

# Going Places: A poetic fall ramble

- Article by: VERONICA NEWINGTON , Special to the Star Tribune Updated: November 13, 2010 - 12:13 PM

The Red Wing Poetry Barns can be a day-trip destination any time of year.

Most Twin Citizens know Red Wing as a charming river town and the home of sturdy shoes. All too few know about Red Wing's four poetry barns. Each carries a poem for one of the seasons, and all are strung along a 20-mile loop originating in the town. This makes for a short driving tour or, more excitingly, a great bicycle day trip.

My husband and I toured the barns by bicycle in the fall, a perfect antidote to city-induced cabin fever.

As we left Red Wing, the accumulating black clouds made good on their promise and raindrops began to spatter loudly on our bike helmets. The idea of bicycling around Goodhue County to see some barns began to seem a bit half-baked. However, with the stubborn determination of a couple who needed several hours' respite between skirmishes with their unwieldy bike rack, we pressed on, the wind and rain intensifying.

Happily, the blustery wind blew the shower away, and we were soon pedaling through weak autumnal sunshine. The country road was a gently undulating ribbon of shining tarmac, beckoning us on. Our lungs started working harder and we breathed in the sharp smells of the ripened crops that stretched toward the low horizon. All lay somewhere on a color spectrum running from russet through pumpkin to canary yellow. Corn rustled dryly on either side of the road and the occasional V of geese honked their way south above us.

Every mile or so we passed a small farmstead. Each had a weathered barn, dwarfed by huge gleaming grain silos. These barns are glimpses of the past that reveal the subsequent changes in the rural landscape: development as inexorable as the turn of the seasons.

## **FALL**

After about 6 miles of pedaling we came to the first poetry barn perched alongside County Road 1, an obvious landmark to the left as we approached up a gentle slope. The ease of spotting it took little pleasure away from the discovery, however. We could easily decipher the rows of white letters on the weathered red boards, so appropriate for the day:

*Breathing in leaves ashes --*

*The wings' course and the tractors'*

*Turning over shadows --*

*Drawing the harvest inside us.*

## **SPRING**

Shortly after Fall, we turned right where County Road 1 meets County Road 6. As usual, my husband was a small bicycling figure on the horizon, and I was surprised when the dot started heading back toward me, calling out as soon as I was within earshot:

"Spring is dead."

"Huh?"

"Spring is dead."

He was right -- almost immediately after the turn lay the ruined boards of Spring. The lack of preservation initially shocked us, but we later discovered that Massachusetts poet Mark Mendel stated from the outset that he didn't wish the poems to outlive the barns. He decided to paint farm buildings in 1983 as part of the "Word Works" festival sponsored by the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and the Walker Art Center. The first four farmers on his shortlist agreed to host his work on their barns for as long as they stood.

*Only wind speaks*

*In the empty treetops --*

*The mute farmer draws a fish*

*In the March snow.*

## **WINTER**

A lovely rolling ride along County Road 6 carried us to a right turn onto Hwy. 19, the busiest section of road we encountered. There is a generous shoulder but this road alone probably makes the ride unsuitable for younger children or very inexperienced riders. We came across the third barn a short distance along the highway, on the left side of the road. It is a spic-and-span burgundy and cream building, nestled into a working farm, with horses in the corral out front and tree-crested bluffs rising all around. A new extension to the barn partly obscures the poem, but we could still pick out many words. They transport you to the chill of a January Minnesota night:

*Wind walking after the storm*

*Tracks filling with moonlight --*

*Stars in a mare's silhouette --*

*Fenced snow waits for dawn*

## **SUMMER**

Our wheels crunched through the fallen leaves drifting across Hwy. 19 and the sun intensified, shining off the tin roof of the final barn. This bottle-green byre is perhaps the most distinctive of the group, and the verse is clearly stamped onto its side.

*Green lit limbs fan glances --*

*Shirtless contours in the downpour --*

*Ancestors folded into valleys --*

*Honey in the burning hive.*

The lower level where cows once slept is now a workshop for Hobgoblin, a harp manufacturer. We were able to peer through a series of small windows and watch as artisans carefully crafted the instruments, curls of wood gathering around their feet. This site is also an atmospheric concert venue, and bursts of bass guitar accompanied our picnic lunch.

After a good hour spent lolling around in the precious last warmth of the sun, we dragged our lazy bones back onto our bikes and rode on until we met Hwy. 61 to head back into downtown Red Wing. While we prepared to go home, the barns' lovely words lingered with us, soothing us as we returned to the unequal struggle of human vs. bike rack.

Veronica Newington is a freelance writer based in Osseo.

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- [The poetry barn tour](#)

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More information if you choose to go:



- [A well-versed barn on Hwy. 19.](#)  
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