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May 29, 2014

Greeley family farm joins National Register of Historic Places



Judy Firestien, left, puts her arm around Ruth Firestien her mother, while at the historic Von Trotha-Firestien Farm on Tuesday in Bracewell. The open house for the historic farm will be this Saturday and will include an antique tractor display and barrel train rides, a petting zoo and a polka dance.



Ruth Firestien glances up at the giant quilt pattern that was placed on the barn at the historic Von Trotha-Firestien farm house during a brief tour on Tuesday in Bracewell.



Ruth Firestien, sits at the end of the dining room table along with a photo of the Claude Von Trotha while in the historic Von Trotha-Firestien farm house on Tuesday in Bracewell. Claude and his brother, Bode, founded the farm in 1916 and owned the land until the 1960s.



Judy Firestien, left, puts her arm around Ruth Firestien her mother, while at the historic Von Trotha-Firestien Farm on Tuesday in Bracewell. The open house for the historic farm will be this Saturday and will include an antique tractor display and barrel train rides, a petting zoo and a polka dance.

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Von Trotha-Firestien Farm open house

Free open house on Saturday, noon to 8 p.m.

30951 Weld County Road 27, Greeley

Activities include an antique tractor display by the Colorado Old Iron Association, a petting zoo by Pony Express, Polka dancing with music provided by The River Boys, a drawing for a handmade quilt, educational booths and displays, and a bake sale to support the Blazing Clovers 4-H Club.

Visit bracewellfarm.com for more information.

Researching the history of her Greeley family farm and the community surrounding it often kept Judy Firestien awake at night, and it sent her rushing to tell her mother, Ruth, about all the things she'd discovered.

“It’s like a puzzle of history,” she said. “It kind of sucks you in and you can’t stop.”

Firestien’s research — compiled into a 50-page application — led to the farm, the Von Trotha-Firestien Farm at Bracewell, earning a place on the National Register of Historic Places. The Firestiens said they’ve long enjoyed the rich history of their homes, buildings and land and, on Saturday at a farm open house, they hope to share that with members of the community.

“We want to preserve a piece of northern Colorado’s agricultural history because farms are disappearing,” Judy said.

Officially, the Von Trotha-Firestien farm dates back to 1916, the earliest record of Von Trotha brothers Bode and Claude, sons of a German baron, owning the land where the Firestiens now live. The Firestien family connected with the Von Trothas, perhaps because they had the German language in common, and they’ve worked on the farm since at least 1917, according to Judy’s research.

“Whatever change of heart the other parties had, I don’t know, but every party is willing to take that step now.
— Kelli Johnson, spokeswoman for the High Plains Library District

The Firestiens and several other families were tenant farmers who lived and worked on Von Trotha land, growing sugar beets and raising livestock. Judy’s great-grandfather, Peter, successfully grew sugar beets for 30 years on the farm. Ruth Firestien, now in her 80s, said she grew up only 3 miles from the house where she now lives. She remembers Chuck Firestien, the man who would become her husband, making a loud entrance everywhere he went in the community, and she remembers turning him down a few times before she realized she liked him and they began dating. The couple was married in the ’50s, just before Chuck was drafted into the U.S. Army and stationed in Missouri as a heavy equipment instructor.

When they were ready to make their home on the farm, the Von Trothas moved a house from another location on the farm to where it stands now, next to the main home at the end of O Street. Judy and her brother, Roger, grew up in that home. In the 1960s, the Von Trothas dissolved their ownership and sold each parcel to the families who worked the land, including the Firestiens. After living more than a decade in Fort Collins, Judy moved back to the farm after her father’s passing in 2004. She moved into the main house, originally built in 1926 from bricks torn from old silos on the farm.

In the home that still has its original wood floors, Judy began researching the settlement of Bracewell, named for an English family who settled there. She soon found connections to her lineage and used information from historical articles and online history sites to connect the dots. In 2008, Weld County announced and ultimately accepted a plan to extend O Street from 83rd Avenue to the Crossroads Boulevard in Windsor — an extension requiring the demolition of the Firestien homes, as the road would run through the living room in the main house.

While official construction plans are yet to come, that was a wake-up call for Judy, and she said she knew she needed to apply to have the home recognized as a historic place while she still could. The farm was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2009.

Judy said the farm earned the designation in part because of its contribution to agriculture in the community and in part because of the resourcefulness of the architecture, as the Von Trothas moved buildings around and recycled materials.

The farm is also part of the Colorado State Register of Historic Properties and the Historic Farms and Ranches of Weld County.

Judy said she recently connected with relatives of the Von Trothas, and they’re very appreciative the land their family members helped settle is being valued as a part of history.

“I think they deserve some recognition, to have their name floating around even though they’re not here,” she said.

The farm open house Saturday will include an antique tractor display, barrel train rides, petting zoo and polka dance — a nod to the family’s German-Russian heritage. The Blazing Clovers 4-H Club will host a bake sale, and burgers, brats and hot dogs also will be served.

Judy said she wanted to organize the open house in such a way that people can see firsthand what farm life is like.

“The community has been really good to us,” she said. “We feel like we want to give back.”

Ruth said she hopes the event Saturday will help those in the community understand the role of agriculture.

“It’s about sharing that history, with all of the stuff that goes on in farming,” she said. “A lot of people don’t know where milk comes from.”

She said she never really considered all of the history that surrounded her over her lifetime, but she’s grateful her daughter has taken such an interest in preserving that history and sharing it with others.

“I guess I just took it all for granted,” she said. “If it weren’t for her, we wouldn’t be doing any of this. I’m glad she’s doing it.”

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