“The Auction”

The date was February 22, 1999 when the 940-acre Whitehall Farm, a sprawling piece of Ohio history near Yellow Springs in northern Greene County, on auction. Townspeople feared the worst: developers would win and cut the historic farm up into commercial properties. For two months they raised funds, hoping to save the farm – concerts, flea markets, garage sales, silent auctions, and the like. One man sold his precious Wheaties box collection to help the cause. Another lad, only seven, went through town, collecting money placed in donation boxes. But the one million dollars raised wasn’t nearly enough.

On the day of the auction, 800 people jammed into the ballroom of a hotel in Springfield where the event was being held. Protesters stood outside. The Tecumseh Land Trust, founded in 1990 by citizens of Yellow Springs and Miami Township, whose purpose is to preserve agricultural land, was hoping to win, but its funds weren’t enough to buy all the parcels.

Just when things looked gloomy, Dave and Sharen Neuhardt walked in. Five years earlier they had purchased the historic Whitehall mansion, circa 1842, along with 35 acres of the farm. They moved into the house on the same day that they married. Timing is everything. And, they liked the idea of preserving the farm intact so much that they worked with other farmers and the Tecumseh Trust to secure the $3.2 million needed to buy the entire 940 acres. The locals viewed them as angels.

Dave and Sharen are attorneys who work in nearby Dayton, but they share a love of rural history and have proved it by saving the farm and these barns, which I’ve painted. They’ve also allowed the trust to use the farm manager’s house as its headquarters.

Dave told me that the farm traces back to yet another attorney, Aaron Harlan, who worked in Xenia in the late 1830s. Ironically the farm was sold at auction once before – in 1864. It eventually passed through various owners, finally ending up, safe and sound, in the hands of Dave and Sharen.

The original barn, the one closest to the house, burned in the 1880s and so the top level was re-built. On the day I visited, it stood exposed behind barren trees, though a few maples on its flank still retained their orange and red leaves.