

Residents recall barn's colorful history

BY REBECCA SVEC
Lincoln Journal Star

MILLIGAN — On a clear night in 1934, a 2 a.m. shotgun blast yanks a 9-year-old farm old from slumber. The 9-year-old is 78 now, still living on the same farm south of Milligan in a brick ranch that replaced the farmhouse of his youth.

But Rudy Capek still remembers that sound, interrupting the stillness of rural Nebraska when it sleeps.

He later learned the gunshot was a signal, an "all clear," for the supply trucks of a massive alcohol distilling plant operating secretly at a nearby farm.

Anecdotes and an old barn are all that's left of those days.

The still operated less than a year before federal agents shut it down in 1934, making it no more than a blip in the town's history.

But novelty outweighs brevity, and the still became a part of Milligan's legacy.

The still earned a write-up in the town's 1988 history book. When high school students made a video history of the town two years ago, the still again made the cut.

Ask anyone at a local coffee shop about the still and each retells old stories about secret tunnels and alcohol stashed in hay bales.

The story survives for a couple of reasons, residents said.

One is the size and complexity of the operation, thought to be one of the biggest in the country at the time.

In the yellowed pages of newspaper archives, government agents estimated the plant, concealed in a barn south of Milligan, cost \$10,000 to \$15,000 to create and turned out 1,000 gallons a day of such high-quality brew that even the agents were impressed.

Yet remember it because it's one of the biggest things that happened around here, said Capek's wife, Louise, whose family was among the hundreds of sightseers feasting the still in the days following the raid.

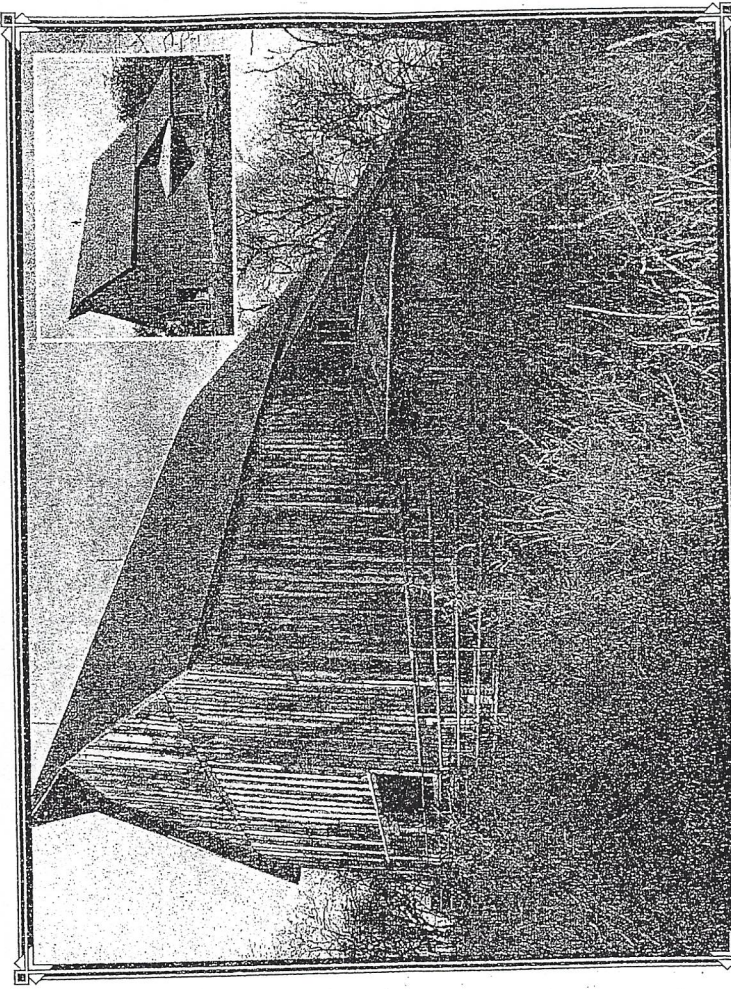
Her 6-year-old legs climbed the ladder to the haymow to look down into four mammoth vats.

The volume of alcohol produced within the barn's walls was "beyond belief," said Bob Kotas of Omaha, a Milligan native whose father, Milo, attended the trial of those arrested in the raid.

"This incredible volume was made and yet no one saw it," he said.

That's the other reason the still made the history books — it's a good story, part history, part mystery and intrigue, the kind people love to tell and love to hear.

