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Artwork adorns local barns

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer | Posted: Monday, October 29, 2012 2:00 pm

A small, local nonprofit group has a big, colorful dream: to install large, brightly-painted square panels of quilt blocks on 35 to 40 Kittitas County barns by this spring.

So far this fall, the group has been successful in getting two barn quilts up, each wood panel measuring 4 by 4 or 8 by 8-feet, and a third went up privately in cooperation with the group, said Jacky Fausset of rural Cle Elum, president of the Barn Quilts of Kittitas County board.

“We have gotten overwhelming positive support for the project from almost everyone who hears about it,” said Fausset in emailed comments.

Tourist attraction

The first quilt artwork went up in early October, and will be part of the state’s first-ever barn quilt trail, a self-guided tour that, hopefully, will attract tourists, Fausset said.

She said the barn quilt group is under the nonprofit umbrella of the Kittitas County Chamber of Commerce, which has helped mentor the grassroots group through the organizational process.

She said the Kittitas County Historical Museum is providing historical photos and information on local historic barns.

“WSU (Washington State University-Kittitas County) Extension’s 4-H program will be including a barn quilt painting program as soon as a leader steps up,” Fausset said.

She added that Tommy Wilmart of T & T Electric has been especially helpful in putting up the local barn quilts with the use of the company’s power lift truck. Curtis Bull also has helped with his power lift truck.

A call for help

The call has gone out to Kittitas County’s rural property owners asking them to consider adding a quilt block to their barns. There are an estimated 400 to 500 old and new barns throughout Kittitas County.

Fausset said the quilt trail is not only an opportunity to highlight specific aspects of the county and state’s agricultural history, but it will be a draw for visitors and those interested in the county’s agricultural heritage.

Some barn owners are adding their ranch cattle brands to the barn quilt they put up.

“Barn quilt trails in other counties have been very successful in attracting ‘agri-tourists’ and having a positive economic impact on local business,” Fausset said.

When the trail reaches a significant level of completion, self-guided, driving tour trail maps will be developed to connect the decorated rural barns to urban and historic areas around the county, providing the thread that strings dissimilar attractions together as they have done in the Appalachian Quilt Trail in Tennessee.

In Kittitas County, long-term plans call for driving loops to intersect with area towns and communities that also have walking tours of their downtown historic districts.

Reflecting our lives

A family putting up a barn quilt might choose a block to honor an ancestor, or their involvement in a particular part of agriculture like growing hay, wheat, raising horses or running a dairy, Fausset said.

“What I love most about the barn quilt project is not only that the brightly painted quilt blocks are beautiful, but that it is much more than a grassroots art project,” she said. “It is what the quilt blocks represent; pride in property, family stories, honoring the quilters in the family, the men who built the barns, and everything those old barns have witnessed over the decades.”

‘Our pride’

Fausset said by involving as many community groups and individuals as possible in the painting and installing of the barn quilts “it becomes our pride, our history, and our stories. It reminds us of our grandparents’ values, neighbors helping neighbors, sharing stories and making the most of our resources.”