

# Witt House Assessment and Recommendations

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## Assessment

### 1. Condition

- a. Deterioration - though the framing is intact, the walls and roof are deteriorating, primarily as a result of moisture
- b. Safe? - Overall the structure, while not "safe", is not at risk of collapsing
- c. Restorable - absolutely restorable, but "PRESERVATION" is most important and pertinent

### 2. Critical Factors to Condition

- a. Leaking roof
- b. Open walls, windows
- c. Trees
- d. Rodents

### 3. Location - Excellent

- a. Flood not a concern - my opinion
- b. On relatively solid piers, easy to shore up if needed
- c. Historic - near where constructed
- d. Expense of moving - prohibitive
- e. Beautiful view
- f. In context with construction and use

### 4. Contents

- a. Antiques, tools and equipment
- b. In context with the use of the house and the farm
- c. Have value not only in monetary terms, but also as educational tools and curiosities – like a miniature museum, but more authentic

### 5. Comparable Properties

- a. None in NE
- b. some in Wisconsin, MO and other states, but rare
- c. Historic comparisons - unique and visited in the area
  - i. Filley Stone Barn
  - ii. Homestead Nat'l Monument
  - iii. ?
  - iv. ?
  - v. ?

### 6. Style - Yes "Fachwerk" style, definitely

- a. Walls have been modified since original construction I believe. There were 2 or 3 different types of "infill" in the walls. Originally it was reinforced with staves (sticks between the timbers), then packed with the "nogging", which is often a clay-straw mix. Some refer to this fill as "wattle and daub" which I think might be more of an English term for Cottage style homes. It appears modifications were made to the walls including adobe brick and wood siding.
- b. Porch obviously an addition - homes did not have porches prior to the 1890s
- c. Other alterations
  - i. roof decking
  - ii. plaster
  - iii. siding
  - iv. sun porch or summer kitchen?
- d. Roofline - I think the house as it stands is the same as built as far as dimensions and roofline
- e. Others in NE - Not that I've seen. Troy Schon has been looking for an authentic timber frame home in NE all his life and he has never seen one

## Recommendations

This is just my opinion. I am speaking from what I consider a relatively pertinent and solid background in agriculture, restoration contracting, barn history research and practical knowledge. I have watched numerous buildings deteriorate and the rate of deterioration accelerates as the structure ages....

**I** First and foremost is PRESERVATION. Moisture is damaging the structure, and the rate of damage is exponential because the more the water leaks, the more the wood rots, which allows more water to leak, and so on. The roof should be repaired where it leaks and the walls should be covered where snow and rain can blow in.

**II** Secondly, REMOVE THE TREES AROUND THE HOUSE

1. the larger they get, the harder they are to remove
2. insect infestation in the roots and dead branches is likely if the trees die
3. potential for damage from wind blowing the trees into the house
4. roots will undermine the piers

**III** Thirdly, DOCUMENT AND RECORD everything - we have plenty of time to research the history, family and the house style, but we may only have a small window of opportunity to accurately record all of the details of the house as it currently sits. I think not only should the house be diagramed, but the markings and features of the home be recorded as well, such as the Roman numerals and symbols on the framing at the joints, and the etchings in the plaster (Nilla Witt?).

**IV** Fourth, RESEARCH

1. What have others done in the similar situation? Actions? Results?
2. Funding?
3. Promotion – Publicize your situation to get input from others
  - a. Newspapers
  - b. Television
  - c. Internet
    - i. Timber Framers Guild
    - ii. This Old House
    - iii. ?
    - iv. ?
  - b. Publications
    - i. Nebraska Life
    - ii. Nebraska History (NSHS Magazine)
    - iii. ?
    - iv. ?

**V** Fifth, PROTECT THE STRUCTURE for preservation – I mentioned preservation first, but that was in reference to short-term damage control. It is my opinion that erection of a structure around the house is the most reasonable way to protect it from deteriorating further. The advantages of protecting the home is that we remove the haste and hurry of working fast, furious and frantic. Protecting the structure would allow us to all relax knowing that it will not deteriorate further.

