“The Oval”

In 1901, seven years before the University of Illinois began its experimental agricultural station and its three round barns, Jeremiah Shaffer and his five brothers-in-law, the Haases, began building round barns in Ogle and Stephenson counties in the northwestern corner of Illinois, bordering dairy-rich Wisconsin. Though Shaffer, born in Stephenson County, was a school teacher, he read voraciously, which is how he presumably acquired knowledge about round barns and Professor King’s 1890 round dairy barn. He and his team built many of them in Stephenson County, which, in the 1984 group submission to the National Register of Historic Places, still had 21 round barns, more than any other county in America. As of 2007, five of these, on the register, still survive. Most were built by Shaffer and the Haas brothers.

 According to Allen Noble’s *Barns of the Midwest*, Shaffer was a convincing salesman, building dozens of round barns in the region. He used a clever example to show the farmer, the prospective buyer, the advantage of a round barn: while sitting at the farmer’s kitchen table and using a cardboard tray, he’d cut a rectangle out of it and fill it with oats. Then, he’d shape the same cardboard into a circle, fill it with oats, proving that the circular design could hold more than its rectangular cousin. Apparently, this worked pretty well.

 What is unusual is that the design of this “oval” varies considerably from the squat round shape – with domed gambrel roof – of the barns built by Shaffer and company. Regardless of who built them, why did the builder opt to round off the corners as well as the roof on basically a rectangular shape? Was this a desire to be more efficient? Or just to be different? As of 2020, this unique oblong shape survives mainly in these two counties of Illinois – in seven barns, built between 1898 and 1915. From a pragmatic standpoint, construction of the rounded corner had to cost more than a simple rectangular end, suggesting that the owner may have wanted a bit of flair or perhaps a cross between a traditional rectangle and a circle. Few were built after the onset of World War I and none were built in the 1920s.

 How should these hybrid barns be classified? When any Ohio State grad thinks of “the oval,” a large oblong green space in the center of the large campus in Columbus comes to mind. Dale Travis, in his website, calls this barn an “oval,” a term that appeals to the esthetics of architecture – with soft, rounded edges.

 This barn, northwest of Adeline, is only a short distance from German Valley in Stephenson County, but, with a length of 88 feet and a width of 38 feet, it differs drastically from the smaller traditional round barns throughout the area. The most recent owner, Bernard Bagley, is listed in county records with an address in Texas. Unfortunately a letter to him remains unanswered.

 And, while a few barns built in more contemporary times feature the oval shape, most are found serving as exhibition halls in county fairgrounds, which, again, may reflect a desire for old-fashioned “curb appeal.” It’s just one more interesting page of Americana.