Parts of the story are recorded in the scrapbooks spread on the Capeks' kitchen table. Rudy's parents eventually bought and lived on the farm that had hidden



REBECCA SVEC/Lincoln Journal Star
For six months in 1934, a barn south of Milligan (inset) was the site of a large still, producing 1,000 gallons of alcohol a day. When it was shut down in a raid, Milligan residents went out to see the operation before it was torn down. The barn is abandoned today (above).

'We had no way of telling anything of this size was going on. But people had the sense that something wasn't right.'

— Rudy Capek on the still in a barn shut down in 1934

the illegal plant. A nephew owns it now.

The family found old alcohol jug in a cellar of an outbuilding. Capek children scoured the adjacent pasture, always looking for the old escape tunnel that connected to the barn. The closest they found was a long depression in the ground.

"(Federal agents) probably collapsed the tunnel," Rudy said.

Agents dismantled the entire operation, though, according to the history book, locals suggested it remain in the barn as a tourist attraction.

"Who knows? Maybe we could have been the next Lynchburg, Tenn.," said Scott Olive, past

president of Milligan's Community Club.

Milligan learned the scope of the operation after it was raided. October 1934 editions of The Milligan Review and The Nebraska Signal newspapers provide details about the still, run by a group from Chicago believed to have ties to mob boss Al Capone.

The barn's contents included four mash tanks made of California redwood, a large syrup tank that could hold 300 sacks of sugar and a water tank with a 6,000-gallon capacity. Water came from a new well, advanced for its time, powered by a buried electric

pump rather than a windmill. The boller run with distillate.

A DeLco oil burner produced steam, which condensed in a complex cooling tower. A ventilator was installed in the

barn's roof. The alcohol produced tested 190 proof.

Two peep holes on the west side of the barn allowed the



COURTESY JOHNNIE HALAMA
This large vat, shown in a 1934 photograph, contained the corn sugar used in the alcohol-making process.

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The Still

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inside of the barn were a lookout for trespassers. The plant's waste ran into a draw, dammed to prevent the material from running toward the road.

An escape tunnel ran from the barn to a pasture. Trees removed to make the tunnel were put back, loosely, in place.

"We had no way of telling anything of this size was going on. But people had the sense that something wasn't right," Capek said.

There was talk.

About the gun shots, about trucks coming and going under the cover of darkness, some following the railroad tracks.

There were questions.

Why such a big new well for a vacant farm supporting only a few cattle?

Why the shiny, expensive ventilator on top of a weathered barn?

What was the odd smell coming from the farm? Kottas' father grew up about a mile and a half from the farm.

"Everyone around knew there was some smell floating around that was not a normal farm smell. When there was a southwest wind, it blew right to (his father's) place," Kottas said.

The operation couldn't work without some local help, but many didn't know what they were involved in, he said. They just knew in the tough times of the Great Depression, dust storms and grasshoppers that the jobs paid well.

"People would be paid to take a truckload somewhere, leave the truck at an address and go away. They never knew who they delivered to or for. It was a very well-kept secret," Kottas said.

Kottas said he remembered talking to "an old-timer," when he was a boy sitting in front of his father's downtown drug store.

The old man had made a delivery to the farm once. "He pulled up with the wagon and walked around a corner and was met by a shotgun. He told them he had a delivery. They told him to leave it and go."

In late September 1934, the operation came to an end. Prohibition was repealed the year before, but the plant was busted for operating without a license.

Agents followed a sugar truck from Minnesota to the farm. Eight federal and state officers staged the 6:30 p.m. raid. George Connelly and R.C. Morgan of Milwaukee were captured as they tried to escape. Connelly was shot. The two men dressed in overalls and leather jackets were rushed to Lincoln, one to jail, one to St. Elizabeth's Hospital.

A Milligan man also was arrested on a charge of possession of alcohol, but did not go to jail.

About 750 gallons of liquor was taken to Lincoln, and a tank of 400 gallons was dumped on the ground.

"Thousands of gallons of mash was running for hours during the day Sunday," The Milligan Review reported.

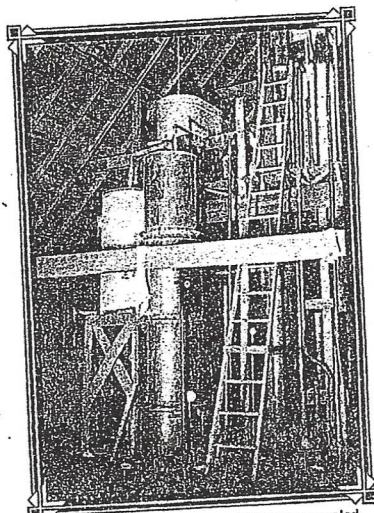
The Geneva sheriff and deputy guarded the still over the weekend.

