“Harter’s Heritage”

Though they’re vanishing quickly from farm fields, Ohio still has many majestic old barns left and this is one of the best. Ironically, it sits in Mahoning County, which is known mostly for the many steel mills of Youngstown and vicinity – rather than old barns. However, the southern end of the county still has a connection with its rural 19th-century beginnings. This impressive forebay bank barn traces back to Andrew and George Harter, 19th-century immigrants from Germany. What’s equally astounding is how the current owner came to buy the barn.

Jean Dougherty and her husband Peter own this barn in North Lima, an unincorporated community of 1,300 residents in eastern Beaver Township. They moved here from New Jersey, which made me wonder why someone from that heavily populated state would choose to live in rural northeastern Ohio. Jean explained that, even though she grew up in a suburb, she loved horses. In fact, when she was seven, her dad took her to a barn, which housed horses and fostered her love not only of horses but of barns. She loved playing in the barn, jumping into the haystacks, and playing in the clubhouse she made.

In her 20s Jean worked for Bloomberg, a large conglomerate, and she excelled in the financial area, but she got bored. Single and hungry for adventure, she applied for a post with the company in Australia and, thanks to her work ethic, she got it. At her going away party, she met a man who would later become her husband, but adventure called. For three years she worked and traveled through the land down under but she missed her family, and, when she returned, she married the man she met at her farewell party and settled in New Jersey. Eventually, her parents moved to the Youngstown area – to be close to her sister – and this gap again made Jean homesick. So, she wanted to move, but had to find work for both her husband and herself, which she did. a job in the construction area, which she did. Her sister looked for a place that would suit Jean – ideally a small farm with a barn.

When this farm went on the market, Jean and Peter made a trip to take a look. It was wintertime in the county, which meant snow – about two feet of it. Unfortunately, Jean had had recent surgery on her foot and had to hobble around in an orthopedic boot. When the realtor showed them the property, Jean knew she had enough energy to visit the farmhouse or the barn, but not both; so she chose the barn. As soon as she saw it and went inside, she knew it was meant for her. When Peter asked her if she wanted to go inside the house, she replied “No, I don’t need to, this place is perfect.” That was 2003. Twenty years later, when barn scout Andy and I visited, Jean was just as much in love with the barn as when she first trudged through the snow.

Jean now works as a project manager for a commercial lighting company and she’s pretty good at researching on the Internet. A few weeks before our visit in September 2023, she explored the ancestry.com site and luckily got connected with Betty Gollner, whose great-grandfather, George Harter, and his father Andrew built this farmhouse and barn. Betty’s grandmother, Cherlotta “Lottie” Harter (along with Lottie’s siblings and parents) lived in the farmhouse. Now 93, Betty lives in Maryland but asked her daughter Jill to respond to Jean via email, which she did, transcribing her memories of the barn during the Great Depression.

Betty's great-great grandfather Andrew Harter was born in Hemmingen, Württemberg, Germany in 1793 and immigrated to America with his wife and children in 1835, which is when he homesteaded this property. George and his brother Andrew, two of Andrew’s sons, volunteered to serve in the Civil War. One of them was Betty’s great grandfather George. During this era, from the early to late 1800s, over seven million Germans came to the United States – for a variety of reasons. They brought with them their culture, language, and knack for building timber framed barns. George died in 1904 and is buried in the Zion Church cemetery in nearby North Lima.

According to Betty, other local German immigrants helped the Harters build their barn, which involved a community-based effort when the barn was ready to be raised. Prior to the raising and often waiting a year for the lumber to season, they harvested trees on their land, hewed them into posts, cut planks for siding in a sawmill, and fashioned wooden pegs to secure the mortise and tenon joints. The barn may date to before the Civil War, though dendrochronology would confirm that.

