“Kentucky’s Best”

Formed in 1786 as part of the state of Virginia, Bourbon County was named for France’s royal family of Bourbons, who supplied troops, ships, and arms in the American Revolution. Three years later the French Revolution began, signaling the end of the Bourbons. However, the name now lives on in one of Kentucky’s famous whiskeys. In 1792 statehood arrived.

The story behind this 14-sided barn, surrounded by Kentucky’s iconic black fencing of traditional horse farms, began in 1879 with the birth of John Daniel Hertz, born Schandor Herz to a Jewish family in a village in present-day Slovakia. His family immigrated to the United States in 1884 and settled in Chicago. As a young man without much money, Hertz began selling newspapers and started boxing, which led to modest success, winning amateur fights in Chicago.

He switched to reporting but lost that job when his newspaper, the *Chicago Record*, merged with another and trimmed its staff. But, being a fighter, he wasn’t ready to give up and, at a friend’s suggestion in 1904, he began buying and selling cars. When he accumulated an inventory, he started a taxi company – with fares low enough for the common man. From a humble beginning of seven cabs in 1907, this venture became the Yellow Cab Company in 1915. Buoyed by this success, he founded a bus transportation enterprise and started assembling the distinctive yellow cabs from parts he purchased, saving him manufacturing costs.

At some point he became infatuated with horses, first working as a jockey’s valet at an Indiana race track. And, by 1920, flush with cash from several burgeoning businesses, he bought land in Cary, a town about 50 miles north of Chicago, and eventually he built Trout Valley, a palatial get-away that he’d visit during the 1920s, often landing his sea plane on the nearby Fox River where an employee – his estate employed 100 at one time – would pick him up and drive him to his 35-room mansion. To design the grounds, Hertz hired Jens Jensen, recently retired from being superintendent of Chicago’s western city parks, whose work must have impressed Hertz. After finishing the magnificent landscaping at Trout Valley, Jensen’s reputation grew, commanding jobs for the rich and famous, including the Fords of Michigan as well as architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright.

When finished, Trout Valley with its nearly 1,000 acres had several homes for estate employees, barns and riding stables, a Roman-style swimming pool with stone balustrades, polo grounds, trout fishing ponds, fields for pheasant hunting, riding trails, and a spectacular arched set of iron gates with stone pillars, which lead into today’s housing subdivision. A barn that Hertz built for his Kentucky Derby champion, Reigh Count, has been converted into a sumptuous private residence, now on the market for $525,000.

In the 1920s Trout Valley represented the best of the Roaring Twenties and Hertz invited Hollywood actors and actresses as well as other famous folks – such as Walt Disney and Eleanor Roosevelt – to his palace for parties reminiscent of the Great Gatsby’s. He also bred and raised thoroughbreds. But all was not peaches and cream.

Business-wise, everything Hertz touched turned to gold. By 1925 he owned or was involved in eight companies, including a rental-car company he purchased, changing its name to Hertz Drive-Ur-Self, which eventually became Hertz Rental Car. However, choosing to employ non-union drivers in his Yellow Cab service, he often incurred ill will from the other major Chicago cab company, Checker Taxi. Violence escalated in 1920 when hundreds of shots were fired in an early morning battle and in 1921 a Yellow Cab driver was killed. Hertz gave a statement to the news media, “It has only been comic opera, warfare until tonight, but from now on it is going to be a fight to a finish.” He offered a $5,000 reward for the killer, who confessed the next day.

However, the fighting continued, helped, no doubt, by some of Chicago’s notorious criminals, such as Al Capone and Bugs Moran. Chicago mayors complied as did the police force. After all, money talks, especially when Prohibition introduced a lucrative new business – bootlegging. It was the era of drive-by submachine gun terror and almost constant feuding between the Irish North Side Gang, headed by Bugs Moran, and the South Side Italians, commanded by Al Capone. The taxi cab wars, although playing a minor role in Chicago crime, hit home in 1928, when a “mysterious” fire broke out in the Trout Valley stables, killing 11 Hertz racehorses, valued at $225,000. Was this the work of the rival Checker Taxi or of the more sophisticated gangs of Bugs Moran or Al Capone? Hertz didn’t care: he’d had enough, his only solace coming when an alert stable boy saved Reigh Count, the horse that won the Kentucky Derby later that year. In those days Hertz attached a siren to his racing trophies on his mantle, which would sound if a piece were moved, noise loud enough to be heard for blocks. Fear and paranoia were creeping into the household.

