



Building BRV

An entrepreneurial love story



— *Sketches by Darlene Lowe*

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Ed and Darlene Lowe were successful entrepreneurs who wanted to help future generations of business owners, which led to the creation of the Edward Lowe Foundation. An integral part of their legacy was the development of Big Rock Valley (BRV), the foundation's headquarters property and learning campus in southwest Michigan. Married later in life, Ed and Darlene didn't have children together, but viewed BRV as their common child. Indeed, it embodies their central DNA: a strong work ethic, appreciation for aesthetics, love of the land — and a passion for building and improving things.

The meet-cute

When Darlene and Ed first met in 1970, their introduction was impromptu and brief. An interior designer, Darlene was helping some friends, Jean and Tom Thornburn, wallpaper a kitchen in a house they were renting from Ed,

and Ed dropped by to check on the progress.

“I was up on a ladder when he walked in,” Darlene recalls. “We had never met, and I didn't know much about Ed except that he was a local businessman; he hadn't gotten famous yet.”

Yet there was an immediate connection. “We were instant soulmates,” Darlene says. Ed later wrote that “Lightning hit me with a silver bolt... I fell in love and didn't even know it.”

A few weeks later, Ed hired Darlene to decorate a lake cottage on some property he had recently purchased. This led to a long list of projects, ranging from the design of corporate offices for Lowe's Inc. to the development of Jones Is Back, a tourist attraction that recreated the image of a 19th century small town.

Jones Is Back was a pivotal point in Ed and Darlene's relationship. The multiyear project caused them to spend increasingly more time together, and in 1976 they were married.





Their union was an unusual blend of chemistry and compatibility. Both came from modest upbringings. Both were hardworking, upbeat and creative. Both had a special gift for transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, Ed moved to Marcellus, Michigan, in 1925 at age five. Even as a child, he was constantly looking for opportunities and coming up with enterprising ideas. For example, he generated pocket money by selling scrap metal and picked up discarded popsicle sticks to trade in for prizes. He built his own scooter by recycling wheels from an old baby buggy.

Fast forward to 1947 when Ed launched Kitty Litter, the world's first cat litter product. Over the next four decades he grew the business to \$165 million in annual sales and more than 600 employees. During his lifetime, Ed secured more than 170 patents, trademarks and copyrights. Many of these were unrelated to his Kitty Litter business, such as a packaged firewood business and an artisan glass company.

Darlene grew up in nearby Three Rivers, Michigan, excelling at both athletics and art. In high school she was a cheerleader, played basketball, softball and volleyball and was on the track team, where she was known for her ability to outrun classmates, even boys. She won numerous art competitions, including a

scholarship that enabled her to attend Albion College. In addition, she served as a class officer each year in high school and was elected president of Albion's freshman student council.

Marriage to her first husband introduced Darlene to farm life, where she managed a poultry business with 3,000 chickens. Yet even with the daily responsibilities of candling, grading and delivering eggs to customers — while raising three young children — Darlene found ways to flex her artistic muscle. She

chairman and president of the Edward Lowe Foundation. “In contrast, Darlene is patient, level and calm. She’s charismatic, but in a quiet way, and has never felt the need to be out front, which made her a great counterbalance and sounding board for Ed.”

Darlene also served as Ed’s translator. “Ed was a true visionary, and he could often confuse employees and even friends because they didn’t always know if he was talking about the past, present or future,” she explains. “Somehow I

“Darlene understands me. This is like finding a fountain of clear water after a lifetime in the desert.” — Ed Lowe

turned a farmhouse into a showplace, decorated livestock stalls at 4-H fairs, taught design at a community college and eventually launched her own interior design business in 1965.

A perfect partnership

Ed and Darlene’s energetic and enterprising natures made them kindred spirits (both were Myers-Briggs INTJ personality type). Yet they also had complementary skills.

“Ed was one of the most proactive, action-oriented individuals I’ve ever met, but he could run people over at times,” says Dan Wyant,

had the ability to know what time zone Ed was operating in.” This became particularly helpful when she joined Edward Lowe Industries (ELI) in 1981 as vice president of design and facilities planning. During conferences and board meetings (often the only woman in the room), Darlene typically said little during presentations. Yet before the meeting wrapped up, she was always asked for her opinion — and interpretation of Ed’s comments.

