“Butterworth Old”

After my meeting with Phil to see the Butterworth chicken barn, I visited with Armand Re, the owner of this early Ohio barn, located higher on the hill and built most likely before 1820. To build two such notable buildings – the stone house and this barn (both of which were not easy to construct on such a steep hill) – meant that the family had to be prosperous. But, as impressive as this old barn is, what Armand has done to it is equally remarkable.

Before I met him, while strolling around the farmstead, I noticed, nearly hidden in the trees, a tall metal silo, its sides rusted into a pleasing shade of burnt sienna, about 20 yards from the barn. It caught my artist’s attention. Barn silos didn’t catch on until the 1890s and most early silos were built of wood staves, though, in 1893, the Columbian Exposition in Chicago featured a metal silo. By 1914 galvanized steel silos were being used and a report suggested that corrosion could be eliminated by squirting crankcase oil to the inside walls each year before filling. How that might affect livestock wasn’t mentioned.

This unusual silo – most that survive are made of concrete, glazed tile, or brick – was, according to a plate on its side, a “Silver Shield Silo.” The company that produced it, Clayton and Lambert, originated in Michigan in 1888 and probably eventually had a plant in Middletown, Ohio, as the plate attests. Since the company didn’t produce metal silos until after WWII, this one presumably replaced a wooden one.

Armand, now fully awake and anxious to share his barn with a fellow lover of old barns, first told me his story. After graduating from Southern Illinois University with a masters degree in industrial design – as well as an art minor in his undergraduate studies – he began working with Notre Dame grad William Shickel of Loveland. Shickel’s niche was liturgical art and by the early 1960s his reputation had spread in Catholic circles enough to merit a commission to renovate the famous Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky. Father Thomas Merton, one of the Trappist monks, whose *Seven Storey Mountain* has sold many millions of copies throughout the world, initially disapproved of the renovation, though he wrote a letter to Shickel, congratulating him on a job well done in 1967, a year before he died accidentally. Armand showed me the letter, which was special since I, too, am a Merton fan and a frequent visitor to the abbey. Their renovation also received more praise – a national award for religious design from the American Institute of Architects.

After Armand’s success at Gethsemani, he traveled with Schickel to upstate New York, where they renovated an old timber-framed barn into a residence for Schickel’s brother. “That’s when I got the bug,” Armand told me. Old barns can be addicting.

Later, in 1976, he became an instructor in the DAAP program at the University of Cincinnati, a position he held until 1999 when he retired as emeritus professor. He also found this barn in Loveland and, stricken by the old barn “bug,” he hired Virgil Tobin to convert it into a residence – per Armand’s design. Over the years Armand offered his students co-op jobs to help shovel manure and turn the barn into a home. In 1980 he, his wife, and his son moved in.

Some, when renovating a timber-framed structure, will hide most of the old skeleton, but Armand, another historical preservationist, chose to expose all the hand-hewn beams, mortise and tenon joints held together with wooden pegs, and the two-inch thick floor planks.

Built into the hillside, the barn has three levels. An earthen bank leads through a covered entrance to the middle floor, where some hay was likely stored, although most of it was probably kept on the upper level. Down below, on the ground floor, animals were housed. As the farm continued to prosper, the Butterworths added extensions to the barn, one of which extended to the silo, which provided enough room for 100 head of dairy cows that required milking twice a day. Whew! The cows would line up on either side of a concrete foundation, which made feeding, milking and manure removal efficient. That extension made good use of the land, though it no longer exists.

Inside, Armand took pains in his design to ensure that the hand-hewn beams didn’t get covered. The result, though the residence is a comfortable one, shows many hundreds of board feet of hand-hewn beams, their adze and axe marks surviving as a reminder of the early barn builders, who cut down and shaped gigantic trees. It’s rustic charm at its best.

Armand also showed me an interesting hand-built lattice piece on one of the floors, which presumably was used for threshing, much like President George Washington did in his 1793 round barn, though his design was circular, not square like this one.

At 89, Armand still gets along well and, after giving me a two-hour tour, he took me to a pile of lumber near the metal silo, taking me up on my offer to make a frame from old barn wood for the painting, which will preserve the memory not only of the old Butterworth barn but of the wonderful conversion of it by the professor emeritus, who gave the barn a new purpose and saved it from the burn pile.