It is my opinion that the house could *not* be a self-sustaining attraction. While it is extremely appealing to me, and others interested in history and / or construction; most of the general population is probably indifferent to this specific house.

In closing, we must ask **“Why Save the House?”**

**Family legacy** - This is a symbol of the Witt family legacy. The ingenuity, skills and knowledge of Michael Witt and whomever he employed to assist him should be recognized. It is something that the family should be very proud of, and that pride should be shared through future generations of Witt descendants.

**Educational tool** – From elementary school to post graduate school, this house is fascinating and functional as a learning tool, not because it is unique (we can travel to Germany and see thousands like it) so much as it was constructed in a place and at a time with few resources. The fact that the house is still in such good condition after almost no maintenance should teach us that we can construct durable structures with medieval technology. As a home inspector, I can speak to the fact that most homes today are not constructed to endure as this house has, which is counter-intelligent in my opinion.

**Tribute to the first permanent settlers of Nebraska** - I think it is remarkable that only a couple of generations ago: 1) most people were born in their homes; 2) we used horses for transportation and farming; and, 3) we made our own food, clothes and buildings. Technology has put us out of touch with the ancestors and their ideals which gave us the lives and opportunities we have today. It is my hope that if we can share this understanding and knowledge we can give our future generations guidance and practicality.

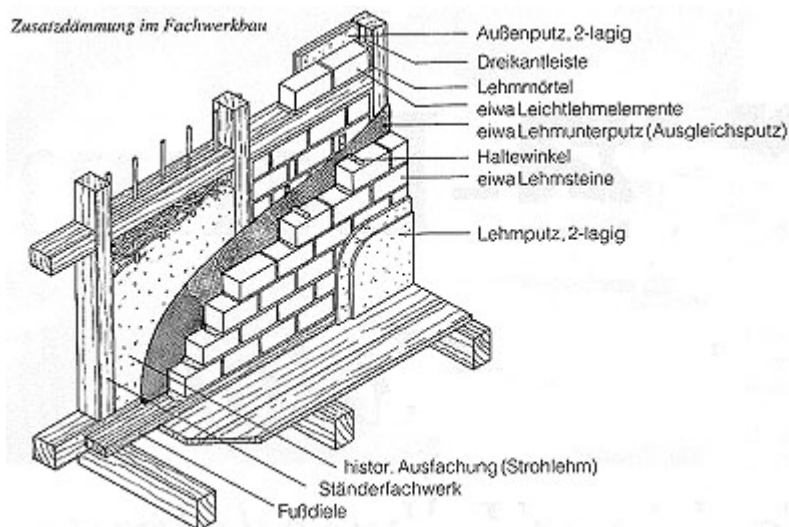
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Excerpt from Wm Tischer, University of Wisconsin at Madison regarding the German settlements in WI:

The Germans, for example, most of whom came from North Germany into Wisconsin, utilized a method of building in German it would be called fachwerk and that consisted of a method that didn't use a great deal of timber. They had come from a part of Europe where there was considerable warfare over the years, fire sometimes, and extensive cultivation. And timber was actually in short supply. So building an all-wood house was a very expensive undertaking. Most people didn't live in or build all wood houses. They built in this fachwerk tradition which utilized wood for the framework or the skeleton of the building but then they used another material for the rest of the wall to make it solid as the nogging or in-fill as we would call it. This was typically mud or brick and I would venture to say there are several hundred fachwerk buildings surviving in rural Wisconsin. At least there were back in the 1970's when I was doing studies of this type of construction. Many of them are sided over with clapboards or other forms of siding. You'd never know that underneath that modern looking building is an antique treasure house in terms of its old world origins.

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### Fachwerkbau Wall Section



This illustration was found on the web, source unknown