Like most farmers, Andrew and George had some dairy cows and raised corn. Betty explained that her uncle would deliver milk and that he also sold eggs and chickens. The Harters also had an orchard and may have had other jobs, unrelated to farming. Regardless, the size (45x75 feet) and the ornate design of this Pennsylvania German forebay bank barn showed that they were prosperous and wanted to show off their affluence. Oddly, they built the barn several hundred yards away from the main road, making it visible only from a distance. In fact, Betty related, “Once you turned off New Buffalo Road onto the drive, you’d be surrounded by corn. In the spring, that corn would get so high and thick. It was so dense - you couldn't see but about a foot in … During one visit, my brother, nicknamed Wimpy, then five years old, ended up getting lost in one of the corn fields … Those fields were huge. Anyway, Wimp was out there for hours. No one could find him. When he finally dragged his sorry self through the door later in the afternoon, he was covered in dirt and bawling his eyes out. We girls thought it pretty entertaining, but mom sure didn't see any humor in it.” Ah, Wimpy, what an adorable kid, who debuted in the *Popeye* comic strip in 1931, “I’ll gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today.”

Inside, its architecture is impressive, beginning with the beautiful cut sandstone foundation, the mark of expert stonemasons. Forty-foot-long half-hewn logs support the forebay on the lowest level and a 75-foot-long beam stretches the length of the roof, which still is supported by the original planks, made from trees of varied widths and planed in a sawmill. A wooden ladder, held by twin hand-hewn 10x10-inch beams runs from the floor to the roof, allowing easy access to the top levels, where hay was stored. A granary, with 18-inch sawn boards, sits on the main level, showing that they may have farmed wheat, barley, or oats, crops that do well in northern Ohio. Today, many old apple, pear, and cherry trees still stand on the property.

The bank that leads to the main entrance was probably built up – since the barn sits essentially on flat land – a task that involved additional work but allowed the Germans to continue their tradition of the typical bank barn, even though the four bays show an English design. As impressive as all of these features are, the most stunning aspect of this barn – and probably the most ostentatious – is the woodwork, not only in the four dormers (which added light and ventilation, lessening the need for traditional cupolas) but in the gingerbread trim on the gable, the entire rear eave of the barn, and the dormers. The average 19th-century farmer, steeped in frugality, would have never considered such extravagance. But the Harters were not your average farmers. Wisely, they also added many louvered windows to provide light and ventilation. A black tile silo most likely came in the early 1900s.

However, as Betty related, they had their problems. During World War I, German immigrants – and even those Germans born in America – were viewed with suspicion. German newspapers were closed. Many – including my own family – changed their name to become more Americanized. Later, antipathy rose during World War II. Betty related that “we kids and mom and dad were woken and taken out on the front lawn during the earliest morning hours so that our home could be searched. Mom was always hot on not making a fuss, not rocking the boat … don’t stand out … always be pleasant.”

Betty, born in 1931, remembers the Great Depression well. During those bleak years, her uncle, George Harter, Jr., ran the farm. “My mom had six children to feed – four of her own, plus one niece and a neighbor boy she took in. During this time, it was not uncommon for us kids to lie in bed with empty bellies. If it weren’t for the kindness of my grandmother’s family, we would have starved … Uncle George … understood the earth and was good at what he did. He’d drive to the market in Youngstown once a week and sell whatever was in season. Sometimes he had apples, cherries, squash. Other times he had tomatoes, corn, or pears. They grew so many things, I have lost track of it all. At the end of a sales day, he’d drive around to our place and mom would give what she could for the leftovers. During the hardest part of the Depression, that food kept us alive.”

In 2017, after watching *Barnwood Builders*, a popular television series that began in 2013 – where a crew from West Virginia dismantles old barns and log cabins to repurpose them into homes – Jean decided to contact them. To her surprise, the star of the show, Mark Bowe, visited her to see the barn, which he described as “the best barn I’ve ever seen.” Yes, without question, Mark was a natural salesman. While going through the barn, he made a video of it, which was later posted on YouTube, pointing out its many unique features. Enthralled, he made an offer to buy it, but Jean turned him down. A student of history, Jean wanted to preserve this remarkable barn.

Today, Jean and Peter enjoy their classic barn on the Harter farm, though there aren’t 80 acres of corn as there were a century ago. The orchards no longer produce as they once did. The barn no longer houses dairy cows nor old Charley, the Harter’s work horse. However, Jean continues the agricultural tradition by raising bees, which she’s been doing for three years. “The wild swarms seem to find me … somehow … though I have never been able to keep them alive.” And, even though maintaining an old barn can be costly, Jean and Peter are committed to preserving this gem, absolutely deserving of a listing on the National Register and a living reminder of the agricultural past of Mahoning County – Harter’s heritage.