“The Sodbusters”

This rare set of two round barns, now gone, was located within a few miles of Ft. Kearney, the first fort built – 1848 – to protect travelers on the Oregon-California Trail. Wagon trains, full of immigrants seeking a new start, drove their mules and oxen along this trail as did opportunistic prospectors, bound for California gold fields. And, this was Indian territory, home to the nomadic tribes of the Pawnee, Omaha, Lakota, and Cheyenne, who migrated with the herds of buffalo. Their grip on the Great Plains was slipping away as settlers arrived, hardy enough to survive winters on these vast treeless expanses of prairie, and laid down roots, often building sod houses if timber wasn’t available. These were the sodbusters.

Photographer Solomon Butcher recorded these pioneers and their mud homes, which often leaked or collapsed, throwing havoc into lives that were already challenged by hot, dry summers and frigid winters. Roger Welsch, a Nebraska historian, in his book, *Sod Walls*, shares many of Butcher’s photos and explains how these brave folks built their sod homes and eked out a living. Even some barns had thatched roofs.

It was a far cry from Somersetshire, England, where William Radford was born in 1852. Two years later his family immigrated to Canada, then into New York State, and next to Illinois, where William was raised. In 1876 he moved with his family to Nebraska, at that point, still full of sod homes, which Butcher began documenting a decade later. William began farming with his family. It’s unknown if they lived in a sod home at the beginning, but probably unlikely since they chose a site near the famous Platte River, where trees were abundant.

In 1883, now 33, William married an Ohio woman, Lizzie Shaad, and paid $1,000 for a 160-acre farm owned by the Prescotts. He began farming and gradually added acreage, expanding his business to include horses, cattle, and hogs, along with crops such as corn, wheat, oats, and hay. By 1910 the Radfords were doing well, plowing their fields with a steam-driven tractor, as displayed in a Solomon Butcher photograph. Photo is courtesy of Nebraska Historical Society.

His two sons, both in their 20s, had become equal partners with their dad in the ranch-farm, a strategy that some farmers used in an effort to keep their sons on the farm and continue family ownership. It worked: by 1910 the ranch had spread to over 1,300 acres, making the Radford farm one of the most esteemed in the region. But, with about 300 head of cattle, 50 to 300 hogs, and plenty of horses, they needed more storage.

So, in 1917, William, now 65, and his son Boyd, decided to build not one barn, but two, connecting them (which was often done in the cold northeastern states) with a covered runway. And these were not traditionally-shaped barns, but round ones, which weren’t small. With a diameter of 60 feet and a height of 58 feet, they could service a large farm. One housed cattle, purebred Hereford stock, and the other sheltered horses. Corn, wheat, and oats were stored along with an annual crop of 500 tons of hay. Hogs were kept in a smaller building.

But why a round barn … or two? Call it a coincidence, but William A. Radford founded an architectural company in Chicago around 1900 and published many books with do-it-yourself plans on building houses. One such book, published in 1909, *Radford’s Practical Barn Plans*, included drawings and explanations about octagonal and round barns. Were these Radfords related? Regardless, Chicago wasn’t too far from Iowa, suggesting a link.

Building the barns took three carpenters and three masons a year to complete. Large distinctive ventilators capped each roof, which required a train car full of wood shingles. Brown ceramic tile blocks, lining the walls, came from Seward and were laid for three cents each. The lumber, though rare in the plains of Nebraska, came from cottonwood trees, cut a few miles away but the flooring was made from creosote-soaked wooden bricks. A stairway led to the haylofts, 18 feet above the floor, and a track around the inside helped in transporting the bales. When full, each loft would hold 96 tons of hay. Two tall tiled silos towered behind the barns. Only an affluent farmer could afford such barns.

Being patriotic, the Radfords used the barn for Red Cross fundraisers during the remainder of World War I, recorded by Minden photographer James A. Pattison, photo with courtesy of the Minden Historical Society. One barn dance, on July 4, 1918, attracted over 1,500 townspeople and lasted until the wee hours the next morning. Two years later, in 1920, wanting to promote the concept of double round barns, Boyd Radford published an article, “Double round barns save time and cost,” in a book, *System on the Farm*. Did the Radfords of Chicago, who published many books and building plans, help him get it published? Although it never caught on, its lack of acceptance – in part due to the farm depression of the 1920s – made this double round set all the more unique.

However, despite their charitable giving and their expertise in farming, the farm slipped out of family hands. Was it the Great Depression? An expensive loan to build the barns? Did the bank foreclose? The punishing Dust Bowl of the 1930s?

The Younkin family eventually became owners and, after a tornado in 1950 dislodged one of the silos, possibly weakened by hogs digging around the foundation, they were forced to dismantle one of the barns. And then, sometime later, the other barn was taken down, closing a page in Nebraska history. Unfortunately, this rare architectural marvel never made the National Register, though its uniqueness and construction were enough to merit a listing. Despite its exclusion, it will be remembered as a tribute to the sodbusters of the Great Plains in this painting and essay.