He sold his majority share in his cab interests and rental car company to General Motors in 1929, luckily raising cash before the massive collapse of the stock market. In the 1930s, discouraged by continual crime in Chicago and heeding the advice of his friend, Arthur B. Hancock, Sr., owner of the famous Claiborne horse farm in Paris, Kentucky, Hertz decided to move. Eventually he bought land in Paris – including this round barn, which was built, according to locals, around 1913 and home to J.D. Butler, who farmed and raised mules. Hertz hired the famous Jens Jensen, landscape architect of his former estate, to design his new farm, Stoner Creek Stud. Reigh Count’s first crop as a stud included Count Fleet, who was named two-year-old champion of 1942. The next year, Hertz once again struck gold when Count Fleet won the Triple Crown, becoming the sixth winner of these prestigious races. In the same year he sold Trout Valley to another multi-millionaire, Otto Schnering, founder of the Curtiss Candy Company and inventor of such treats as Butterfingers and Baby Ruths.

He continued to raise horses on his Kentucky farm but, apparently missing the car business, Hertz re-purchased his rental car company from General Motors in 1953, which he ran for the rest of his life. At that point, money didn’t matter anymore. In an address he gave in 1956 to the Thoroughbred Club of America, Hertz explained that, when Count Fleet turned four, a wealthy Texan offered to buy him for $1 million but Hertz refused to sell. “I think a fellow who would pay $1 million for a horse ought to have his head examined,” Hertz said after the negotiations. “And that the fellow who turned it down must be absolutely unbalanced.”

After Hertz died in 1961, his heirs decided to sell the 730-acre Stoner Creek farm, which they did in 1964 – to two gentlemen, both racehorse experts. Norman Woolworth and David Johnston continued to raise horses, more champions, but sold the farm in 1981 to a wealthy friend, a Swedish lady, who currently leases the farm – since 1996 – to Steve and Cindy Stewart, who have merged their former horse farm, Hunterton Farm, calling the new establishment, Hunterton Farm at Stoner Creek Stud. Steve, who grew up in Kentucky’s horse-racing capital of Lexington, explained, “We’ve expanded to over 900 acres … on land that used to be Stoner Creek Stud and Woodlawn Farm, another piece of racehorse history.” They’ve turned the operation into the world’s largest Standardbred farm that does not stand stallions. Each year they breed over 200 mares and sell about 150 yearlings in auctions in Lexington and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They’re busy people.

The little round barn may seem out of place in such august territory (there are about 20 barns on the property to service about 500 horses), in bucolic grounds designed by the famous Jens Jensen. Driving down the dozens of lanes lined with giant sycamores – likely planted by Jensen – with views of handsome horses and their young colts trotting around is as good a therapy as any psychologist can provide. Yes, the 35-room Hertz mansion and the trout ponds are missing, but a large attractive manor home that Hertz built remains – as do other barns and buildings.

Apparently the round barn, a rare tetradecagon, wasn’t the first. Interior rough-cut wooden beams surrounding the central feed bin show many wooden nails and remnants of mortise and tenon joints, suggesting that a timber framed barn existed before this one and may have dated in the 1800s. Using some reclaimed lumber from the original barn, the owner may have built this round barn, as locals claim, around 1913. But why the farmer chose a round shape is anyone’s guess. The barn’s 50-foot diameter, not large by any means, indicates it was used only for a handful of horses and, perhaps in its early years, by, shudder, mules. Inside, on the first floor, a large enclosed central corral most likely held hay, stored above in the spacious second floor, with stanchions for the horses and mules probably surrounding it. Nowadays the stanchions are gone but the roof, well protected over the years, including a fairly new set of shingles, is in excellent condition. Perhaps part of the reason for the roof’s durability is that six vertical beams support it. It’s not used for anything now, surviving as an important part of barn history.

And, although this barn does not have a specific spot in the National Register of Historic Places, it deserves a place there, just as much as the region, which is already listed: The Stoner Creek Rural Historic District was listed in 2001. It contains 22,000 acres, 526 buildings, 207 structures, 33 sites, and seven contributing objects. The district includes 12 historic farms, including the Stoner Creek Stud Farm. Surely this round barn fits in well with such company and, at least in this painting, merits the title, “Kentucky’s Best.”