“Brown County Tobacco”

When my barn scout Kristel and I passed this massive white barn, rich with honey-brown tobacco hanging from the rafters, I asked her to stop. It was a scene that any painter would like to see. I sketched and took photos. That was in tobacco hanging season, September, 2015. Although Kristel didn’t know much about this true bank barn, she thought it might have been lost to the bank in the Great Depression.

I haven’t yet met the owners of this barn, but I finished the painting in 2017 and finally got around to working on the essay. The barn may not go back to the early 1800s – as many of Ohio’s old ones do – but the story of tobacco in these parts goes back even further – to the era of the first settlers of this land, the Native Americans.

Scientists believe that, although tobacco plants date to about 6,000 B.C. in North America, natives began using it around 2,000 years ago. It was viewed as a gift from the Creator and, unlike addictive tobacco of today, it was used primarily in pipes for religious ceremonies or to seal a treaty. Many Native Americans carried tobacco in a travel pouch and some carved smoking pipes out of stone, often in the shape of animals, true works of art. Many pipes have been found in Brown, Adams, and Scioto counties. Some of these artistic wonders are on display in the Ohio Historical Society’s museum in Columbus.

When the Spanish arrived, they acquired the habit of smoking tobacco from the Indians in the early 1500s and introduced it to fellow Europeans, who used it more for pleasure than for religious purposes. It soon became addictive and led to a new industry – tobacco farming and clay pipe manufacturing. By 1760 Pierre Lorillard established a business in New York City that processed tobacco, snuff, and cigars. P. Lorillard is the oldest tobacco company in the United States. Demand grew in the United States and in Europe, despite scientists discovering the pure form of nicotine in 1826 and concluding that it was a poison. Ten years later nicotine had another application – an insecticide. But addictions are hard to stop and smoking, at first in pipes and cigars and eventually in rolled cigarettes, couldn’t be stopped.

Tobacco farms and their distinctive long, rectangular barns – with vertical slits in the sides to control the aging of the tobacco – sprang up along the Connecticut River valley in Massachusetts and Connecticut to meet the demand. Later, tobacco farming entered the fertile Ohio River valley, chiefly in Brown and Adams counties. In 1864, farmers in Brown County noticed that their tobacco looked different and cured differently. It was called white burley tobacco and it now has a monument in front of the tobacco museum in Ripley. In 1866 Captain Frederick Kautz, a farmer in Brown county, produced 20,000 pounds of it and took it to the 1867 St. Louis Fair where he sold it for $58 per hundred pounds. Serious money in those days.

In 1967 tobacco production was still going strong with Brown and Adams counties leading the way in Ohio. In Brown County 2,176 farms grew tobacco and in Adams County there were even more – 2,300. But with increased awareness of the relation between smoking tobacco and cancer, strict government allotments, and growing state and federal regulations – not to mention numerous class-action lawsuits against tobacco companies – tobacco farming withered. Today most of the tobacco barns in western Massachusetts sit empty and many throughout Brown and Adams counties likewise have become nonfunctional. Despite this, the white barn on Scoffield Road, its sides bursting with drying tobacco leaves, defies the obstacles and continues to serve its owners well.