

Barn On The Old Gib Wheeler Place

Written by Bud Fleming

In 2009, the little New England style barn on the old Gib Wheeler place was deliberately destroyed and replaced by a large, modern, efficient, metal structure completely out of context with all of the now ancient and useless buildings on the place. Fitting and proper that this change ought to have been made, but none the less, I have two regrets, 1) that that fine relic is no longer there to see and remind us of when farming was a way of life rather than a profit making business and 2) that I never thought to take a picture of it!

Ironically, in the very same year, the old Pennsylvania style barn on the same side of the road as the house on the John Fleming place was jacked up and its badly deteriorated sandstone and slacked lime foundation was removed and replaced by a far more practical and efficient concrete footing and frost wall that happens to be uglier than sin and totally without architectural or artistic merit. The rest of the barn was stripped of what was left of its Pennsylvania identity and the whole thing was covered in shiny steel, roof and all - overpowering some new doors and windows - leaving the impression of a nearly square, rectangular, metal, meaningless, block.

I do hope they used the stock boards that once covered it as wall paneling inside. I do hope they recognized the art in the hand hewn (by James Fleming) hemlock beams mortised, pinioned and pegged together such that it has been able to sway with the wind and continue standing full or empty since sometime in the 1870's (And where do you get hemlock logs around Pepin? From runaway rafts of logs in flood stages of the Chippewa river and local farmers kindly went to their rescue! But, it didn't stop there, most of the original rafters are still holding the roof in place with only a hint of a sag after all these years and what, do you ask were these rafters made of? Popular poles! And everyone knows how long lasting Popular wood is - speaking to outstanding maintenance all these years. And what of the haymow floor? Would you believe, full 2 inch white oak plank! What a magnificent example of the best of what the 19th century had to offer, now hidden beneath that awful metal shield.

I think it is being used as some sort of art studio - a much improved usage since its agricultural function vanished utterly over the years, but interestingly, several neighboring more modern barns, including one immediately across the county highway have blown down while that old edifice continues to sway with the elements, defying them to destroy valid construction. The photo above was taken in the summer of 2006 before the present owners decided to "fix it". The cupola was already long gone and the hexagon or octagon windows or vents in either end long boarded up rather than repaired. But I have a picture of this barn. And I remember when it was stacked full of baled hay - many times greater in weight than the building was actually designed for, but it sagged not a bit.

Of course, the tiny cow barn under this end was ridiculous in a day when a dairy farmer expects to have a hundred or more milking cows aligned on a concrete floor well limed so they might be milked by sanitary machines instead of wet hands dripping manure and whatever else in the milk, which was 'strained' out through a thick cotton pad designed to return the milk to 'purity'.