“Fearless I and II”

In early September, on our annual “surprise” anniversary trip, Laura and I took a ride on the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad, heading north from the Akron station to the Peninsula Depot. On the way north I noticed two old barns and on the return trip a train attendant explained that the barns were historic, owned by the Botzum family, immigrants from Germany. Intrigued, I did some research, uncovering an unusual story.

The next week when I visited Akron for a fundraiser for the Summit County Historical Society, barn scout Leianne took me to the site for a visit. Fortunately, we met George Winkelman, who leases this land, called the Conrad Botzum Farmstead, from the National Park Service. George’s wife Maureen is the great granddaughter of Conrad Botzum, who owned the farm when the barns were built. As George explained, both barns were actually transported to the property – the small one in 1885 and the larger one in 1898.

The story begins with John Georg Botzum, who was born in 1796 in Neuhaes, part of present-day Germany. He married Katherine about 1820 and they raised seven children. John had served as a soldier in the army, fought in the Battle of Waterloo, and detested war. Since he feared that his five sons would be drafted and have to fight, he and his wife decided to immigrate to America, where they could raise their family in peace. So, in 1836 they traveled by ox cart to a seaport and boarded the vessel Princessa. However, pirates captured the ship and robbed all the passengers. Tragically, the family – a pregnant wife, husband, six young children and a one-year-old – arrived penniless in New York City, a new land for them where English, not German, was the main language. An unscrupulous agent offered John a chance to sail for South America, where he could make a fortune. But, before he signed the paperwork, John discovered that the agent secretly had planned to sell him and his family into slavery. Fortunately, John made some new friends, likely fellow Germans, who convinced them to move to Ohio. It was a challenging way to begin their life in America.

They sailed on a flat boat up the Hudson River to Albany, then on a canal boat on the Erie Canal to Buffalo, where they boarded a steamer to Cleveland. Shortly after arriving, Katherine gave birth to Conrad, their eighth child. How the family financially survived for weeks after being robbed is anyone’s guess; most probably, help came from generous fellow Germans.

When the baby was old enough to travel, the Botzums continued on the Ohio-Erie Canal to Niles, a community next to the canal in Northampton Township, Summit County. After some time here, they moved to Ghent, Bath Township, where John began working as a laborer, earning 50 cents a day. Katherine gleaned wheat and took in boarders in their home. Life must have been a struggle but it was a peaceful existence and their sons didn’t have to risk their lives in the German army. The family lived frugally, saved their money, and were eventually able to purchase a small farm. Practicing Catholics, the Botzums helped to build the first Catholic Church in Akron.

After the Revolutionary War, the young government opened up the Northwest Territory for settlement, which included present-day eastern Ohio. The Connecticut Land Company, established in 1795, bought three million acres. The investors, 57 of the wealthiest and most prominent families in Connecticut, like many others, were land speculators, hoping to sell lots to recoup their investment many times over. However, due to poor management, weak sales, and political issues, the company failed in 1809. On the positive side, the city of Cleveland was founded, land in the region was surveyed, and lots divided.

One of the lots, number 10, is the site of the Conrad Botzum Farmstead. Richard Howe, the chief construction engineer of the northern end of the Ohio-Erie Canal, purchased it in the 1830s. Agricultural census records showed that Howe raised sheep and that his farm produced three times the average number of bushels of corn, showing that the land was ideal for farming. In 1876 he sold the farm to John August Botzum, who, in turn, sold it to his brother Conrad in 1883. John Georg Botzum, the courageous family patriarch, died in 1864.

Meanwhile, the Botzums had recovered from near poverty on their arrival in 1836. The sons branched out into numerous businesses – along with owning several farms. With such prosperity, they moved to Akron on Botzum Court, a street that still bears the family name, at the end of Walnut Street and near the church they helped built, St. Vincent’s. Collectively, the five sons owned a total of 374 acres of improved land in the 1870s and all were farmers. John August was exceptionally productive – with a flock of 65 sheep that produced 500 pounds of wool and a herd of 31 hogs. He also owned a canal boat, sawmill, and a general store.

Decades later, the brothers expanded into retail businesses, selling a variety of products. An advertisement in the 1905 Akron city directory lists them as dealers in “grain, hay, straw, flour, mill feed, garden and field seed, lime, cement, and sewer pipe.”

After Conrad died in 1914, his sons Charles and Henry owned the farm, eventually leasing it to tenant farmers. In 1963, they sold the farm to their insurance salesman, Sherman Shoemaker, who kept it until he sold it to the Public Trust for Lands in 1991. Later, the farm became part of the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. In 1996 the National Park Service made the farm available for leasing through their historic property leasing program. George and Maureen Winkelman took advantage of this offer in 1998 and a year later the farmstead earned a listing on the National Register.

According to George, the two barns were not built on the farm, but were transported, which is unusual but, considering the many Botzum farms throughout the area, it made sense. The barns, along with five other buildings on the National Register listing, represent vernacular construction during the late 19th and early 20th century in Summit County.

The smaller of the two barns, erected in 1885, is a trademark German posted forebay, which is banked into a slope and anchored with an impressive sandstone block foundation, its stone likely quarried locally. A tiny barn – only 24 by 30 feet – it contains three bays, a granary, and a threshing floor. Traditionally timber-framed with mortise and tenon joints held with wooden pegs, the barn’s lumber is both hand hewn and sawn, the latter possibly taken from the sawmill owned by John August.

As Conrad’s farm became more productive, he needed more room and so he transported another barn, this one much larger – 30 by 70 feet – in 1898. Its foundation, also made of sandstone, has held up well over a century. Inside, George, an architect, has done restoration, mostly by himself, evidenced by the circular table saw that sits on a bench on the lower level. Both hewn and sawn lumber supports the forebay, again suggesting that some of the planks came from the family sawmill. Half-hewn logs, anchored into the stone wall, support the main level, which was likely used for threshing as well as hay and grain storage. Pens and stanchions below hint that this was a dairy farm, though these days it’s an event venue. George told us that the barn has hosted over 700 weddings since 2001, an average of 22 a year, almost weekly during summer months. In fact, as Leianne and I left, a construction crew had blocked the road and one of the workers asked about the barn since it was where he got married!

Today George and Maureen manage the Conrad Botzum Farmstead, a nonprofit that helps preserve the farmhouse and these two old barns, rustic memories of the heydays of the enterprising Botzum brothers and their parents – fearless in every sense of the word.