“The Beer Baron’s Barn”

It’s old – as the 1881 date on the roof testifies – and it was built by Gottlieb Muhlhauser, whose name also graces the slate roof. This barn, rescued from dismantling by West Chester Township, introduces a colorful page of Ohio history – the breweries of Cincinnati’s Over-the-Rhine and their farms in Butler County.

The story begins with Conrad Windisch, born in Bavaria in 1825, who worked in his father’s brewery in Germany before he immigrated to America in 1849. After arriving, he worked in breweries in Pittsburgh and St. Louis. When he moved to Cincinnati, he became partners with Christian Moerlein, who had established a brewery in 1853. Windisch sold his interest to Moerlein 13 years later in 1866.

The other half of the story, and its main character, is Gottleib Muhlhauser, also born in Bavaria, who came to America with his family when he was four in 1840. They moved to Cincinnati in 1845. However, he had to leave school when he was 13, the oldest in the family, assuming the lead role, due to the death of his father. He began working in a pottery, and later entere the mineral water business, becoming the plant’s foreman in 1852. Two years later, armed with knowledge of the business as well as an entrepreneurial spirit, Gottleib started a company in the water business. Apparently he prospered and was confident enough in 1857 to marry Christina Windisch, the sister of Conrad. A year later, at the ripe old age of 22, he built a mill for crushing malt and another for steam flouring – with the help of his brother Henry. He continued in this business, supplying flour to the Union army during the Civil War and, after Windisch sold his interest in his first brewery, Muhlhauser became partners with him, establishing the Windish-Muhlhauser Brewing Company in 1867. Gottleib became president and general manager.

According to a report in the 1890s, the company was incorporated in 1881 with capital stock of $100,000. Henry Muhlhauser, Gottleib’s brother, was vice-president and other relatives held positions as well. Edward Muhlhauser was brewmaster. They built an incredible brewery in Over-the Rhine – near the Miami-Erie Canal – a building that occupied several blocks and was topped by two gigantic lion statues, estimated to weigh ten tons each. By the 1870s the brewery was third busiest in Cincinnati and 20th largest in the country.

Beer brewing in Cincinnati began on its riverfront in 1812 when Davis Embree, an Englishman, opened the first one. Historians claim that 250 have opened and closed since then. But the Germans led the way. In 1829 Robert Wimberg became the first German to open a brewery and many more followed as Germans began migrating here in the 1830s, a time when Germany began discrimination against Catholics. By1856 Cincinnati had about three dozen breweries, thanks to the beer-loving Germans. By 1890, Christian Moerlein and the Windish-Muhlhauser breweries had become giants in the industry and at least 20 local breweries were producing over one million barrels a year. Cincinnatians drank a lot of it. Can’t blame them – there were 1,841 saloons in town. In 1893 the average annual consumption of beer was 40 gallons for every man, woman, and child, though, since that’s only an average, men presumably drank most of it and children the least of it. Regardless, it was two and a half times the national average of beer drinking.

Years later Carrie Nation began her anti-drinking campaign and went from town to town, busting up saloons with her ax, intimidating wherever she traveled. In 1902 she came to Cincinnati, determined to continue her temperance crusade, but, when she looked up and down Vine Street and counted 136 saloons, she left town – without a single blow of her ax. Later, she admitted that she “would have dropped from exhaustion” in that first block.

The breweries thrived, even though some succumbed during Prohibition, until the 1960s-1970s when Anheuser-Busch of St. Louis and the Miller company of Milwaukee launched massive national promotions and grew to become the two major players, forcing the little guys out. However, nowadays, craft breweries, along with wineries, are springing up nearly in every city. And, though on a limited stage, Cincinnati’s breweries are being reborn.

So, where does the barn fit into this? Although the beer barons of the 1800s located their breweries in Over-the-Rhine, they grew their barley and hops on their farms in Butler County, which offered good land for crops. Before railroads, the farmers transported their yields in horse-drawn wagons, a journey of about 30 miles. But, when the rails arrived, transporting grain became much easier.

Accordingly, Gottleib built this barn on Seward Road in 1881, next to where the train stopped – at the intersection of Seward and Muhlhauser roads – enabling him to load the rail cars directly. The barn housed their crops and livestock and was built well enough to survive nearly 150 years. In 1998 the Ohio Casualty company purchased the land where the barn was located and offered to donate the barn to West Chester, which, thankfully, accepted – circa 2002. But moving and restoring an old barn, as well as giving it a new purpose, was not an easy task.

But West Chester township responded to the challenge. Through the generosity of the Muhlhauser family and others, they hired David Gaker, an expert at barn renewal, who dismantled the barn and then reconstructed it at a new site, Beckett Park. Gaker used nearly all of the original hand-hewn beams and re-established the slate roof, keeping both the Muhlhauser name and the date of 1881. Today West Chester rents out the barn, as well as a copper-roofed gazebo from the original Moerlein homestead, for events such as weddings, reunions, and parties. In the 10-year span from its opening in 2008 it’s hosted about 1,000 times. The barn has space for up to 220 people, has a kitchen area, and restrooms. The old boy has new life.

I’m sure the crew of the television series, *Barn Builders* – who lovingly take down and re-purpose old log barns and log homes – would be proud of David Gaker, the Muhlhauser family, and West Chester for their efforts of preserve of early Americana. So would Gottleib.