“Gomer’s Pride”

This remarkable barn was another reason I wanted to come to Allen County. I had seen a photo of it online and wanted to see it in person. So I did – in the spring of 2016 – with the help of Rheuben, and with some advice from Darlene Montooth, whose great-grandfather, a Roberts, had emigrated from Wales. The barn, not only an Ohio gem, is also a national treasure. Sadly, it falls apart a little more each year, as a visitor noted a few years ago.

The little town of Allen County’s Gomer is Welsh. Names such as Roberts, Thomas, Williams, Nicholas, and Jones were some of Gomer’s early founders. These names, essentially first names – Robert, William, Nicholas, and John (Jones) – stem back in history to when the English imposed taxation on the Welsh and demanded surnames to keep track of taxpayers. With no love for the English – which persists in modern Wales – the Welsh cleverly used their first name as their surname. Hence, Robert Roberts, William Williams, and John Jones. This presented a problem for Welsh recruits in World War I. There were a lot of John Joneses and William Williamses. So the British government labeled them by numbers, such as John Jones, number 24.

This community sprang up in 1833 when three Welshmen traveled from the Welsh community of Paddy’s Run to look at land in Sugar Creek Township. Formerly the home of the Shawnee and their famous leader Tecumseh, the wooded land was flat, good for farming, and was sold for $1.25 an acre by the government in 1833. Satisfied, the men, Thomas Watkins, James Nicholas, and David Roberts, returned with their families six months later. They arrived in September and had to live in their wagons while they built log cabins. Hopefully they finished them quickly – winters in northern Ohio can be harsh. In November, 1834, more Welsh settlers came here, notably Evan Jones, John Watkins, and John R. Jones. By 1839 between 40 and 50 Welsh families had set up homes. James Nicholas and Samuel Ramsey laid out the streets, but John W. Thomas, another Welshman, got permission to name the community. He chose the name Gomer.

Gomer’s first physician and the builder and first owner of this barn, Richard E. Jones, was born in Llanbrynmair, Wales, in 1834. His father, William Jones, brought him to Gomer in 1848. About two years later, Richard boarded with the family of a Dr. Sanford in Lima, who may have encouraged the lad to pursue a career in medicine. He did, first apprenticing under Drs. Monroe and Robb in Vaughnsville and then graduating from Cincinnati’s Miami Medical College. In 1856, fresh out of school at the age of 22, he moved to Gomer and set up practice. Nowadays, most freshmen in medical shool are 22 and have many more years of education before they can practice.

In mid-19th century years epidemics were common. In 1855 a cholera epidemic took many lives and in 1872 there was an epidemic of small-pox in Columbus Grove, a small village in Allen County. One of the residents left a diary about this, “Our parents decided to have us vaccinated. Father took me to Gomer to Dr. R.E Jones who told Father that as soon as my vaccination developed fully, he could vaccinate the rest of the family … Each case was a grand success … Dr. Jones also pulled my first tooth. He was a fine gentleman.”

He was also a good businessman – for 16 years a director and for four years president of the First National Bank of Lima – and a politician, elected to serve two terms in the Ohio legislature. A historian, he founded the Elida Pioneer Society in 1895 and became its president. Oddly, he never married, was a confirmed bachelor, and remained a stalwart in the town’s Confederated Bachelor Union. A popular man, Dr. Jones was honored by his many nephews and nieces, one of whom, Edith Jones, kept house for him. He died, aged 77, an old age in those years, in 1911.

Judging from the saw-cut wood inside the barn, it was built in the late 1800s, perhaps as late as 1890s, but, from a photo of Dr. Jones in front of his barn, he appears to be around 50, which would date the barn to 1885. He used it to store crops from his small farm and to house his horses and buggies, which he used to travel in and, presumably, make house calls. In front of the barn stood his office, a slender two-story brick building (though he worked out of a simple log shed when he started), now converted into a residence. In November, 2016, Rheuben and I had the chance tour his 1870 home, also done in American Gothic, and view some of the memorabilia. The building next to the barn, Cathy Smith told us, was a granary and the doctor’s farm office. Not far away and long since gone were two other buildings – a smoke house and a spring house. Dr. Jones had quite an operation going.

But his masterpiece was the barn, an American gothic marvel, whose architect remains unknown. Even in those days, the architectural plans and construction must have cost dearly. An impressive tiled turret, the main attraction of the barn, rises high above the roof lines, which zig and zag in various directions. The many barn doors show off a fancy herringbone pattern and three dormers sport circular slate tiles, a real statement of wealth. After all, anyone could use ordinary square tiles. Both sides of the barn feature protective eaves over the haymows. Even the adjacent farm building is embellished with an ornate wooden cupola and a slate roof, one that matches the barn’s.

Slate for most American barn roofs came from Wales. So, it’s easy to see why this Welshman wanted to bring some of the old country to Gomer. Many barns and homes in northeastern Ohio still have their original slate roofs, evidence of their dependability.

However, the interior of the barn is deteriorating. The roof is damaged and leaks. Many windows are broken, allowing more water to penetrate the wood inside. Lightning rods, which dot the roof, may not do much good to stop the demise of this barn; the weight of the heavy roof, combined with its holes, may cause it to collapse. A strong wind may be the final blow. When I first saw it in the spring of 2016, I thought it could be saved – for a few hundred thousand. But, after having seen further decline six months later, I’m not sure that amount would be enough.

Regardless, I’m happy that the owner allowed me to do a painting of it and write about it. Like the famous pagoda barn of Henry County, another national treasure that is no longer here, “Gomer’s Pride” may face a similar fate. I’m glad I captured it in time.