“A Broken Heart”

Adolph Weske, born in 1838 near Liegnitz in the province of Silesia, Germany, traveled around Cape Horn, arriving in California in 1850. He was 17 and ready for adventure, lured by tales of American riches – gold was discovered here in 1848 – in gold mining, which he began with his older brother. They mined for a few years in Placer County, in a settlement founded by gold miners. Originally called Michigan City, it had its own post office in 1854 and by 1858 the town was shipping $100,000 worth of gold each month. Leland Stanford ran a store in the town from 1853 to 1855, became a successful merchant, was president of the Central Pacific Railroad, and later founded Stanford University. Michigan City was a place to strike it rich.

And Adoph did just that, earning an estimated $1,000 a day from the gold strike in the El Dorado Mother Lode area. After mining for a few years and making a fortune, he moved to San Francisco, about 150 miles away, and became a businessman. Being a patriot, he enlisted in 1862 in the Second California Volunteer Cavalry and served as quartermaster sergeant, a position he held until the end of the Civil War.

After the war Weske worked in San Francisco with the California Cracker Company, where he apparently had financial success. But his homeland called and in 1873 he returned to Germany and a year later married Betl Meyer. In 1885 Weske brought his family back to California, where he continued to ascend the ladder, becoming manager, superintendent and eventually president and principal stock holder of the California Cracker Company. After the company merged into the American Biscuit Company in 1888, he left the company – this departure allowed him more time for other pursuits, including his other passion – trotter horses.

In the 1880s this former gold prospector-turned-business-executive-turned-millionaire purchased 240 acres in the foothills northeast of Windsor and built a substantial home for his family. And few years later in 1891 later he hired Charles Mathison to construct a barn for his horses. And what a barn it was!

Though the reason he chose an octagonal shape may remain a mystery, the barn’s construction won’t. The builder hauled 17 train cars of virgin heart redwood, 52 kegs of square steel nails, and many rolls of steel rods. Inside the huge barn (105 feet in diameter) there were 50 horse stalls, six box stalls, two stalls for foaling, and, on the second level, tons of hay. A suspended stairway from the mezzanine led to the cupola, where Weske had a circular platform built so that he could watch his race horses running on a mile and a quarter track surrounding the barn. This design mirrored the Nutwood brick round barn of Champaign County, Ohio, built in 1858 for Absalom Jennings, another millionaire, who loved to watch his horses run. Perhaps that was Weske’s inspiration. But unlike the Nutwood barn, Weske’s also included a two-room apartment and fireplace, a bit dangerous for a barn, which, despite the threat of fire, has survived. He also built a quaint stone bridge, arching over the race track, so that his cattle could cross to pasture.

The cupola was no ordinary one. Above it sat a three-foot, 97-pound bronze weathervane, featuring a trotter, a sulky, and its driver. Also, though telephones were in use in the 1880s, Weske preferred passenger pigeons and built four rows of coops on a walkway near the cupola. To signal his ranch staff that he was leaving San Francisco, he’d release a bird upon departure, which carried the time that he’d arrive at the Windsor train station so that a driver would be there to pick him up. Shades of another round barn owner, John Hertz of Chicago.

However, bad luck entered his life when Black Prince, his favorite and prized stallion died near the turn of the century. With a broken heart, Weske lost his fervor for horse breeding and moved back to San Francisco. His relatives took over the farm and, though otherwise healthy, he suddenly contracted pneumonia and died after a few days of illness in 1910. He was 72.

The estate, after family squabbles (his first wife claimed she had never signed divorce papers), sold it to Edwin and Bessie Richards, which once more had ties to gold fever. This one involved the late 1890s Klondike gold rush in the Yukon, the famous one that drew over 100,000 prospectors, though only about a third reached the frozen tundra of Canada’s Dawson City. Only a small percentage became wealthy, one of whom was Edwin Richards, who struck it rich, saving enough money to buy the Weske ranch and its iconic barn in 1911. They raised two children here.

After a certain Paul Meier bought the farm in 1945, it apparently became run-down and presented an opportunity to the next owners, Harold and Lorella Soderling and their sons, who took over in 1959. Historically-minded, they restored the barn, returning it to its original colors, reminiscent of the gay 1890s. Their grand opening came in 1968 and featured a riding school.

In 1975 Michael Norreel, a 26-year-old Frenchman with an impressive resume as an international equestrian judge, trainer and instructor, leased the barn and established the Center for Equestrian Arts. When a reporter asked why he chose an obscure corner of Sonoma County to start the biggest venture of his career, Norreel replied “You don’t see a barn like this very often.” For some reason, the barn escaped the recognition of a National Register listing.

But the center didn’t last long and by 1987 Carol and Roy Applequist had become owners, choosing not to house their horses in the barn. They also continued restoring the barn. Following them, ownership has become sketchy, beginning with the farm’s sale in 2016 for $2.7 million, after an original listing or $3.3 million.

In December, 2020, it was again for sale and the real estate listing, especially at the bargain asking price of $2.1 million, should have tempted any horse lover: a 42-acre estate with a 12,000-square-foot round barn – with a two-room office – an 150-foot show arena, paddocks and riding trails. A well produces 250 gallons per minute and there are 20 acres for a potential vineyard. Two custom built homes include a guest house and a main house with three bedrooms, as well as a pool, spa, and bathhouse. The property is gated and totally private, yet only five minutes from town and the Sonoma County wineries. The realtor also proposed possible uses, such as a winery, a tasting room, or a bed and breakfast. Such creativity!

Adolph Weske’s barn apparently has been well tended for over a century and offers a grand opportunity for yet another function. Hopefully when the next owners assume stewardship, they’ll secure a well-deserved listing on the National Register, a recognition that would brighten the spirits of Mr. Weske and help ease the pain of his once broken heart.