“Harvey’s Heritage”

The Firestone family moved to Columbiana County in 1828 and built a two-story brick farmhouse and a large bank barn. They were German farmers and knew how to work the land, growing oats, hay, corn, and wheat, and relying on a large flock of sheep for their wool, the family’s cash crop. They continued to farm this land throughout the 19th century but one of their children, Harvey S., born in 1868, decided to leave the family farming business, just after this barn was built in 1880.

He attended business school but dropped out to become a bookkeeper. Not satisfied with that occupation, he worked as a salesman for a buggy company in Detroit – where he made friends with Henry Ford who was experimenting with cars and was fascinated by speed. Fortunately – everything happens for a reason, doesn’t it? – Harvey lost his job when the company folded in 1896. Now, without a job but not without an idea, Harvey embarked on a project to replace steel-rimmed buggy wheels with rubber tires. It was an opportunity, like so many at the turn of the century that could turn a simple farm boy into a millionaire. But he still had to sell it.

With one worker, he started a rubber tire company in Chicago and, as it grew, he sold it for $45,000, a fortune in those days. Still not satisfied, Harvey left Chicago and moved to Akron, Ohio, using his newly-made fortune to start the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in 1900. He convinced Henry Ford to try his new pneumatic tires, which Ford liked since they increased car speed. Ford tried them on three models in 1903, producing 1,700 cars – all with Firestone’s tires. Success followed success and by 1910 Harvey’s company manufactured more than one million tires. The Ohio farm boy had become an industrialist, rubbed shoulders with President Warren Harding, another former rural Ohio farm boy, and went camping with Thomas Edison and Henry Ford. He had become an Ohio legend. Today, after a merger with Bridgestone, Firestone is the world leader in tires.

Then in 1983, for some strange reason, Harvey’s two surviving sons, both in their 70s, donated the original family farmhouse and the large Pennsylvania-style barn to the Greenfield Village complex in Michigan, allowing Ohio history to leave the state. Another Firestone treasure, an Italianate-style home, built by the family in 1880, well before Harvey struck it rich, was lovingly transported to a new location in 2011. But vandals burned it.

Now, the only building left from the Firestone legacy was this old barn, which was also built in 1880, as its slate roof testifies. I was able to photograph it in June of 2015, a few months before it was moved to a new location. Standing on top of a giant mound of dirt, I was able to get a view of the roof, though the original farmland had been altered for development.

Tom Mackall, owner of East Fairfield Coal Company, decided to preserve the barn and moved it – an incredible feat that can be viewed on a YouTube video – several hundred yards to a new foundation near a 10-acre retention lake. That the barn could be transported in one piece testifies to its construction: solid hand-hewn oak beams and mortise and tenon joints. If only its builder could have watched the move!

Tom plans to renovate the barn to function as a Firestone museum that will feature farm machinery and perhaps a brew pub. Thanks to Tom, one last piece of Ohio history will be preserved, not only in this barn but also in my painting, framed with original Firestone barn wood, again thanks to Tom.