“The Hermit”

The other barn that I painted that Ron and Nellda Friend own lies deep in their woods. When Raymond and I visited it in early April, the many trees that encircled the barn were bare, exposing it and allowing me to take photos. I’m not sure it would be so easy to see in the summer, let alone find it.

It’s hand-hewn timbers are old – some are only half-hewn logs and the ancient stone work is crumbling. Over the years it’s been refurbished with new wood. “New” may mean 1890s. Did the Huffs build this barn originally? It’s tiny, as many barns were in the early days, and it must have housed animals below the hay loft. The trees surrounding it are all young; so this was once open land, making the barn readily accessible to the farmer. If only the barn could talk.

Nearby the barn, as the legend goes, a hermit lived. No one knows his name but rumor has it he buried his money. Rusty and Raymond hunted for it, which, for kids, must have been a thrill. Who doesn’t want to find buried treasure? But, if it was indeed buried, it still lies beneath the ground.

Hermits go back along way – to the times of the early Christian church in the fourth century. The desert fathers, notably St. Anthony of the Desert, withdrew from society and entered an austere life, dedicated to god through prayer. St. Benedict, around 500 A.D., known as the father of Western monasticism, laid down rules, which have been followed by several monastic orders, including the Trappists. Their most famous monk, Thomas Merton, whose books have sold millions of copies, was a hermit, at his own choosing, for several years in the early 1960s.

But was our barn hermit a monk? Probably not. In fact, he may not have been religious. On the other hand, he might have lost a wife and gone into seclusion. I draw from my own experience here and remember the abject loneliness when my first wife died. Women, when their spouse dies, are luckier than men; they have a vibrant social network that keeps them busy. Men are more solitary. Some remarry, seeking companionship. Others, for one reason or another, don’t.

In either scenario, we need people. Unless you’re a spiritual guru, you won’t survive long in a solitary life. I painted this barn in a fog, which I feel is how men feel when their wives die – one fuzzy day blends into another. Was our hermit a widower? Again, if the barn could only talk.

Perhaps the English poet John Donne made the most sense of this when he wrote these words in 1624.

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were:  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;   
It tolls for thee.