

Greeley-area farm gets historic farm designation

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FOR THE FENCE POST,

It's now more than a farm.

The Von Trotha-Firestien Farm at Bracewell has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, joining an impressive list of historic farms in Weld County. The farm's headquarters are at the intersection of O Street and 83rd Avenue, northwest of Greeley, and was the subject of heated debate last year when the Board of Weld County Commissioners approved a plan to extend O Street west through the farm.

And while the economy has placed that expansion on the back burner, Ruth Firestien and her daughter, Judy, who make their homes on the farm, said the designation provides some protection from any future expansion of the street.

"I don't think I'll see it (expansion) in my lifetime," Ruth said. She has lived on the farm for 57 years.

The farm, according to the Colorado Historical Society, is important because of its long association with the development of irrigated farming, sugar beet cultivation and livestock feeding which are all important to the development of Greeley and Weld.

The farm buildings represent more than 109 years of European settlement in the Bracewell area, once a community with its own school, several businesses, a sugar beet dump and the Bracewell Store, which remained in business until the 1970s. It once encompassed an area of about four square miles. The town's center was at what is now Weld County roads 641/2 and 27.

Judy said she has been conducting research on the family farm for several years and approached the Colorado Historical Society about getting the designation late last year. She then tackled the 55-page application, which was submitted in December. That form then went through a review board meeting. From there, it went to Washington where it was posted for 45 days before getting the approval of the keeper of national designations.

The family was notified of the official designation May 12, which comes from the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Judy's research revealed the farm started sometime around 1887 when Baron Claus Wolfgang Von Trotha and his wife, Helen, who had immigrated to the United States prior to 1865, homesteaded in the Bracewell/Farmers Spur area. Bodo "Bode" Von Trotha was the eldest of their nine children and he and his brother, Claude, as the Von Trotha Brothers, had one of the largest livestock feeding operations in the region.

Peter and Sophia Firestien and their sons, Conrad and Louis, immigrated to the U.S. in 1899 as part of the group that became known as the Germans from Russia. They were in the Bracewell area as early as 1911 and started farming for the Von Trotha brothers shortly thereafter.

"Mary Bracewell owned the farm originally, which was unusual at the time to see a woman owning property," Judy said. The Bracewell family had immigrated from England in 1885, she said, and settled in the area, naming the town for the English town they had left. Bracewell, at the time, was a stage coach stop.

Chuck Firestien was one of the six children of Conrad and Mabel (Sitzman) Firestien, who were married in 1922 on the farm. Chuck and Ruth were married in 1952 and moved into the house she continues to make her home, which was built from recycled materials at the farm. Chuck died in a automobile accident in 2004.

The house where Judy lives was built in 1926 and it, too, was built with recycled material from grain silos and other materials on the farm. Part of the farm, 40 acres, continues to produce crops and is farmed by Ruth's brother-in-law, Gerald Firestien and his son, Mark, using ditch and irrigation systems put in place by the Von Trotha brothers. Other historical buildings are a part of the farm, including two tin granaries where livestock records were written on doors and walls of both, dating back to the 1940s.

The farm also is part of the Sharkstooth Pipe Line Co., started by the Von Trotha brothers in 1951 and there are still 11 taps on that water line. It services eight homes, two businesses and the Poudre River Learning Center.

Judy said while getting the designation was a lot of time and work, the effort was worth it.

"It (the designation) says the farm is 'worthy of preservation,' and I really like that," she said.

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