Visitors poured to the site.

A Tobias woman played hooky from school to see the still, and remembers the big clunks of yeast piled in a corner of the barn.

Her husband remembers the visitors' cars lining both sides of the gravel road leading to the farm. The two Milwaukee men pleaded guilty as owners and operators of the still and received jail sentences. Many questions about the operation, such as its ties to Chicago, were left unanswered.

"People were willing to keep their mouths shut, do their time and come out later with a lot of money," Kottas said. "Nobody rattled on anybody higher up the



The haymow of a large barn near Milligan concealed this large still.

ladder."

The topic closed for a time. "It was one of those things that people just really didn't talk about much until many years later. Everyone knew about it, but had all been talked out at the time. It was only many years later that stories started coming up, people saying 'Do you remember this?'"

In the 1960s, pictures taken at the raid to document the operation made their way to Milo Kottas' drug store, which gathered film to be developed in Lincoln.

The crisp black-and-whites of the barn, equipment and tunnel, were copied many times over the years, as keepsakes of a little corner of history.

These many years removed, people think of it as an interesting piece of Milligan's history, Oliva said.

Many, like Rudy Capek, are impressed, not with the illegal production, but the craftsmanship.

"It was quite a place, really, made intelligently and big. This went on all over the country, but this, this was big."

The number of people with memories of the still drops each year.

A new five-mile spur of pavement replaced the gravel road to the farm last year.

And the old barn spills no secrets.

The fancy ventilator was removed; the tunnel sealed.

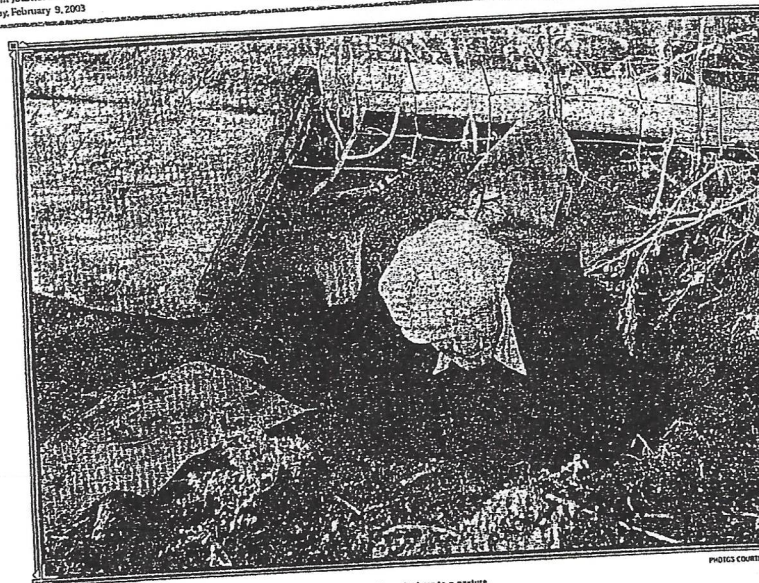
The paint faded, and the haymow emptied. It's filled with hay and cattle gates now, waiting to shelter newborn calves from winter winds.

"It looks like a plain old barn now," Rudy Capek said.

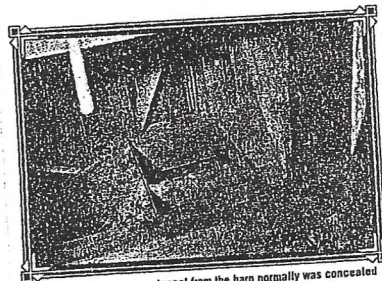
Then he remembers, it looked like a plain old barn in 1934, too.

"But it really is just a plain old barn now," he said, smiling.

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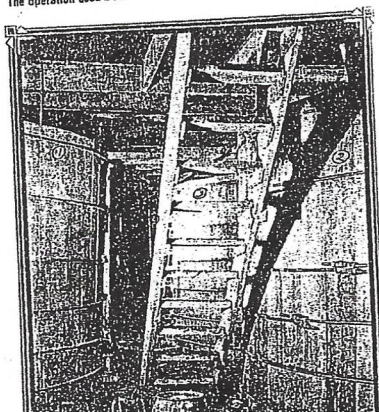
A man exits the secret tunnel for a photographer after the 1934 raid. The tunnel ran from the barn to a pasture.



This entrance to an escape tunnel from the barn normally was concealed by boards.



The operation used a modern well for its time, powered by this underground electric-powered pump.



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