“Harley’s Mail Pouch”

Not far from Ralph’s Mail Pouch barn lies another barn, painted in Mail Pouch motif, right next to Route 52, its advertising message facing westward. A bait and tackle shop next to the barn overlooks some six acres, fields of yellow gold, formerly tobacco fields. The previous owner, who has since sold this farm, wishes to remain anonymous.

He guessed that the barn was built about the same time as the farmhouse across the road – in 1890. A long hand-hewn beam, about 30 feet long, may have been taken from a barn built earlier, a common practice in the late 1800s.

Although the paint has faded, boards are missing, and the weeds encroach, the barn can still be restored, though the current owner won’t be able to hire Harley Warrick, the last Mail Pouch barn painter in America and probably the one who painted this one. Harley retired in 1991 and died in 2000.

Born in 1924 on an Ohio dairy farm in Ross County, Warrick was not the first of the Mail Pouch barn painters, though he was the most prolific. He estimates that he painted, repainted, or touched up over 20,000 barns in his long career.

The tobacco advertising began in Wheeling, West Virginia, home of the Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company, an enterprise that began selling cigars to augment their grocery business in 1879. They found that the left-over cigar clippings could be flavored and could be used for chewing, adding the asset of chewing tobacco to their company. Around 1900, the brothers got the idea to advertise their chewing tobacco on the sides on barns – with large lettering that could be seen for hundreds of yards down the road. The clever idea caught on: farmers were delighted with free tobacco products and a free paint job for their barn.

At first, the Mail Pouch logo began in the Ohio River valley – stretching from western Pennsylvania, through West Virginia and Kentucky, to southeastern Ohio, including Adams and Brown Counties, two Ohio counties with hundreds of tobacco barns. But, as the iconic Americana logo became famous, Mail Pouch barns could be found from Maryland and New York to Oregon and Washington. Estimates of barns painted with this ad are as high as 20,000. And Harley did a lot of them.

After his service in WWII, he returned home in 1946 and helped a team of painters as they painted the Mail Pouch message on his family’s dairy barn. He must have had some artistic ability since the painters offered him a job, which he accepted, figuring it would be better than milking Jersey cows all day long. At the time, he had no clothing except for his Army uniform, which he wore during his first week of barn painting.

Harley eventually joined forces with another painter, traveling from town to town, the pair offering their services to farmers, and sleeping in cheap motels or in the back of their pickup truck. His partner painted the black background and Harley did the lettering. Their teamwork meant that they could paint two barns a day, spending six hours on each. That’s about a 13-hour day, sunrise to sunset. They were busy. And maybe too busy. Harley’s first wife, no doubt frustrated in raising children on her own, her husband gone for weeks or months at a time, gave him a choice: paint barns or stay married. Warrick later said he must have liked painting barns more than his wife. They divorced. However, in his second marriage he was gone only for a week at a time.

A natural artist, Harley used no templates for the lettering, often beginning with letter “E” in CHEW, then adding “W” and “CH.” As time passed, he must have become bored, sometimes deliberately misspelling words. He said that once in a while, he added an extra “C” in “TOBACCO” to see if anyone would notice. Harley had a sense of humor.

In 1965 the government banned advertising signs within 660 feet of an interstate highway, which put a damper on using barns for Mail Pouch ads. Though nearly all of the barn painters went out of business, Warrick continued to paint barns on state and county roads. In 1980 he was the only one left, painting barns in Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania every five to six years. Swisher International, the cigar manufacturer that acquired Mail Pouch tobacco products, kept him employed. The lone ranger, the last Mail Pouch barn painter, Warrick retired in 1991 at the age of 67. He continued to work out of his home in Belmont, Ohio, selling barn-shaped bird feeders and mailboxes that he adorned with the famous Mail Pouch logo.

In 1974 Congress designated Mail Pouch barns as National Historic Landmarks, exempting them from regulations against tobacco advertising. So, even though Harley has passed away, his iconic Mail Pouch advertising lives on, allowing the current owner to re-paint in onto his barn, if he so chooses. I hope he does.