“Moos and Mattresses”

Round barns, often preserved because of their unique architecture, have been changed into functional businesses such as wedding and event centers, wineries, bed and breakfasts, restaurants, and office buildings. However, the Roncadori round barn, located about 20 miles from Athens, Georgia, and one of only three round barns still existing in the state, is the only round barn in America that has been converted into a mattress store, keeping it alive and well for customers and tourists, as well.

 In 1909 the original farmer, George G. Williamson, purchased 188 acres from S.J. Nix and, four years later, hired Lee Helms, Early Barrett, and Claude Jackson to build two round barns. The smaller one, with a diameter of 30 feet, served as a barn for raising hogs but was dismantled over the years. Why round? Williamson may have seen the octagonal barns in Harris or Carroll counties, even though they’re over 100 miles away, or he may have read ag journals that described Wisconsin’s Professor King’s round barn plans with a central silo or he may have heard about the University of Illinois’ three round barns on its experimental farm. Regardless, he picked a round design over the conventional rectangular one and he had adequate resources to build it. Despite many claims to the contrary, round barns were more expensive to construct than traditional ones.

 Williamson used the barn for his herd of 30 Jersey cows and he supplied milk and butter to surrounding stores. The cows were housed in the lower level of this bank barn in stanchions located around the central silo. Above the silo a water storage tank held liquid for the cows and a track for transporting hay made feeding easier. Over the years the builders’ work has stood the test of time, thanks, in part, to five-and-a-half-inch thick oak boards and other substantial construction.

 However, when financial trouble struck, Williamson left for Florida in 1925, though he maintained ownership of the farm. During the Great Depression many farmers could not afford to make mortgage payments and lost their farms, as did Williamson when a life insurance company foreclosed in 1936 and put the farm on the auction block. W.H. Maley bought it and quickly sold it to his brother, Hugh Maley, who decided not to continue dairy farming. Instead he raised beef cattle and hogs.

 In the 1950s the barn began to show its age, especially in the roof, which is the Achilles heel of a barn. Mr. Maley considered tearing it down but a local builder and building supply owner, A.G. Mitchell, apparently a good salesman, convinced him to keep the barn and cover the roof’s original wooden shakes with composition shingles, which he did. The barn survived.

 Hugh Maley and his wife Jessie had one child, Dories, who married Louis Turner, who, after serving in World War II, returned to the family farm. Their daughter, Imogene, who is featured in the painting – done with the help of a 1958 photo showing her in the arms of her grandfather – currently owns the farm with her husband Mark Roncadori.

 In the 1950s Louis, along with farming, also worked in a local furniture store, which, though it eventually closed its doors, sparked a dream for Louis. He loved the round barn, which again was deteriorating, even though it still housed cattle, and, since he knew enough about the furniture and mattress business, he thought, *Why not restore the barn and turn it into a store?* In 1963 he upgraded the barn, converted the silo into office space, carpeted the main floor, and gave the barn a fresh coat of red paint. The next year he began selling furniture and mattresses, though cattle still roamed in the lower level. Could such thoughts be going through their heads? *What a nice farmer! How considerate! Maybe he figured we’d produce more milk if we had a good night’s sleep. I can’t wait to lie down on those comfortable mattresses. Moo, moo*. But, sorry, cows, as business picked up, the cows were asked to leave.

 The farm and its many buildings – the 1913 farmhouse, the round barn, an ice house, a well building, a milking barn, and a corn crib – earned a listing on the National Register in 1995, adding distinction to the iconic red barn. Today Imogene and her husband continue to raise beef cattle and run the mattress business, Round Barn Mattresses, out of the round barn, re-purposed and functional once again, thanks to their entrepreneurial spirit and to their passion for preserving a unique piece of Georgia’s history.