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Red Elephants?

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We have all seen variations of the photograph that has come to symbolize rural America: the dilapidated barn, majestic even as it collapses after years of neglect, set against a picturesque landscape. To the uninitiated eye, it may seem a dignified death. Wooden rafters rot beneath spent shingles. The roofline sags and, left in disrepair, gives in to gravity. Perhaps it is this inevitable collapse that charms us, but the timeless quality suggested in pictures of deteriorating barns denies reality. The photographers are long gone when a volunteer fire department unceremoniously arrives on the scene, and rural neighbors are the ones left behind to notice flames feasting on weatherboarding at a neighboring farm. And neighbors do take notice, often shaking their heads as the noonday sun dims. Some may simply be paying tribute to a loss of craftsmanship. Others recognize that more has been lost than an outbuilding—barn without memories is as rare as smoke without fire.

When I was very young, barns meant rough-and-tumble dodgeball and hidden forts. I envied my cousins' ability to build tunnels in the loft of my grandparents' barn; by the time I became an artisan of straw, those cousins were too old to bother climbing into the mow to admire my multi-leveled creations. Dad found my pet raccoon—my "object" for fourth-grade show-and-tell—in an uncle's barn, nestled between bales of straw and other furry bodies, ringed tails, and masked faces. A bat dropped from the peak of our barn during my tenth birthday party and became momentarily entangled in my friend's hair as the rest of us shrieked in horror and delight. Those who were there still talk about swinging on the medicine ball Dad suspended from a sturdy rafter. We dreamed of swinging on the hay fork hanging from the peak of our barn, its rusty fingers filled with pigeon nests.

Barns meant chores, too: pocketknives and handfuls of twine. I remember steam in winter, rising from beneath Holstein cows disturbed from their sleep by bales of bedding landing beside them. I associated sweat in summer with cousins who terrorized me with threats of tossing me out of the loft once we finished mowing a load of alfalfa. During that year or two when my younger brother and sister could climb a ladder but still had to be escorted in the loft, I associated barns primarily with jiggers, splinters, dust-induced wheezing, and hooded sweatshirts for a sister with long hair. I took refuge from adolescence in the simplicity of our barn's evening shadows; I cursed the straw forts my sister and her friends had crafted when they collapsed beneath me without warning. And there were the subtle gifts a barn offered at the threshold of adulthood, like the smell of curing alfalfa or the tap of Grandpa's hammer against walnuts balanced between his fingers and the cool barn floor.

Old barns exacted youth for our memories, and skinned knees for our fun. Their solid posts rolled their share of knots on unthinking heads during "no blood, no foul" basketball games. Their lofts demanded innocence for a momentary loss of inhibition, and our labors for a security that put our minds at ease through another long winter. And so it was with each passing season; the exchange was different for each of us, but with every exchange came a price. For a long time it was a price we were willing to pay, though perhaps we paid it unconsciously. Barns showed us what we

valued; by doing so, they became extensions of ourselves.

Experiences like these gave me reason to object to our county commissioners' decision to raze a barn at the David L. Brown Youth Center, a center for juvenile delinquents located on a county-owned farm about four miles west of my house. The south end of the barn had separated from the floor joists, and rumor had it that the structure would be torched by a local volunteer fire department before the end of the year.

It would not have been the first old barn to disappear from the local landscape of my childhood, but neglect had always been the culprit before. Here was a new, more immediate threat, one that compelled me to write to my elected officials to criticize them for viewing the barn as a liability instead of a resource. There were other letters. Our township trustees, sensing the original decision's unpopularity, requested that the commissioners preserve the structure. Ultimately they did, addressing the barn's structural weaknesses and even its fading coat of white paint—by the end of the summer. It felt as though we had come to the aid of an old friend.

But it was not until we had a barn fire of our own that I came to fully appreciate the value and vulnerability of older barns. It started early one July morning. "Barn fire!" Dad yelled. Smoke already seeped from the barn's vents, threatening our first cutting of alfalfa and orchard grass. We fought futilely to contain the round bales' smoldering cores with garden hoses until the first of five volunteer fire departments arrived. Acrid white smoke and exhaust fumes soon cast a ghastly halo over firefighters and tractor and skidloader engines struggling to evacuate soaked and smoking round bales. Hot, wet hay stifled the air.

