“Magnificent Manchester”

This iconic round barn is one of Ohio’s most photographed and painted, and rightfully so. The dark roof, contrasting with deep red siding and white trim, provides a striking composition, which many artists have been drawn to capture, as evidenced by the hundreds of images found in a Google search.

Even though George Washington designed and built a sixteen-sided threshing barn at his farm in Virginia in 1793 and the Shakers built the first truly round barn in Massachusetts in 1826, this type of barn did not catch on until the late 1800s. An article, *The Economy of a Round Dairy Barn*, written by Wilbur Frazer and published by the University of Illinois in 1908, described the benefits of a round barn: more efficient housing for cows, time savings in feeding, a protected silo, and easier silage distribution. The article also inferred that construction of a round barn was less expensive than a rectangular one and that “progressive” farmers should consider such a barn. The opposite was true – circular barns were more expensive than rectangular ones and the “progressive” farmers were usually only the wealthy ones.

One of those farmers was Jason H. Manchester, who came with his parents from Vermont to central Ohio in 1865. They bought 200 acres of swampland in the northern tip of Auglaize County and began farming. Their Italianate farm house, in reality a mansion in 1877, showed that they were prosperous. By 1900 Jason had acquired 2,800 acres of farmland and decided to build this barn eight years later.

Tim Manchester, the fifth generation of this farming family, graduated from Ohio State University as his wife Martha did, but decided that any business job he might land, thanks to his college degree, was not strong enough to lure him from his inherited roots of farming. Carrying on the tradition of his family, Tim has expanded the farm to 4,500 acres and has maintained the barn immaculately. With a diameter of 102 feet, it’s one of the largest round barns in America and today, besides being an Ohio treasure, it serves as storage for equipment. It earned a listing on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.

White lettering above the entrance continues to preserve the legacy: J.H. Manchester, 1908, Maple Avenue Farm, Horace Duncan Builder. Yes, it’s rare that the builders of such impressive barns are ever remembered, which makes this sign all the more special. Mr. Duncan, a native of Knightstown, Indiana, was born in 1877, and, as a young carpenter, he was influenced by experienced round barn builders McNamee and Benton Steele, known today as “The Father of Indiana’s Round Barns.” Duncan’s first known exposure to round barns came in 1901 and by 1902, at the age of 25, he was skilled enough to supervise construction of one of Steele’s designs – the Boettcher round barn in Artis, South Dakota. He quickly developed a reputation for building round barns.

At this young age and armed with confidence, Duncan began getting jobs. In fact, in 1911 his business letterhead carried an image of Steele’s Boettcher barn and warned farmers to be wary of amateur barn builders. It stated, “Some unscrupulous, would-be architects, in order to obtain a few dollars for worthless plans, gotten up with no knowledge of circular construction, thus causing many disappointments and much extra and unexpected expense during construction, are endeavoring to make prospective builders believe that my barn is not patented. … I will promptly prosecute each and every infringer.” This legalese lingo might have stemmed from Duncan’s involvement with four other round barn builders – including Steele – who built the largest barn (102 feet in diameter, the same dimension as Manchester’s barn) in Indiana for a wealthy Indianapolis lawyer, Frank Littleton. This attorney made a patent on the design of the “self-supporting conical roof” for Duncan and McNamee, which was approved in 1905. Over the years, Duncan used this patent to collect fees from builders of round barns and to promote his own business. Ironically, only a few years after construction of the Littleton barn, the windmill on top of the “patented” roof caved in.

However, his reputation spread to other states, and in 1908 Duncan designed and erected the Manchester barn, which he was so proud of that he put a photo of it on his business envelope in 1911, which also carried the inscription, “Infringers promptly prosecuted. Beware of unscrupulous architects.” Above the address side and under his name, Duncan included, “Designer and Builder of the Original Circular Barn with Latest Improvements.” At 33, this carpenter-turned-round-barn architect was in his prime. However, the round barn craze fizzled by 1918. He died ten years later, but is remembered as the “Round Barn Man.”

Although many of the barns that I paint and write about are now gone, this one, thanks to the expert construction by Horace Duncan and careful maintenance by the current generation, may last for centuries. Long live the mighty Manchester.