

BY TOM EMMERSON

Never mind VEISHEA —

ISU Horse Barns Still Site of Greatest Show

VEISHEA may be history — but another spring celebration is still drawing raves at Iowa State University — even though it's been essentially the same basic performance for 93 years.

That's when Olive, Al and Emmy, followed by a host of other foals — make their debuts at the horse barns — located just south of the Union Pacific railroad tracks in the northeastern corner of campus. The initial trio arrived early — in January and February — to be followed by about three dozen foals that will be born between mid-March and mid-May.

That's when the curtain goes up on a production at least as popular as Cinderella or The Sound of Music. Despite some concern about the fate of the campus horse barns, this show looks like it will be running for a very long time to come.

This assurance comes from the head of Animal Science, the dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and, above all, from ISU President Steven Leath.

This is good news, not just for children visiting the barns, but also for ISU students, alumni and just about everyone in the Ames area who knows about the horse barns. Watching the foals take their first wobbly steps, become weanlings and then yearlings is the “must see” show of the year. And the price is right:

It's free. Visitors are welcome to stop by and see the horses along University Boulevard (formerly Pammel Drive) any time. Just show up and — perhaps — bring a small donation in form of a carrot or a bit of apple.

Some of the season's foals are owned by clients and will be returned to them along with their mothers. At least some of Iowa State's foals will be sold later to thoroughbred stables or quarter horse owners for racing or pleasure. But ISU always keeps enough weanlings to replenish its supply of horses for its hands-on classes, which are largely at capacity.

And student interest is increasing to the point that all eight equine courses are full

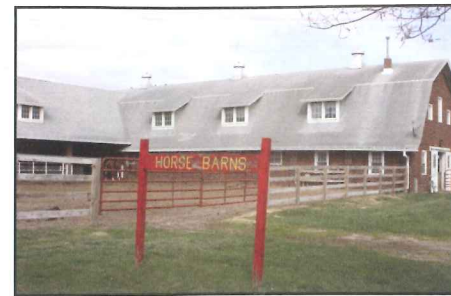
and might need to expand beyond the 415 places now being offered.

The ringmaster for this ongoing performance is Nikki Ferwerda. Classes she teaches include equine reproduction, horse behavior and training, and equine evaluation. Ferwerda is also barn manager for both the campus horse barns and the new equine learning center 2 miles south of campus.

Perhaps above all, Ferwerda is responsible for the health, safety and welfare of all the 45-60 horses owned by Animal Science and its clients, as well as the breeding operation, which produces between 18-25 foals in an average year.

Without the three horse barns on campus there would be no stage for the Big Show.

The first two barns were built in 1923 (and connected by a machine shed three years later). Included in each wing was a tiny two-room apartment for student employees.



A third barn was built a few meters to the east in 1927, but it serves today as a teaching laboratory.

All three are classics of their kind: They were constructed of clay tile with a gambrel style roof (think Mansard) and numerous gabled and shed dormers for ventilation. The west barn built in 1923 still has some of the original wood block floors in its tie stalls.

Unlike the story of the Three Little Pigs, you could huff and puff and not blow these barns away.

The original U-shaped barns were for college-owned horses, beginning back when most farm work was done with draft teams. When Iowa State sold its last pair of Belgians in 1960, the barns were minimally maintained, but the activity level dipped for a few decades. Then, for a variety of reasons, including the growth of the race track business (and the opening in 1989 of Prairie Meadows just east of Des Moines) horses were back on the main card.

The Animal Science department re-built its pleasure horse inventory and then added thoroughbreds — which make up about half of the barns' breeding activity today.



In between, the horse barns endured some difficult times. In 1989 barn #3 was converted to a facility for basic ruminant nutrition research. Having no cuds, horses were shut out. That lasted until 1998, when ruminant research was moved to the new animal science facility (Lush Hall). Barn #3 was then restored as an equine teaching facility.

The two other barns went decades without facelifts of any substance. Over time roofs began to leak and the buildings were generally reduced to minimum maintenance budgets.

By 2005, however, interest in quarter horses and Iowa-born thoroughbreds sparked

both opportunity and student enrollment. The result was an infusion of \$155,000 the following year. Roofs were re-shingled. In the last four years, the two student-employee apartments have been painted and outfitted with new appliances.

Ferwerda, who became barn manager in 2012, proudly boasts that the barns today are in “great shape . . . sound, durable and in good repair.”

Better yet, Barn #3 today houses three foaling stalls — each with two doors in case the mare blocks one giving birth. These



stalls are constructed of materials designed to be thoroughly washed and disinfected after each use. There are also two stocks for artificial insemination and equine health care — such as dental work — as well as offices and a classroom.

This is the only barn that is heated — not so much for the benefit of the horses as for the comfort of the 80 or so students in semester-long classes. Another 300-400 students in other Animal Sciences courses spend at least some time in the horse barns as part of their semester's class work.

Ferwerda predicts that program numbers would mushroom if she had enough staff to add equitation classes to the course offerings. Today, however, equine reproduction is the course in greatest demand. This is taught spring semesters, beginning in early January.

For this class Ferwerda aims to have 30-36 mares give birth. A few foals are born in January and February. That's when Wildcat gave birth to Olive. Some arrive in May or early June.

But the main show occurs in March and April when there could be a birth a day and even multiple births on some days, according to Emma Schmitz, a junior in

Mechanical Engineering, who has been working 15-20 hours a week at the barns for the past two years.

On average, the campus barns are home to three stallions and 20 mares (evenly split between thoroughbreds and quarter horses). Ferwerda says the stallions are permanently housed at the campus barns.

On the other hand, mares are routinely moved back and forth between the Equine Learning Center and campus barns. Reasons to be on campus include foaling, weaning, sales preparation and medical or dental treatment.

Just under half of the horses housed at ISU during the spring semester are “client” mares from private stables. Some are bred at Iowa State, while others arrive sometime during their gestation to foal. They are obviously returned with their foals as soon as they are fit.

The other mares belong to Animal Science. Their foals are kept for class work until they are sold — normally as yearlings, though some may be purchased as weanlings. Regardless of ownership, all of the mares (and foals) have two names: their official Jockey Club or American Quarter Horse Association registered names and their “barn names.”

For example, “A Sudden Exception,” is known locally as “Laverne;” “She's Always Good” is “Libby.” “Five Alarm Fancy” goes by “Amber.” And “Sweet Talkin' Beauty” is just “Sierra.” Needless to say, the 15 students working with the horses at the barns all have their own favorites. But they also share one common characteristic: they love the horses — especially when the sun is shining and the foals are frisky.

Visitors are welcome almost anytime. However, an appointment is needed for more formal tours of the barns or visits to the paddocks behind the barns. These can be arranged by phoning Ferwerda at 515-290-7669.

One satisfied visitor summed up her visitation experience when she described the staff as “very sweet” because “they showed my mom and sisters around on Mother's Day.”

In fact, almost every spring day is Mother's Day at the campus barns.



Be sure to check the north façade of Barn #3 where you will see a slightly faded message in large letters for the benefit of passengers of the dozen or so streamliners that stopped in Ames every day from 1927 to the late 1950s: “AMES, Animal Husbandry Department, Horse Barn”