

Quick response limits barn fire damage at Miracle of America Museum



Gil Mangels demonstrates the moving parts of an antique stationary bailer Monday at the Miracle of America Museum along U.S. Highway 93 east of Polson. The bailer was among several museum exhibits that was damaged in a fire Friday. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

Fire response crews from Polson and beyond responded to a structure fire at the Miracle of America Museum in Polson around 9 a.m. Friday. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

Fire crews spray a barn on fire at the Miracle of America Museum on Friday. (Courtesy of John Hart)

The agriculture barn that was destroyed by a fire Friday at the Miracle of America Museum. (Courtesy of Gil Mangels)

Piles of burned antiques and artifacts stand in front of the burned agriculture barn at the Miracle of America Museum. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

A barn full of antique tractors right beside the agriculture barn received virtually no damage from the fire. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

A nearby antique fire engine was of no use during Friday's fire. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

An adjacent small barn survived Friday's fire with only minor burns. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

Gil Mangels said he needs to go through several piles of burned museum pieces and determine which are salvageable. He said it will take years to restore everything that wasn't a complete loss. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

A twisted piece of machinery rests among the ashes of the agriculture barn at the Miracle of America Museum. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

Some pieces of equipment burned in the fire could be restored with a bit of cleaning and replacement of wooden parts. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

Some pieces, like this Oliver plow that sat unused for years on Wild Horse Island, sustained severe damage. The heat from the fire twisted and bent some metal parts. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)

By
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Lake County Leader
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A bit of Lake County history went up in smoke Friday morning as a fire destroyed a barn full of agricultural equipment and artifacts at the Miracle of America Museum southeast of Polson.

The good news is things could have been much worse.

The museum holds a collection of thousands of artifacts of American history scattered throughout 42 buildings over 4.5 acres of land. While the agriculture barn was destroyed, other adjacent structures suffered little or no damage thanks to a quick response from local fire crews.

A smaller barn full of dairy equipment beside the ag barn has burn marks on the front. An open barn area just behind the blaze that’s full of antique tractors — with a helicopter on the roof — was virtually unscathed.

Gil Mangels founded the museum, located at 36094 Memory Lane, in 1981. He and his wife, Helen, operate the museum, which runs as a 501(c)

nonprofit organization.

Mangels said Monday that he had been burning dandelions near the barn Friday morning.

“I couldn’t find anyone to help with the weeds. I was being very careful. But a spark must have gotten behind the building’s paneling.”

Mangels said the affected buildings were the 1936 barn and a close ag building that were a total loss with many rare agriculture antiques seriously damaged or destroyed. While many of the museum's structures are insured, those that burned are not.

Among the destroyed items was a collection of potato sacks from Lake County with local growers’ names on them. Also damaged was an antique Case stationary bailer, a collection of barbed wire, seeders, grain grinders, cultivators and a grist mill.

Mangels said it will take him quite awhile to go through the piles of damaged items and determine which are salvageable. Some items have wood pieces that were charred, while the metal frame remained intact. Other metal items came away warped and twisted from the fire’s heat.

Mangels said the quick response from fire crews saved the day. He also gave a nod to Mother Nature.

“We were fortunate the wind didn’t come up. It could have been much worse if it had.”

Multiple agencies responded to the fire, including Polson Rural Fire, Polson City Fire, Polson Police, Polson Ambulance, the Lake County Sheriff’s Office and members of the Chief Cliff Volunteer Fire Department.

The Polson city boundary runs between Walmart and the museum, and the closest source of water for firefighters is the south end of the Walmart parking lot. Crews ran a hose from the parking lot down Memory Lane, a frontage road, about a quarter of a mile to the fire.

“We started with a tank attack, then transitioned to hydrant supply,” once the hose was connected and extended to the museum, Polson Rural Fire Department Chief Gordon Gieser said.

Mangels said coming up with a damage estimate is nearly impossible.

“The true value of these items is the joy they bring to people. Antiques open up the mind of an older generation who might have forgotten.”

The museum’s collection includes antique military vehicles, firearms, motorcycles, dolls, toys, cars, boats and thousands of pieces of war memorabilia. The site also hosts an annual Live History Days event each July. The museum remains open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.

You can help

Mangels said anyone who would like to help clean up the site of the burned barn can stop by any time during business hours. “It’s dirty work, though, so they need to bring gloves and be prepared.” He hopes that people may be interested in taking on a project and helping restore some of the burned equipment. Making a visit to the museum and encouraging others to do so helps as well. Entrance costs \$10.

Anyone interested in volunteering for this year’s Live History Days should contact the museum at 406-883-6804. For more information, visit miracleofamericamuseum.org



Some pieces, like this Oliver plow that sat unused for years on Wild Horse Island, sustained severe damage. The heat from the fire twisted and bent some metal parts. (Scot Heisel/Lake County Leader)



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