The chaos within the barn transfixed me even as neighbors, squad cars, and television crews closed in from behind. Floorboards snapped beneath the tremendous weight of the tractor and skidloader and their waterlogged cargo. The intense jets of water dousing the tops of round bales still inside obliterated one of the barn's vents. After realizing the barn would be saved, I wondered if our efforts were doing more harm than good. For the first time, I had detected a hint of frailty in the barn's walls. It seemed out of place, left by an era of small-scale agriculture to endure the frenzied efficiency of modern machinery.

I recalled when our family had switched from square bales to less labor-intensive (but heavier) round bales. A few years after we began storing round bales in the bank barn, the floor's support beams began to give out beneath the weight of the round bales and had to be reinforced with additional beams. Even then, we had to lay presswood on the barn floor to help distribute the weight of the heavy equipment driven across it. Nor are old barns cost-efficient; the money needed to repair roofs and replace wood siding often can be more economically invested in newer barns and pole sheds, which accommodate larger farm equipment more easily than bank barns and are less expensive to erect. I knew my family could afford the upkeep of our old bank barn only by capitalizing on the benefits of these newer barns. Old barns have become white—or red—elephants of sorts. Ignored except at tax time, old barns that stand empty stick out as considerable financial liabilities when steep property taxes are levied against them.

Why preserve old barns, then? Why resist my local landscape's seemingly inevitable transformation into giant grain bins and fabricated metal Morton and Cleary buildings? Memories can do little in the face of the almighty dollar, powerful as some may be.

And yet the old barn refuses to bow out of collective memory. A neighbor whose barn burned down on Christmas Eve fifteen years ago recently confided that his new barn, though more efficient, just didn't have its predecessor's charisma.

I remember statements like that when I drive down township roads and see the old bank barns: their presence, their singularity. I recognize the Sweitzer barns with their cantilevered forebays, but I knew they were beautiful long before I came to understand their architectural significance. I fell in love with our own barn's practicality, how it maintained its dignity despite my dirty boots. I recognized the strong backs in the barn's beams, and reveled in its mysteries, though I never did find that mythical heart-shaped knothole the barn owl is said to have curiously peeked out of as the farmer painted his barn white.

I think America sees in its barns a simple covenant belonging to another era. Barns promised to immortalize our childhood, though youth invariably slipped away in the gaps between the straw bales one golden afternoon, never to be found again. The day came when those humble structures taught us responsibility, and yet we never resented them for the lessons as we did our parents. Many of us discovered what expectations were in the empty haylofts of old barns, and realized satisfaction for the first time when they were filled.

What was the barn like before it was photographed? That's the ironic question Don DeLilo poses to a consumer society accustomed to pre-packaging and instant gratification in his novel White Noise. I find myself instead wondering why we photograph old barns; if it is for the reasons I think we do, then future generations will waste little film on the rustbucket remains of the barns we are building today. Today's barns do not engage us the way the old barns did. They have no lofts and thus no hay or straw, no knotholes, and those that house livestock have room for little else. New barns cannot ward off a February chill like the old barns with their straw-filled mows could. The materials used to make them come from factories, not from the woods of a neighboring farm. Yes, the new barns house the huge John Deere tractors and New Holland combines that fascinate children, but today's youth may one day cherish fond recollections of tractors and combines, not of the buildings that housed them.

Old barns offered us lessons for life. They taught us resourcefulness, imagination, and cooperation; how else could brothers, sisters, and cousins entertain themselves for an entire afternoon in a mow filled with nothing but hay and straw? They taught us to discipline ourselves, yet tempered the workaholic in us by providing outlets for pent-up orneriness. The countless hours we spent in barns reflected the ideal life we all imagined: a simple, balanced life with clear-cut rewards and consequences, and hard work that left us enervated but fulfilled at the end of each day. Perhaps it is a symbol of simplicity and fulfillment that an America deracinated from its agricultural heritage and inclined to shortcuts tries to capture on camera from the windows of cars parked along the shoulder of our interstates. Indeed, as Jack Matthews points out in his essay, "In Praise of Euerlastynge Barnes," the barn is an artifact which, like all of our most honest inventions, mirrors us in what we have done and what we are.

And so it is. During those protracted times away from the farm, I have looked no further than pictures of collapsing outbuildings for reflections of myself and of my heritage. But sometimes, on early summer mornings not long after returning from college, I pause in

our barn during morning chores to watch dust fleck the first light of dawn. For a moment, the barn is a rural vault. Silent and empty, its unpretentious expanses broken only by broad rafters, it commands a presence that seems even to stir the air about me. Freed from the sentimentalism invoked by glossy pictures on calendars and playing cards, I breathe deeply of the barn's coolness and sigh.

—Ben Sutherly '98