“Darlene understands me,” Ed wrote in one of his memoirs. “This is like finding a fountain of clear water after a lifetime in the desert.”



During their marriage, the Lowes owned several residences, including a townhouse in Chicago and a ranch in Florida. Yet BRV was where they felt most at home.

BRV buildout

BRV began with a 158-acre tract of land Ed bought in 1964, one of his favorite mushroom-hunting sites. With a penchant for real estate, he continued to buy adjacent property and was fond of saying, “I don’t want to own all the land, just the land that’s next to mine.” By the time

Darlene moved to BRV in 1976, it had grown to more than 1,300 acres.

A portion of BRV was a working farm with crop fields and pastures for Black Angus cattle that Ed was breeding. Yet the majority of property consisted of woodlands and wetlands, including ponds, streams and a small lake. Receding ice-age glaciers had carved two large valleys and deposited numerous boulders on the property, which led to its name.

By 1976 Ed had built a cabin home and begun to blaze a few trails through the

woodlands (one of his favorite weekend pastimes was running a bulldozer). Now with Darlene at Ed's side, BRV began a slow but steady metamorphosis. New structures were created and existing ones were improved, although the couple took great care to maintain the land's natural beauty.

“Ed took the lead on structural issues and layout — but always with Darlene's input,” says Mike McCuiston, who began working for Ed in 1981 and served as the foundation's vice president of physical resources. “Darlene ran the interior design side and filled Ed in on the details. Projects were typically fluid and dynamic with lots of changes.”

His and her houses

One of the Lowes' first major undertakings was to transform a dilapidated barn into an impressive residence. The hayloft became a sitting room and bar while the downstairs became a large dining room. The original rough-hewn beams and interior walls were left intact; however, wings were added on both sides of the barn to accommodate other rooms.

Once completed, the couple moved back and forth between the Barn House and the cabin. “I considered the Barn House to be my home and Ed considered the cabin to be his,” Darlene says. “We used to ask each other, ‘Your house or mine?’ ”



From top: Exterior shots of the Barn House, Ed's Cabin and one of the three ponds that it overlooks.

Big Rock Valley not only reflects Ed and Darlene's love of the land and historic structures, but also provides insights into their values and personalities.

Billieville, which today serves as a hub for the foundation's retreat facilities, began life as two pole barns. When Jones Is Back, Ed's ill-fated tourist venue, closed in 1977, the majority of its antiques were sold at auction. "Yet we kept the best and put them in the barns," Darlene says.

To make these storage areas more interesting, the Lowes asked their craftsmen to construct facades so the buildings appeared to be part of an old western town. Ed christened the area "Billieville" after Darlene's middle name (Billie).

Shortly after that, Ed moved his corporate offices from downtown Cassopolis to South Bend, and he established a remote office for himself at BRV. The property also became the site of a research and development center. As the number of employees based at BRV grew, one of Billieville's barns was partially cleared and finished to resemble an old tavern, which became a spot to convene and relax.

About the same time, Ed and Darlene began to renovate farmhouses that were included on land they purchased to expand BRV's boundaries. Some of these homes dated back

to the early 1800s, and though the Lowes added modern conveniences, they tried to preserve as much of the original structure as possible. Named after the farm families that originally owned them, the buildings were used for both office space and guest quarters.

Creative repurposing

In addition to their passion for historic structures, Ed and Darlene were enthusiastic antique collectors and liked to repurpose materials in creative ways. For example:

- Five old railroad boxcars were brought to BRV and converted into additional guest housing.
- Casey Jones, a molded fiberglass sculpture that was one of the original Muffler Men, was purchased at an auction in Boyne Falls, Michigan, and brought to BRV.
- A nearby Quaker church was purchased and relocated to BRV. The group that built the church in 1880 had been active in the





From top: On the PBI golf course; Ed and Darlene in costume at a birthday party; and employees on a float at another party.

Underground Railroad. At BRV the church has been used for weddings, baptisms, community meetings and memorial services.

