“The Klondike”

In my travels to find old barns to paint and write essays about, I sometimes find a barn that not only is outstanding architecturally but also has a good story to tell. This is one of them.

Thanks to the article in the Warren’s *Tribune Chronicle* newspaper, Jeff Mathews, owner of this barn along with his wife Bonnie, forwarded an email to Becky about his barn and a story about its former owner Frank Reed.

Frank built this barn in 1885, though it may not have been the original barn since a nearby farm house from 1855 burned down in 1963. Anyway, Frank must have been a prosperous farmer as well as a good businessman to be able to afford to build this 60 by 100-foot long bank barn with a slate roof. The nearby milk house, circa 1885, also has a slate roof. He could have used the conventional wood shakes roof, but Frank wanted durability – as well as a little extravagance. Perhaps flaunting his wealth, Frank put his initials, F.H.R., on one section of the roof and his full name F.H. Reed on another. Life must have been pretty good for the Reeds in the 1890s … until Frank disappeared.

Yes, he vanished in 1898. Was he kidnapped? Murdered? No. Frank left – without telling a soul – for the famous gold rush in the Klondike of Canada’s Yukon – a long journey of over 3,500 miles. A year later he sent a letter to his wife explaining his strange departure, telling her that he wasn’t coming back, and instructing her to sell the farm and keep the proceeds. Following orders, she sold it in 1900 and, ten years later, Jeff’s grandfather, James Mathews, bought the farm, two houses, and the entire 240 acres for $20,000, a large sum in those days. It’s been in Jeff’s family ever since then, but, unfortunately, since its upkeep doesn’t justify keeping it, the predicament of many old barns, Jeff and Bonnie hope that someone will repurpose this piece of history.

Back to Frank. I asked myself why a prosperous farmer would leave his wife – and children if they had any – for a place so cold, so far away, and so full of uncertainty. Why? It may have been for financial reasons, although his farming business appeared to have been robust. Perhaps he and his wife weren’t getting along. Or perhaps he read the newspaper and magazine articles, written in romantic fashion, and was struck by wanderlust, that syndrome that affects many millennials today, well documented in such magazines as *Outside*. For an adventure to be a worthy adventure, it must involve the risk of death.

Traveling to the Yukon in 1898 would have qualified as such. And Frank wasn’t the only one lured by the thought of finding gold and striking it rich. About 100,000 joined Frank in hopes of instant wealth in the frozen tundra of the Klondike region of Yukon Territory. Few found it.

Those who got there early had the best chance: the first gold discovery came in August of 1896. When newspapers in Seattle and San Francisco reported it, the stampede of prospectors began in the following year. But traveling there was the first challenge. It was expensive and Canadian authorities required each person to bring a year’s supply of food, which meant weight – sometimes nearly a ton of food and provisions, which had to be transported. Costly. So, Frank must have known about this and must have been prepared. And then there was the cold.

Winter in the Yukon – with temperatures dipping to 40 or 50 below zero – can last from September through April and May, and digging through permafrost was yet another challenge. Founded at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike rivers, Dawson City, the heart of the gold rush had a population of 500 in 1896. By the summer of 1898, the year Frank disappeared, it had 30,000 residents and a host of new buildings – saloons, roadhouses, hotels, stores, and even brothels. One old photograph shows a line of hundreds of men, waiting to get into the post office. Perhaps one of them was Frank, preparing to mail his letter of instruction to his wife. Thousands of letters would arrive in a single shipment, which, with one person sorting them, meant that people would have to wait in line for days.

Despite the lure of instant wealth, only about a third of the 100,000 ever made it to Dawson City. Many turned back, out of money for the trip, some died on the way, and others moved onto new gold fields, such as the one in Nome in western Alaska. Others got rich either by transporting prospectors or supplying miners with goods, which were priced high – a one-pound bag of salt commanded $28 ($760 in today’s dollars), a can of butter sold for five dollars ($140), and a single egg cost three dollars ($81) in the spring delivery of 1898. It was a classic case of supply and demand. The Yukon’s gold rush fizzled in 1899 and gold was last mined there in 1903.

No one in Ohio ever heard from Frank Reed again and, even though his famous letter has been lost, the story has been passed down from one generation to another, each reminded of this fascinating farmer by his initials still branded on the barn’s roof. Jeff told me that some of Reed’s relatives from Texas visited the farm in the late 1980s – to see the barn – and they verified the tale.

Jeff told us another story, this one involving the Great Depression. In those bleak years, a railroad line ran directly behind the barn. From time to time, hobos would hop off the train, looking for food and shelter. Jeff’s grandfather, a kindly man, would look after them but not before taking their cigarettes away. And, if they stayed, they had to work on the farm. One did stay – Lee Yippy, who worked on the farm for 25 years before leaving in 1960.

The barn and its outbuildings are impressive. Slate covers the several roof lines of the main barn, the milk house, and the octagonal silo, built by the Mathews patriarch in 1915. I’ve seen a lot of silos, but never one with a hexagonal slate roof. The decorative cupola was more than just showy; it accommodated the pulley system for large hay forks. The track and trolley are still in the peak of the barn. The lumber, both hand-hewn and sawmill-cut, continue to defy Father Time, though, perhaps its days are numbered if no one comes forward to salvage this beauty.

Inside, 42 stanchions for dairy cows as well as other stalls for young livestock and horses hint at what was farmed here. Jeff raised beef cattle until 2015. He and Bonnie also showed us a wooden model of their barn, made by an artist in Tennessee, which means that, even if the barn is dismantled someday, they’ll have this replica and my painting and essay to keep the memory alive. I’m sure that Klondike Frank would approve.