TUSCOLA COUNTY

“Tom’s Thumb”

*The History of Tom Thumb*, published in 1621, was the first fairy tale printed in English. In this folk story, passed down from generation to generation long before it got into print, little Tom is no bigger than his father's thumb. As the tale goes, the wife of a poor woodsman, forlorn for not having had any children, wishes she could have one even if the child were no bigger than her husband’s thumb. When a good fairy, passing by the house, hears her wish, she grants it. Voila, Tom Thumb.

Though there are plenty of Toms on Michigan’s Thumb, the peninsula jutting into Lake Huron – which, from an aerial perspective – resembles the thumb of a hand or mitten, there’s also an octagonal barn, loved enough by locals to merit preservation. It’s located just north of Gagetown, a village of nearly 400, which sprang up around a mill founded by Joseph Gage in 1869. In the same year, James Luther Purdy, the one who decided to build this barn, was born.

Born in Pontiac, a city northwest of Detroit, he was raised in Gagetown and, at 21, he joined his father in the banking business – the Bank of P.C. Purdy and Son. Four years later, in 1894, he married and began raising two daughters.

Labeled as a “natural,” he became president of the bank, which flourished under his leadership and was one of only two banks in Michigan that remained solvent during the Great Depression. After having lost trust in banks, Americans were reluctant to make deposits and rightfully so – more than 9,000 American banks had failed by March, 1933. However, hoping to restore credibility in the system, James Purdy met with other bankers in Lansing, formulated a plan, and traveled to Washington to convince Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenburg to introduce a bill to save the banking business. His trip and his idea were successful: Congress passed the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933, which protected bank depositors and the Banking Act of 1933 led to the formation of the FDIC. Though originally denounced by the American Bankers Association as too expensive and a questionable support of bad business, the FDIC, thanks to Purdy and his fellow Michigan bankers, proved its mettle when only nine additional banks closed in 1934.

But this Michigan banker had rural yearnings. In 1895 he bought a 50-acre parcel of farm land and, over the years, increased that homestead to a total of 560 acres. In 1919, James and his wife Cora hired local builders George and John Munro to build a craftsman-style 15-room home on this land, which became known as “Mud Lake Estate.” They moved into the home in May, 1922. Their next project was the barn.

Pleased with their work, the Purdys again hired the Munro brothers to build a barn, but not an ordinary one – instead an octagonal one, after a barn that James saw during his travels in Iowa, a state that competes with Indiana and Wisconsin as being round barn capitals of the country. The Purdys apparently gave a blank check expense account to the builders, who, to their credit, asked for help, sensing that building a round barn would require knowledge outside their expertise. They looked for advice from Russell Jaggers, the principal of Gagetown High School and a math teacher, and used his calculations, which were accurate. The result, one of Michigan’s most remarkable barns – round or otherwise – must have impressed the Purdys.

The barn stands 70 feet tall, the equivalent of four stories, has a diameter of 106 feet, and has eight sides, each nearly 43 feet wide. With nearly 15,000 square feet of internal space – 8,600 on the first floor and 6,200 on the second – the barn sits on a four-foot high foundation. An octagonal cupola, harboring a large ventilator, rises over six feet and, beneath it, distinctive shed dormers project from the clerestory. The 288 individual windowpanes in 32 windows are positioned to minimize direct sunlight, reducing the risk of fire in the haymow. Originally an internal wood stave silo, for grain storage for feeder cattle, sat on the first floor but, after years of neglect, a later owner removed it. The Munro brothers had to be proud of their masterpiece, finished in 1924.

The Purdys stayed on their Mud Lake Estate and raised Black Angus cattle until 1942, when they returned to their Gagetown city home. They sold the farm in 1943. Seven years later James died and, in 1955, Cora passed. Unfortunately the heirs did not take ownership and the home, farm, and barn went through four different owners, the last of whom lost it to, ironically, a bank foreclosure. In 1991 the bank sold the 80-acre estate to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, which wanted it to link to their adjacent hunting and wildlife preserves.

Unfortunately, with decades of little maintenance, the barn had deteriorated, forcing the new owners to consider scrapping it. When word of the barn’s possible demise made news, local citizens banded together and organized the first Octagon Barn Festival in 1994 to raise funds to repair the barn. The Friends of the Thumb Octagon Barn was formed that year and, in 1996, came to an agreement with the state to have control over the eight-acre farmstead – with the stipulation that the group had to provide liability insurance and develop a plan for restoration.

Today, the nonprofit has not only restored the magnificent barn but has also converted the farm into an agricultural museum, which includes the barn, farmhouse, and power plant. They have also added a one-room schoolhouse, saw mill, grain elevator, cider mill, granary, and a covered bridge and they hold an annual barn festival each year and provide tours to school groups – to illustrate what farm life was like a century ago. Their motto, “Saving the Past for Tomorrow's Future,” epitomizes the goal of every historical preservationist. And, thanks to these “friends” and to this painting and essay, Purdy’s spectacular octagonal barn will be remembered – as an important legacy in Michigan’s “Thumb.”