- An industrial steam boiler was cut in half and used to create a grill at Billieville and a fireplace in Ed’s office building.

During an antiquing trip to Mattawan, Michigan, Ed acquired 200 wooden pickle barrels, which he brought to Big Rock Valley. Some were repurposed as flower beds, others were converted into hot tubs, and 18 were used to create a whimsical golf course.

To play pickle barrel golf, duffers move from hillside to hillside and try to hit golf balls into the large barrels. If a ball lands in the barrel — what’s known as a “pickle in one” — you score 10 points. When the ball lands in one of two large circles drawn outside the barrel, players can still score (five points for the inner ring and three points for the outer ring). The Lowes began to host annual Pickle Barrel Invitationals for Edward Lowe Industries employees, brokers and suppliers — and today the foundation proudly continues the tradition for our retreat guests.

Even on the weekends, the Lowes were constantly improving BRV. “Ed would get on the bulldozer or Bobcat and stack rocks, and I would help by telling him which angle to place them,” Darlene recalls. “We might go out on the



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trails and walk, but it wasn't for recreation. It was a working walk. We would correct something or build something or plan something. We were always doing projects — that was our play.”

“And, of course, after you build something, you want to use it and share it,” she adds.

Celebrating BRV style

BRV quickly became the site for art shows, holiday parties and other celebrations. And though Ed was hard-charging and project-oriented, he loved to entertain and had a *joie de vivre* that was infectious.

“He was the most fun person I’ve ever been around,” says Darlene. “Talk to anyone about Ed Lowe, and the first thing they’ll say is that he was fun. And you went along for the ride.”

Among memorable gatherings at BRV were some of Ed’s birthday celebrations. One featured a parade with employees riding floats and wearing costumes that honored famous entrepreneurs. For Ed’s 60th birthday, the theme was a child’s party, complete with pony rides. Guests dressed as six-year-olds, and Ed and Darlene, also clad in costume, surprised everyone by arriving in a helicopter.

“Darlene has a sense of humor that allows her to put up with and share some atrocious clowning from me,” Ed said. “She is the co-author of my infallible principle: Make a lot of love and have fun together.”

Ed was a true romantic — and he loved to “surprise people, especially me,” Darlene says.

One unexpected event, at least for Darlene, was her wedding in 1976. In December, Ed and Darlene were taking a road trip to Florida to visit her parents; on the way they planned a stop in Missouri to attend a party for Lowe’s Inc. plant managers. Although engaged at the time, the couple hadn’t set a wedding date. When Ed and Darlene arrived at Bill Kapfer’s house (where the party was being held), an organist began to play “Here Comes the Bride,” and guests began to throw rice. “Travis Rose, one of the plant managers, was an ordained minister, and we were married on the spot,” Darlene says.

Darlene recalls a Valentine’s Day when she bought a package of old-fashioned valentines and left them all over the Barn House, tucking some in pockets of Ed’s clothes, others in his shoes, on his desk or by his coffee cup. “Well, he topped me,” she says. Arriving home after work, Darlene found an 8x6-foot sign in front of the Barn House. On it, Ed had spray-painted “I love Dar!” inside a red heart.

On one of her birthdays, Darlene recalls being at the hair salon. Ed drove up in a pickup truck, and the cab was full of balloons. He brought the bundle into the salon, and Darlene thought they were all for her. “Instead, Ed gave one to each of the girls, and then he gave the last one to me, kissed me and left,” Darlene says. “He was really clever. You couldn’t top him for pranks.”



After the Lowes launched the Edward Lowe Foundation in 1985, development of the property became more intentional. Ed and Darlene envisioned BRV as a place where:

- Entrepreneurs could gather with their peers, make new connections and access information to accelerate their success.
- Educational programs could be developed and tested.
- Individuals would learn to better understand and support entrepreneurs.

With that in mind, the storage buildings at Billieville were converted into meeting rooms and a dining hall. The Lowes continued to buy property to expand BRV's borders, and additional facilities were built and renovated to serve as offices, meeting spaces and guest quarters.

