“The Wonder of a Windlass”

David Evers approached me at a fundraising event in the spring of 2021 at the Warren County historical museum. “I’ve got an 1820s barn that you might be interested in,” David said, as he explained his “frugal” efforts to preserve this gem. He was right; I was interested.

Arriving early, I had the chance to inspect a small but tall red barn, which appeared to have some age to it – a mixture of hand-hewn beams and saw-cut lumber, though there were no mortise and tenon joints. “I built it myself,” David explained when he realized the construction seemed confusing. “I salvaged the hand-hewn beams from other barns whenever I could and bought the oak siding from a guy in Kentucky. Twenty-five cents a board foot.” David knew how to economize. He built the barn from 1972 to 1978.

To reach the main barn, we crossed the road and drove past a long stone wall, probably built, as David was told, to stop erosion on the flank of an early Ohio railroad. Further south of Morrow, the Little Miami Railroad, the second constructed in Ohio, was started, thanks to a charter from the state legislature in 1836. Its purpose was to connect Cincinnati to Springfield and was built from 1837 to 1844. The railroad ran until 1974 when Penn Central went bankrupt. Today it serves as a bike trail that stretches over 80 miles from the Ohio River to Springfield in Clark County.

David learned that Chinese laborers built the one through his property and through Morrow and that it was called the Sheepskin Line, planned to connect Cincinnati with Wilmington and Zanesville. Six trestles were built to cross Todd’s Fork of the Little Miami River; one remains near David’s barn.

Construction on the line began in 1851 and the first train ran two years later. To celebrate, hundreds turned out to feast on mutton from many sheep that had been slaughtered for the occasion. As the train returned to Morrow, the last car contained the sheep skins from the butchered sheep, prompting locals to call this the Sheepskin Line. The nickname stuck. David explained, “I remember when trains passed by the farm. Originally they ran daily, then weekly, and sadly no more. Truly it was the last train to Clarksville.”

The barn was a beauty. Built into a natural bank, its foundation of laid river stone – some cut uniformly, some irregular – had not shifted and showed no cracking. I wondered if the barn sat on solid bedrock but David disagreed, “Over in the field, a friend and I excavated gravel. No bedrock there.”

Inside, ancient hand-hewn beams, connected with traditional mortise and tenon joints, some single-pinned and some with two wooden pegs, formed the bulk of the timber-framed construction. However, some of the beams had gone through a saw mill, which, though present in the early 1800s, weren’t abundant in this part of Ohio. Was this barn built in the 1820s, as David claimed? Maybe. Regardless, David wasn’t exaggerating – his barn was definitely interesting.

The farm’s timeline traces back to June of 1798 when John Peyton Harrison owned 4,000 acres here, the deed signed by John Adams, the second president of the young United States. In 1805 Harrison sold 3,000 acres of this land to Robert Whitacre, who, in turn, sold 183 acres to Andrew Whitacre, presumably his relative, in 1829, about when the farmhouse and barn would have been built.

The farm passed out of the Whitacre family in 1874 when Jonas Stubbs bought 103 acres. From Stubbs it moved to the Kelley family, who probably built the cement silo around the turn of the century, when silos became popular. In 1927, during lean farming years, the Kelleys sold to Charles and Susan Vanderworth. A few families later – in 1967 – Laura and Paul Evers purchased the farm, now 84 acres. When dad died in 2009, David got 54 acres and his sister got 30.

David, whose career has ranged from farming to plumbing to general contracting and, eventually, to waste water management, explained that, even though the barn has been used for crops including tobacco, soybeans, wheat, and corn, he now leases all tillable land. His tenant farmer also raises cattle, a few of which got loose and retreated into the barn, giving Merlin, David’s Australian shepherd dog, his first opportunity to demonstrate his herding skills. He performed admirably, driving the cattle out of the barn and on their way to pasture.

However, when David took over the barn, it had problems. A leaky roof and gutter had caused some of the hand-hewn beams to rot, requiring him to act quickly. He installed a new sill beam over the entrance and, being both frugal and clever, rather than replacing, he poured cement down the centers of other hewn beams that were failing. Voila: new beams, solid as a rock, yet preserving their outer hand-hewn appearance. “I guess the next owner will be in for a surprise if he tries to use a chainsaw to cut through them,” David mused.

But the most unique part of the barn was the wooden windlass, hand-made in the mid- to late-1800s – probably by the Whitacres themselves – and rarely seen in old barns today. Metal hayforks and their pulley systems attached near the peak of roofs in barns are more commonly seen; so the windlass was a delightful find. Unfortunately, the metal hayfork that ran on a high

trolley – created when the cross timber braces were removed in David’s barn – was stolen. So the barn’s owners had two systems – the wooden windlass and the metal hayfork.

But the wooden windlass was unique. Catalogs didn’t sell them; farmers made them. About three feet in diameter, the circular wheel attached to a round shaft, which would turn as the farmer pulled on ropes fitted inside the slot in the windlass wheel. This made hoisting easier. Wagons could be raised to dump grain on the floor, which was threshed when both top doors were open. Corn cobs could be dumped into the crib. The windlass could also be used to raise livestock for butchering or move heavy sacks of threshed grain. It was a versatile performer. In fact, there’s a smaller windlass next door in the corn crib.

In 1867 Iowa’s Louden Machinery Company recorded a patent for a hay carrier, which attached a hay fork to a metal monorail to transport hay in barns. Despite going bankrupt during the depression in the 1870s, William Louden continued to perfect the hayfork and invented and produced many other farm and barn implements. However, this wooden windlass must have worked well enough that the farm owners of those years never thought to get rid of it even though they also had another system.

Congratulations to David for his inventive and frugal preservation efforts, showing that an old barn can be maintained without spending a fortune. And, please, for goodness sake, if your old barn has a wooden windlass, please save it – another wonder of a bygone era.