“George’s Giant”

It’s been called a Chinese barn and, yes, it resembles a Chinese pagoda, but it’s a good old American barn, one that bit the dust many years ago.

This area of northwestern Ohio was formerly known as the Great Black Swamp was a huge wetland, thanks to the glaciers, stretching from Lake Erie – east of Toledo – and westward through Henry County and into Indiana – near present-day Fort Wayne. It was a land of forests, grasslands, and wetlands and, not only did the swampy conditions affect travel, the area was a breeding ground for mosquitos, causing malaria.

However, the swamp didn’t stop General Anthony Wayne, President Washington’s trusted military officer, from marching troops northwards from Cincinnati to quell the Indian uprising, which other generals could not accomplish. General Wayne spent about two years training his men and marched north, building forts along the way, with a force of 5,000. The Indians, numbering about 1,500, encouraged by recent victories over the Americans, were led by Little Turtle of the Miamis, Blue Jacket and his Shawnees, Buckongahelas's Delawares, Wyandots led Chief Roundhead and his Wyandots, Ottawas led by Turkey Foot, Potawatomis, Mingos, Ojibwas, and a British company of Canadian militiamen. A nearby British fort supplied them with provisions. The Battle of Fallen Timbers took place near Toledo and was a major victory for America, leading the way for the Treaty of Greenville and opening the black swamp for settlers.

But the swamp was still a swamp. The city of Napoleon, the county seat of Henry County, was not founded until 1832, illustrating the problem with the land. But a clever local, James Hill, from Bowling Green, invented the Buckeye Traction Ditcher in the mid-1850s, which allowed drainage tiles to be laid quickly. His invention, helping to drain the swamp, and the arrival of the railroad led to settlement.

One of those early settlers was George Hyslop who built this barn in 1910. Not much is known about him but he was mentioned in the local newspaper in 1894. According to the Democratic Northwest and Henry County News, “George Hyslop last Tuesday brought to Deshler 21 of the finest dressed turkeys ever brought into this market. George is a hustler in the turkey business.”

Not only was George a hustler with turkeys, he also had a vision to build one of America’s most unusual barns. Unfortunately, it collapsed in 1984, long before I could take a look at it. However, after seeing old photos of this barn, I felt I had to include it in my project. Incredibly, it had 10,000 square feet of floor space.

George had to have been one of the most productive farmers of Ohio in those days, having enough money – $11,500 – to built this five-story “cow palace,” as it was also known. Though no one knows who the builder was, George may have contributed his five cents worth to the design. The four silos stretched from basement to the cupola and chutes around them provided ventilation. A large cistern collected rain water from the roof, allowing it to flow through pipes into seven tanks to water livestock. A system of carts on track carried feed to the animals and another track, this one for hay, worked similarly.

The elaborate engineering allowed George to increase his production, using the barn to protect the livestock in the harsh winters of northern Ohio. At one time, the barn held a hundred head of cattle, 14 horses, six hundred chickens, and 190 hogs. What an operation! But, alas, the barn was neglected and eventually fell apart, a fate that other remarkable Ohio barns will succumb to in time. At least its memory will be preserved in my painting an essay.