“Fayette’s Corn Barn”

This corn barn is one of Ohio’s historical treasures. And, it’s got a good story, too. In driving down I-71 one day, my wife and I spied it from the highway, not far from the Washington Court House interchange. From a distance, it looked like a round barn and it caught my attention. After contacting the city, I finally reached the current owner, Chris Jefferies, who has lived in the area since 1979 and told me he’s always admired the Krieger homestead as well as Carl Krieger’s farming expertise. Carl was one of the best farmers in the area.

He told me that a larger barn sat next to this one and was once part of a huge farm – going back to the late 1800s. In the 1960s Carl Krieger bought the farm, about 1,000 acres then, but did not use this corn barn. Technology had changed and wooden corn cribs were no longer used. So, Carl built a 70,000-bushel storage, 300 feet northwest of the crib. The corn barn hasn’t been used since the 1950s. Carl died in 2005 and the farm was sold to a John Ackerman, an investor, not originally from Fayette County.

John’s story is fascinating. Born in New Jersey in 1931, he graduated from high school there and later earned a degree in engineering in 1953 from Lehigh University. Immediately he joined the Air Force to serve in the Korean Conflict, finishing with the rank of major in 1956, the year he started working as a mechanical engineer for Pratt & Whitney. He retired from there 30 years later. But he had other callings: insurance agent, farm owner, investor, and farmer. John was a renaissance man, a man of many coats, and one who apparently invested well enough to acquire vast holdings.

John never moved to Washington Court House; he bought the Krieger farm as an investment. And he must have done well in buying and selling farmland. His estate grew, but when he died unexpectedly in November of 2010, he had no heirs: no wife, no children, no siblings, no cousins. Why, after being an insurance agent, didn’t he have a will or trust? Perhaps he thought he wouldn’t die at 79; but death can come unannounced. At least that’s what insurance agents tell me.

So his vast holdings, valued at $25 million, went to probate court. In an exhaustive search for heirs, the executors found two grandsons of one of his aunts who were living in California. That must have been a remarkable phone call: *guess what, your long-lost distant relative died, leaving you his estate. A big one*. They disposed of the holdings, selling the farm to Chris in 2011.

So, is this a “corn crib” or a “corn barn?” Eric Sloane, in his book, *An Age of Barns*, explains that the American corn barn, copied from an 1813 English plan, was not popular and gave way to the more traditional corn crib, which is prevalent, either in wood or metal, on many Ohio farms. Two large doors, on either end, were wide enough for a wagon or tractor full of corn. It was an efficient little barn.

And, this barn is likely one of the most ornate corn barns in America. Whoever built it had a sense of esthetics: the cupola and the side edging aren’t simply flat boards – they’re serrated, adding a whimsical flair. Its side vents also are serrated. One might assume that the large barn, previously next to it, had a similar design.

The vents helped to allow air to season the corn, which also prevented mold. And, the cobs were used for oven ash – to smoke meats – and for kindling. Native Americans, especially those living in this part of Ohio in the 1700s, had even more uses for corn. None of it was wasted.

White paint overlaps a coat of red, something I discovered when Chris gave me barn wood to frame the painting. So I decided to do another painting in red. When Chris and I, thinking this was a granary, went in the barn, we discovered corn cobs, old ones, littered on the floor. The large supporting beams were sawmill-cut but the joints were mortise-tenons. The inside looks good; there’s no moisture, proving that the roof has been maintained well. Congrats to the roofer. Chris will save this Fayette County gem, one of Ohio’s rural heirlooms.