with the help of his wife, they completed the year-long project in October. He said that basically they had to take everything apart and start from scratch.



A TALL CRANE carefully lifted the restored windmill head onto a wooden tower at the Cottonwood Ranch near Studley.

They decided to cut down a wooden fence in their yard, then use the wood to cut 84 fans, along with 14 fins needed for each fan. He used an original fan for a pattern, and after they were completed, his wife sanded and painted each one with white trimmed in red.

Countless hours went into the project, but they enjoyed working side by side to make the windmill the beautiful piece it is today. The couple, who both had lost their mates, met at a singles dance and were married April 27, 2001, in Oberlin.

Mr. Neal said he took his boat trailer and remade it into a heavy trailer to haul the completed head to the ranch. Kieth Alstrom lifted the head onto the trailer, then the Neals

delivered it personally.

Besides his talent in woodworking, Mr. Neal also restores stationary engines. He said when he buys them, they are usually "stuck" and the 8 or 10 which he now owns are all in running order and brightly painted. He enjoys showing them at engine and thresher shows.

COTTONWOOD RANCH

The Cottonwood Ranch is on U.S. 24 a half mile west of Studley, between Hoxie and Hill City. In 1982, the State of Kansas purchased 23 acres of the original Cottonwood Ranch and today the state Historical Society administers the property as one of the last surviving legacies of English settlement in Kansas. Don Rowlison is curator.

In the late 1800s, many thousands

of European settlers attempted to establish permanent settlements on the High Plains of northwest Kansas. Among those who prospered were the Pratts, a family of immigrants from Yorkshire County, England, who joined him in America. Between 1878 and 1882, Abraham Pratt and his sons, John Fenton and Tom, settled on adjacent tracts in the valley of the South Fork of the Solomon River. The Pratts were ambitious, hardworking, inventive and opportunists, and unlike many, when they came to this country, they had money.

By 1888 Fenton felt he was prosperous enough to have his fiancée, Jennie Elizabeth Place, of Ripon, England, join him in America. She made the long journey to Kansas alone, arriving at Lenora, the end of the rail line, on Dec. 30, 1888. She and Fenton were married the next day. They had two daughters, Hilda, born in 1889, and Elsie, in 1894.

Fenton Pratt became a successful sheep rancher and in March and April 1891, he shipped 3,566 pounds of wool to markets in St. Louis and Philadelphia. In the 1880s and 1890s, Fenton constructed a stone house and buildings and also planted many cottonwood trees. He named his home Cottonwood Ranch.

Five of the site's six original stone buildings have been preserved: the house, wash house, bunkhouse, stable, and shearing shed. Visitors get an introductory slide program and tour of the house. A self-guided tour brochure provides information about the outbuildings and other nearby features, such as the spring, historical train, Fenton's orchards and the play area of Hilda and Elsie.

The historic site focuses on sheep ranching, the English in Kansas, entrepreneurship, and settlement on the High Plains.

Fenton Pratt died in 1937. Hilda never married and remained on the home place with her mother. After the death of Mrs. Pratt in 1959, Hilda lived alone at the ranch until 1978, keeping the place as it was. She died in 1980.

There was already a wooden tower at the ranch, said Mr. Neal, so the restored windmill head was mounted there.

Hours at the ranch are from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and 1 to 5 p.m. Sunday. For details, call (785) 627-5866 or e-mail cotton@kshs.org.



THIS STONE HOUSE (above) was the home built by Fenton Pratt in the 1880s and 1890s. It still stands, along with four other original stone buildings at the Cottonwood Ranch, a half mile west of Studley.