As they adapted BRV for the foundation's programs, the Lowes sought to create a safe haven — a place that enabled entrepreneurs not only to unplug and relax, but also one that sparked creative thinking.

Quality was also a priority, and the Lowes implemented inspection protocols that Ed used in his manufacturing plants. Known as the Green Hat Program, these periodic, albeit surprise, inspections are still conducted at the foundation's facilities and grounds. The intent is to catch small problems before they escalate into larger ones.

Focus on second stage

After Ed's death in 1995, Darlene became the foundation's chairman and CEO, a position she held for 25 years before retiring in 2020 as chairman emeritus. Under her leadership, the foundation narrowed its focus to serve second-stage companies (those beyond the startup phase that are focused on continued growth).

DESIGN INSIGHTS

Darlene Lowe has been the driving force behind Big Rock Valley's aesthetics, from building interiors and exteriors to its landscaping. In keeping with the property's many historic structures, a 19th century Americana theme, which Darlene describes as "country classic," unifies BRV's facilities and grounds.

Getting started is always the hardest part of any project, Darlene says. Her secret for inspiration: Look to a recently completed project. "I pull an idea, whether it's a color scheme or leftover material, which gives me something to build on."

One of Darlene's hallmarks is to design in layers. Typically, she starts with the color theme for the entire house or building — not individual rooms. Then she works on flooring treatments or large furniture and eventually moves to window treatments, wall hangings, lamps and accessories — coordinating each layer throughout the entire project.

"Individual rooms become balanced by the elements you put together," Darlene says. "It always puzzled me when I was running Haymarket Designs and clients wanted to do one room at a time. It all has to come together at the same time."

A staunch advocate of "form follows function," Darlene says it's critical to be open to change: "No matter how happy you are with the design and style of a building, you must always be open to changing it. Just as a company innovates as it grows, the design of the foundation's buildings should reflect the changes in its programs and activities."



Interior shots of the original Barn House exemplify the "country classic" style that Darlene Lowe developed for Big Rock Valley.

ON LEADERSHIP

Both Ed and Darlene were natural leaders, albeit with contrasting styles.

Ed's leadership style varied, depending on the situation, says Mike McCuiston: "With employees, he was typically a 'my-way-or-the-highway manager.' Because he was the ultimate boss, Ed didn't have to sell his ideas, although he usually explained his logic behind them. Sometimes he would say, 'It might be fun if we...' or 'Let's try this and see how it works...' so that it didn't really feel like a directive. Other times, he would get frustrated with a process and say, 'Just get it done!'"

While Ed was a big-picture thinker, Darlene has a strong attention to detail. "Her leadership style is more consistent and relaxed," McCuiston observes. "She is very decisive, although willing to listen to different perspectives and use that input in her decision-making."

"I've always thought Darlene could have been a great politician," says Dan Wyant. "She has a tremendous ability to read the room, and she's very empathetic and able to connect quickly with people and put them at ease. And while she doesn't mind being in the background, she has no problem stepping up and taking charge."

Although their management MOs differed, Ed and Darlene were alike in their optimism and ability to take risks, Wyant adds. "Their positivity was contagious — and they inspired other people to take action."

Over the decades, the foundation has become a national expert on second-stagers, and BRV has further evolved to support its entrepreneurial programs.

In addition to entrepreneurship, land stewardship has become a secondary mission for the foundation due to BRV's unique habitats. Innovative land management practices are used to preserve the property's biodiversity, and the foundation makes BRV available to academic researchers.

"Big Rock Valley has become much more than a physical space, for it embodies our culture and values," Wyant says. "In fact, I would say it's our secret sauce."

"People often ask how Ed and I dreamt of doing it," says Darlene. "Yet we didn't plan Big Rock Valley — at least, not in the beginning. It just evolved. We'd step into a project that we liked, and we'd do it. Then the project would lead to the next one."

"Our decisions were 90% joint. Ed agreed with me when he felt I was right and vice versa," she explains. "And we never had a fight — ever. People always find this hard to believe, but it was true. I think it's because we respected each other's strengths so much."

"Someone once asked me who loved who the most," Darlene adds. "My response: Ed loved me the most, but I loved him more."



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— *Darlene Lowe*



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