“The Octagonal”

I visited this weathered gray octagonal barn in 2014 with Carl Feather and Jeff Scribben, barn enthusiasts in Ashtabula County, on a day when the orange day lilies in front and alongside the barn were at their best, almost begging for photos. Although we didn’t meet the barn owner, we talked with a lady whose husband rents the farm from his father. They do organic gardening on 100 acres. She agreed that the barn was special. In fact, it’s the only surviving octagonal barn in northeast Ohio.

Local legend dates the barn to 1865 – four years after the brick barn at Nutwood Place, giving credit to a Mr. Dewey for building it. The story goes that the owner imported blue glass from Belgium for the windows, with the hope that the glass would make the hay look green (Of course, it dries to a beige color after harvesting and being stored in the barn), thereby encouraging cows to eat it. I don’t know whose idea that was, but maybe it worked. Another theory is that the blue glass could have lessened the intensity of sunlight and helped prevent a barn fire. Several panes still show blue glass, which was used over clear glass, which often had bubbles in it, a manufacturing defect. The bubbles could focus the sunlight – as a lens does – onto hay and ignite a fire.

Round and octagonal barns continued to thrive into the early 1900s. Even Sears and Roebuck got into the act in 1918, offering a kit to build an octagonal barn, along with other barn types, when they published *The Book of Barns – Honor-Bilt-Already Cut*, a catalog that offered fifty-six pages of barns, hog houses, chicken coops, granaries, and other farm buildings. For $756 Sears provided all the lumber, pre-cut, framing timbers, hardware and paint for an octagonal barn. All the farmer needed was cement, a silo, and hard labor.

Yes, this barn is old, but its three stories and its shingled roof are in good repair, which is the key to longevity. Once the roof leaks, look out! The farmhouse, not far from the barn, dates to 1848, suggesting that this octagonal was not the first barn built here. Maybe the first one burned – as did four rectangular barns owned by New York’s Elliot Stewart, convincing him to build an octagonal. However, like many other old Ohio barns, “The Octagonal” shows its age and needs maintenance, a cost that someday, sadly, may force the owners to dismantle it. Let’s hope not.