“The Wedding Cake”

Since several writers have used the phrase, a three-tiered wedding cake, to describe this round barn with its distinctive separate cupolas, it seemed fitting to title its painting and essay in the same way. Though it was built in 1908 by Strauther Van Pleak, the barn’s history traces back much further.

Strauther’s great grandfather, John Pleakenstalver, born in 1755 near Philadelphia, became a frontiersman, much like Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton. Some records indicate that he served with Daniel in Fort Boonesboro, Kentucky, and later became an ensign under George Rogers Clark in his Illinois campaign in 1778. Also during the Revolutionary War – in 1780 – John was one of the 256 signers of the Cumberland Compact, a document outlining rules of the settlers at Fort Nashborough, which later became Nashville, Tennessee.

After his marriage, he and his wife Esther moved to Morgan’s Station in 1791, a time when land – at a dollar an acre – was affordable but also a time when Indian skirmishes were still prevalent, probably motivating them to move the next spring to Mt. Sterling, Kentucky. The move was timed well since the settlers at Morgan’s, sensing no danger, dismantled the fort stockades, using the logs for firewood. In that spring, 1792, a large band of Shawnees killed many men, women, and children in this region, according to an eyewitness account of John Wade, Jr., the son of a settler at Morgan’s. Two miles away in Mt. Sterling, Pleakenstalver and his family were safe. They had 12 children.

One of them, named after many generals – Narcus Barren Steuben Isaiac Henry Fielding Lewis Pleakanstalver – moved to Decatur County, Indiana, and founded the family farm, recorded in the family land deed, dated 1827 and signed by President John Quincy Adams, a copy of which is proudly displayed inside the round barn. Despite having seven first names, the son was referred to simply as “Fielding” as was his son, Fielding, Jr., who was the father of the barn builder, Strauther Van Pleak. The grandchildren of Narcus, including Strauther, were spared the long name when it was shortened to Pleak.

In the 19th century the family farmed the land and also raised mules, often selling them to the army, who trained them for transporting supplies. During the Civil War, Strauther was about seven years old, and, according to his grandson, related a story about selling mules. When once an army officer was inspecting mules, he was checking the animals’ mouths, which were a sign of health or disease, along with age. Being a clever child, the boy spoke to his grandfather, with the army inspector close by, “Dad, is that the mule you knocked the tooth out of?” Smart kid.

However, why he chose a round design for the barn remains unknown. At the time, Indiana was fertile ground for early round barn builders – the McNamee family, Benton Steele, among many others, as well as the flamboyant Horace Duncan, who built his masterpiece, the J.H. Manchester barn, in Auglaize County, Ohio, in 1908, the same year as the Pleak barn.

Strauther built an octagonal central silo first and then constructed the barn around it, which would allow the mules and horses to surround the silo for feeding. More than 100 animals could feed at one time and, on the outer perimeter, another manger and a large watering trough provided hay and drink. The silo, originally made of stacked lumber and coated with tar, was later covered with brick and cement when it began to leak.

The barn’s top cupola is covered in decorative rounded wood shingles while conventional horizontal curved wood siding covers the lower sections. Although eight single-paned windows provide some light, the barn’s interior is dark. Today, thanks to interior Christmas-styled lights, placed by friends of the Reeds for a wedding, there’s plenty of light. In 1914, the Pleaks sold the farm to a Reverend I.E. Morgan.

Apparently the mule business was so successful that the next year the Morgans built a large rectangular barn, one with a series of pens on either side of a central walkway that connected to the round barn. In 1937 Morgan’s son, Ati, took over the farm, continued farming and, realizing the historic significance of the round barn, got it listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1993. Three years later his heirs put the barn and farm into an auction, which begins the next part of this story.

In 1996 Richard Reed owned farmland acreage surrounding the 180 acres of the Pleak-Morgan farmstead and wanted to include it in his farm. He related that he went to the auction, intent on buying it and that his friend, who also wanted to acquire it, was willing to let him have the property, mutually deciding not to escalate the price. Despite the auction being well attended, Richard ended up with the farm after bidding only once, as much a shock to him as it was to his friend. Currently, the Reed families own about 1,500 acres.

Richard, also feeling a responsibility to Indiana heritage, decided to save the round barn but had to dismantle the large rectangular one, also in disrepair. In 1997 he began restoring the barn, raising it with 13 house jacks, and pouring a new foundation. When he started power washing the black siding, he couldn’t believe the beautiful golden color that emerged, “So we just stopped what we were doing.” The barn’s white coat sparkles today. He removed the other barn later in 1999.

Richard and his family exemplify a farm family that sticks together, something fairly common in the 19th and early 20th century but becoming rare today as young people leave home for travel, job opportunities, and eventually become nomadic, moving from house to house and state to state. Richard’s father, Francis “Nick” Reed, started a fertilizer company in 1935, during the dark days of the Great Depression, an era when many farm families struggled and many lost their land to banks. His company, KOVA, has become one of the Midwest’s premier agricultural enterprises, even branching into nearby Ohio, Illinois, West Memphis, and Nebraska..

After graduating from Purdue University, Richard returned to the family business in 1958 and continued its success, something that required hard work, which did not always guarantee success. It’s not uncommon to watch a patriarch build a thriving company only to see it dwindle or fail in future generations. Kodak is one example, a company founded in 1880 by George Eastman, a poor high school dropout who supported his widowed mother and two sisters, one of whom had polio. Some will remember the Kodak brownie camera, which the company began producing in 1901 and which sold in the millions in the 1950s and 1960s, using conventional film. But when the digital filmless camera came along – ironically first invented in 1975 by a Kodak engineer – company executives dismissed it as “a cute” idea and one that should be kept hidden. But others saw the future of the digital camera, though Kodak gurus, even as late as 2007, asserted the superiority of film-laded camera. The multi-national company filed for bankruptcy protection in 2012.

On the other hand, Richard Reed grew his fertilizer business into a thriving economic engine, one which today employs not only his three sons but eight of his 11 grandchildren. His son Todd is quoted on the company website, “We are focused, we have the right people, and we challenge ourselves to do the best job possible for our customers.”

Richard lives not far from the iconic round barn, which he takes school children through and which he shows off to visitors from other states and other countries. The 85-year-old said he’s lived in the same house for a long time, “Sixty-two years in the same house, and 62 years with the same wife.” I wonder if they had a three-tiered cake at their wedding.