“Orrmont”

Janelle and Tim Baker, who grew up in West Milton, an old Ohio village about 25 miles away, decided they’d move and, since they both enjoyed restoring old houses, bought the Orrmont Estate in 2003. Even though the 9,000-square-foot mansion, carriage house, and other buildings had once entertained the high and mighty, the grounds had not been maintained over the years. The Bakers had their work cut out for them.

They quickly filled in the pool with a cement base and erected a large tent which they rented for weddings and events, helping to offset the restoration expense. Then they began building a family, which now includes four sons, who continue to learn valuable lessons about entrepreneurship from their parents. Janelle, who grew up on a farm, became concerned about the possible loss of their parking lot and visualized the old octagonal barn nearby as another commercial asset. So, in 2012 they added the barn and 15 acres to their holdings, which again meant more rehabbing.

Eventually they began hosting wedding and events in the barn – as well as in the tent – and constructed a fairytale bed and breakfast – breakfast is on you – featuring old world stucco, a Romeo and Juliet balcony, a copper spire, and wrought iron light fixtures. Janelle, a CPA, now works full time in booking these three buildings. The barn’s inside is wide open, immaculate, and now features a side wing with bathrooms and a changing room. Air conditioning and heating allow the barn to function all year long. An old barn has new life.

Though historical records show that George McCabe owned the farm in 1875, he may have used a traditional rectangular barn to begin farming. Tax documents valued the barn at $900 in 1880 but don’t specify the shape of the barn. In 1894 William P. Orr bought the farm and may have built this octagonal barn, if McCabe hadn’t built it earlier. Interestingly, the saw-cut lumber and iron bolting is the same as in another octagonal barn, still standing, only a mile away. The difference between the two barns is that the Orr barn has an outside silo, whereas in the other barn the silo lies in the center of the barn. It’s plausible that Eliot Stewart’s 1875 octagonal barn publications may have influenced McCabe to build his octagonal, keeping the silo outside, and that Professor Franklin H. King’s publications in 1890 may have influenced the builder of the second barn. Though King advocated a circular shape, rather than polygonal, he included an internal silo in his barn design.

Regardless, W. P. Orr bought the farm in 1894, illustrating a rags to riches tale in early Ohio. Born in the nearby village of Covington in 1833, the 17-year-old Orr learned the trade of carriage painting in Piqua but, an entrepreneur at heart, left Ohio, as did another young Ohioan – Joseph Sharp of Fairfield County – for the gold rush in California. As Sharp did, William endured the hazardous and arduous 113-day journey through the plains of Nebraska, the rocky mountains of Wyoming, and the deserts of Utah and Nevada – as many did in the famous emigrant wagon train migration. Unlike Sharp, whose daily diary reminds us of the many perils he endured, Orr seldom mentioned his trip, though it must have given him not only a strong work ethic but, after two years of gold mining, enough cash to start a grocery and mercantile business when he return to Covington in 1854.

After serving in the Civil War, rising from private to captain in four years, he returned to Piqua in 1869 and, according to his obituary in the Lima News, May 24, 1912, he “interested himself in many enterprises.” Among them were the grain business, boats on the Miami-Erie Canal, three strawboard mills, and Piqua’s grand Hotel Plaza and other city buildings in 1891. He also purchased a textile company, which became known as the Orr Felt company, a paper manufacturer, which employed 200 at its peak, though it closed in 2016. Along with owning many other businesses, Orr most importantly had strong connections with the Citizen’s National Bank, the Piqua Savings Bank, and the Seventh National Bank of New York. Another major industry he became involved with was linseed oil, made from flaxseed, which grew well in southwestern Ohio. Today this linseed oil company has customers from over 80 countries. His businesses and financial leverage helped build Piqua.

And he was also a patriot. After finishing his service in the Civil War, Orr joined the National Guard and was promoted to lieutenant colonel. In 1896, two years after he bought this farm, he was commissioned quartermaster general – with the rank of brigadier general. He served four years under Ohio’s Governor Bushnell, which included wartime duties during the ultra-short Spanish-American War. During this brief war, General Orr lived in Columbus and equipped 12,000 soldiers for this effort.

At 21, and back home with cash from his adventures in California, he married Martha Morrison in 1854 who bore two sons, Lewis Hoover and Aaron Morrison, who, at age 43, built the Orrmont mansion in 1900. However, after Martha died, William married for a second time, this one in 1884 in a slightly different venue – Westminster Abbey. Yes, that Westminster Abby. His second wife Frances died in 1909, three years before his death.

His son Aaron continued the family legacy … for a while … though death came only a year after his dad died – in 1913. And, although W.P. Orr had built a fortune, his heirs could not continue to maintain the mansion, its 11 bedrooms, five fireplaces, and four servants rooms, along with the spacious pool, the carriage house, and the octagonal barn. Eventually the estate passed into other hands, and, fittingly perhaps, ended in the stewardship of two other entrepreneurs, Janelle and Tim Baker, mirroring Willam Orr’s fondness for running businesses. In time perhaps their sons will expand Orrmont and continue to preserve this gem in Ohio history.