“Hunting Mushrooms”

Mother’s Day, early May, 2015

I met Sandy Shoemaker through the Highland County historical society. Both a barn owner and former USDA employee, Sandy’s job involved issuing permits for waterway construction on farmland. So, after three decades of this, she came to know most of the farms, farmers, and barns in this rural county, about an hour east of Cincinnati. Were it not for Sandy and her husband Tim, I might not have kept going with this Ohio barn project.

My wife and I arrived early in the morning and spent most of the day touring the northern half of the county, talking with barn owners. I took photos and made sketches. Sandy gave us the history and told me she could show many more. But, after all, it was Mother’s Day and Sandy and my wife deserved some personal time.

The first barn was a beauty, a formidable gray one, framed by huge spreading trees in front of a built-up bank leading to the entrance. Sandy and Tim co-own it with Howard Grabill, whose family name graces the road alongside it. Originally unnamed and called “West Road” by locals, it officially became Grabill Road in the 1970s when the state introduced 911 and mandated names for all public roads.

As we sat on the porch of the 1912 farmhouse, Sandy told me that Howard Grabill was born here. Sort of. In 1945 when Howard’s mom felt strong labor pains, Howard’s dad was nowhere to be found: he was hunting mushrooms deep in the woods. For you Millennials, in those days there were no cell phones. So grandpa took Howard’s mom in his truck and sped to the hospital. But they never made it. Howard was born in the truck. In farm life everyone pitches in.

The farm is named “Millstone Creek Farm,” in reference to the many mills that lined the nearby Clear Creek. Several large millstones greet visitors on the driveway as does a big brass bell that Howard got from a West Virginia steam engine. If you ring it, Howard, a railroad aficionado, will answer with a toot-toot-toot from his horn.

Howard and I both served in the Vietnam era, he in an Army re-con unit in Vietnam and me in the Navy. In those days our military personnel weren’t on pedestals, as Howard and I can attest. But times have changed, fortunately.

A farmer built the barn in the 1880s, a time when Ohio pioneers still knew the properties of wood and how to make a barn last – as this one has. In those days, Ohio was primarily a farming state. But, further west, Indians still roamed the plains. And one of the Grabill family was there to document those days. John C.H. Grabill was a photographer of the Great Plains and, in 1886, he opened a studio in Sturgis, Dakota Territory. He took photos of the Wild West: mining, stagecoaches, the Devil’s Tower (now a national monument), and cowboys including the famous Buffalo Bill. But his most memorable work, now in the Library of Congress, showed the aftermath of the massacre at Wounded Knee in January of 1891, a tragedy that happened in the unforgiving Dakota winter. All this while his Ohio relatives were building barns and farming. John was an adventurer.

Howard’s grandfather, the one who provided his truck for Howard’s delivery, had farmed for decades in Highland county before he purchased this farm in 1944. Much earlier, when Howard’s grandmother was a child, an old freed slave named Manny took care of her. They called her husband, also a freed slave, “Uncle” Oliver. In return, the Grabills took care of them when they grew old. Highland county was one of numerous Ohio counties that helped slaves escape through the Underground Railroad.

In 1960 a tractor loaded with hay fell through the floor, but the barn survived. It was repaired. A few years later, Howard explained, his parents spent $5000, a considerable sum then, to level the barn with railroad ties and steel beams since it was 17 inches “out of plumb,” as Howard put it. He said that’s why many barns fail: lack of support.

During his later years, Howard’s grandpa still owned the farm, but allowed Howard’s family to live upstairs in the farmhouse. That changed when Howard began making too much noise. So grandpa, tired of Howard’s bouncing on the ceiling, moved upstairs. He died in 1953.

And, the other owners of this wonderful barn, Sandy and Tim, grew up on Highland county farms as well. Sandy’s parents raised dairy cows; so Sandy spent a lot of time milking. “We had 100 cows and I had to milk them. But my dad sold them the year I left for college. He could have done that a lot sooner,” Sandy told me. Tim also grew up on a farm, one in the southern part of the county where his parents and grandparents had been farmers. But Tim decided to spend his career working in a hospital – until 10 years ago when they bought into this farm. Even though retired from their jobs, they work the farm, raising cattle and crops.

Who knows what the future holds for this Highland county barn? Maybe another father will be out hunting mushrooms at delivery time. Maybe.