“Sheer Serendipity”

Every now and then I’m treated to an incredible discovery on my travels, when a barn surprises me with something incredible. This was one of them. Several years ago, Megan, wife of my barn scout Andy, spotted this barn one winter day on her return home from work in Canton. She thought I might like it since it was unusual – two logos – Kentucky Club on one side and Mail Pouch on the other. A few years later, while driving on Route 30, I looked for it but thick summer foilage hid it.

In the fall of 2021, since I was going to drive on Route 30, leaving Youngstown and heading to Canton, I thought I’d try again and plugged the address into my phone. This time I found it. The Kentucky Club side was prominent, with a foreground of a grassy field (no doubt a corn or wheat field many years ago), but the Mail Pouch side was hidden by trees. I stopped, drove up a hill to a small house, and knocked. No answer. I left a card.

Thinking that there might be a farmhouse, also hidden in trees, I drove slowly down the road and found it. By luck, Gretchen Hummel was exercising her two dogs in the driveway when I approached. After explaining my Ohio Barn Project, she told me that her boyfriend John Thomas purchased the barn and the farm last October and that she thought the barn was built in the late 1800s, not a bad guess since it had a gambrel roof, which became popular in that era. She said that the previous owner still owned 400 acres of the farm and knew more about it.

Two logos on a barn are rare since both sides must be visible for cars passing by, as this one is. Though the Mail Pouch side is mostly hidden during the summer, the Kentucky Club logo is highly visible all year round. The Bloch Brothers Tobacco Company of West Virginia began selling Mail Pouch tobacco in 1897 and added Kentucky Club in 1934. The famous and prolific barn painter Harley Warrick painted these logos on this barn in 1998, only two years before he died. His son admired the barn so much that he included it in his book, *The Barn Painter*, which he wrote to honor his father’s work. At the time there were no trees in front of the Mail Pouch side.

Although the double logo was extraordinary in itself, another surprise was waiting … as Gretchen took me into the barn. In looking up and admiring the intact slate roof, my eyes glanced at a mortise and tenon joint … and marriage marks, which I had seen (only the day before) in an old barn in Mahoning County, dated to 1812 by dendrochronology. My knees dropped and I almost fell over ... in complete disbelief. What are the chances of seeing two old barns with marriage marks in less than 24 hours? Close to zero.

I explained to Gretchen that these marks, Roman numerals at the joints on adjacent posts, indicate how the pieces should “mate” together. This ancient method of timber-framing construction, used extensively in Europe prior to the 19th century and seldom seen in Ohio barns, represents the scribe rule technique, which was replaced by the American invention of the square rule, used throughout most of this barn.

The footprint of this old barn, enclosed by a larger one built around it, measured 24 by 21 feet. The tiny barn was probably built in the early 1800s, which could be confirmed by dendrochronology. On the lower level roughly carved hand-hewn beams, possibly dating to the same era, support the floor, though there are saw-cut posts in other sections. Gretchen told me that there was a sawmill on the farm.

Large sandstone blocks in the foundation were well-laid and haven’t shown any sign of shifting, suggesting that there’s solid bedrock beneath the barn. The slate roof is likewise in good condition as is the glazed brown tile silo, which still shines like a beacon when the sun hits it. Though a few pieces are missing, the silo has stood the test of time – over a century – remarkably well. Inside, hay bales fill one end of the barn, giving the barn some purpose. A man-door adds another touch of early farming – making it easier to enter the barn in Ohio’s cold winters.

After leaving the barn, I was lucky to meet the owner, John Thomas, when he and Gretchen came to my demo painting the next day for the Perry History Club in Canton. John told me that the barn was the main reason why he bought the property and that he plans to keep it in good condition, which would please any barn lover. All in all, I was extremely fortunate to find this “double treasure,” a two-logoed barn by Harley and one with ancient marriage marks. True serendipity.