

Barn



If they had stopped on the road they would have seen it like this, the barn, the milkhouse, the sheds, the farmhouse with its southern porch. The great catalpa is there just east of the farmhouse. The old orchard is just beyond the buildings, the slope of the woods where the valley-and-ridge land begins. There were cows on the place at that time.



The first barn on the place burned, they said, so this barn dates to about 1920. My father replaced the roof in the mid-1950s. He did this, he said, by tying himself to a rope he had slung over the peak and tied fast on the other side. Something like that. Completely nuts, he said, many years later. That tin roof he installed is the roof today. The old roof, also tin, was hauled up the woods road and left. The remains are there still.

The white milkhouse survived into the 1980s. Apples were stored there in the summer heat. A pump was by the door, and the water was so cold, with a slight taste of rust. And on a hot summer day out of that pump came the best water a sweaty boy ever drank in his life.

The narrow sidewalk there led to the house. Rows of marbles were embedded in the concrete at its edges. They were blue and yellow and green and they fascinated me, beautiful like tiny worlds. Gone now.



“Some nights the cows are in the upper pasture to the right of the lane. Then the electric fence goes across the lane in 2 places and must be moved before you drive in. Watch for the wire when you get almost to the farmhouse. They have white cloth hanging from it. Don’t touch the wire, you unhook it with the big green rubber hold and pull it off the road, drive by & hook it again. About 20 ft there’s another one. If the cows are way down near the road when you come in you know you are safe.”

Mother, July 10, 1956

The cow stalls were taken out and they converted the lower barn for chickens in 1958. The date was recorded.



This photo is dated June 8, 1953. The photographer – must have been my mother – was standing by the porch of the old farmhouse. The car is our Oldsmobile. The English walnut there would live for nearly 70 more years and its stump still stands there now. I had just turned 2. I imagine I was playing nearby as my mother took the picture, that day.



“The chicken price was bad last week. We only made about \$200 clear. Oh well at least we didn’t lose. Hope the market is better for the big house. New chickens come for the barn tomorrow. A tractor is being delivered tomorrow too for us to try for a few weeks.”

Mother, April 25, 1959

The Farmall 230 was our tractor until 1981: its PTO ran the hammermill, it pulled the feed wagon, hauled rocks from fields, ran the rotary cutter, a manure spreader, a cultivator, plowed old chicken litter, plowed snow. And whatever else such as supporting a scaffold here in 1965.

Once or twice, while pushing brush into a burn pile after the fire was going, it got stuck while in the pile and had to be dragged out by a neighbor before it blew up in the heat. Exciting, if you were a kid at a safe distance. We did have a lot of luck around here sometimes.

I haven’t seen that tractor in more than 40 years, but if I could sit on it now, my hands would still know that wheel. I’d give a lot, if I could drive it one more time.



“Monday he took off to work (what else?) and needed help. He had cleaned out his big bins of soybean and corn and wanted to put cement in the bottom so they weren’t right on the barn floor. We mixed cement all afternoon and lowered it down in buckets. Also patched up all holes around the barn to keep rats out.”

Mother, October 25, 1961

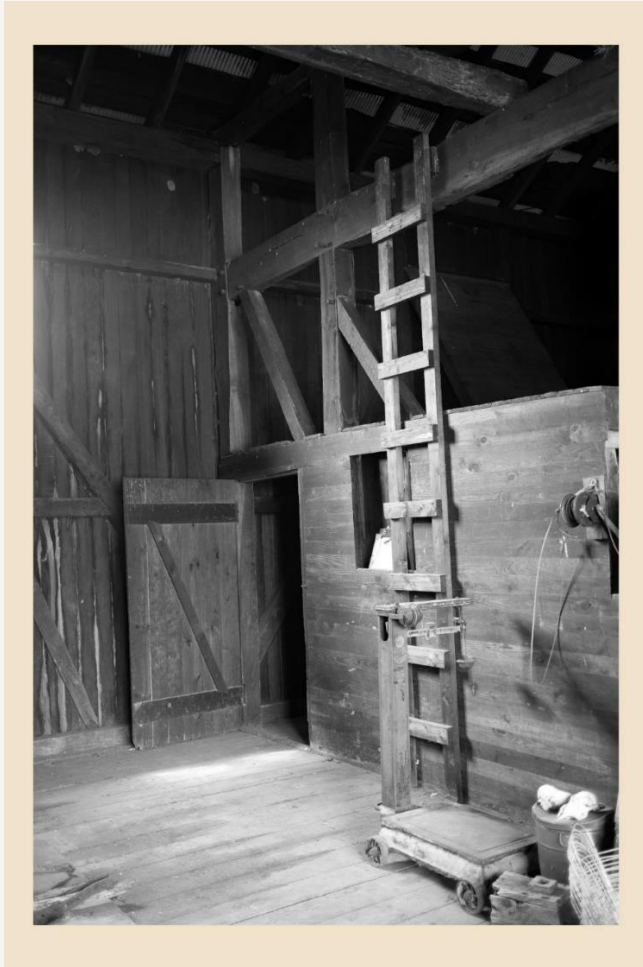
There are two bins in the barn’s west bay. One held corn for the hammermill. This bin is the feed bin, which the auger pulled over the wall to the feedroom below. If the feed caked up and wouldn’t drop to the auger, you climbed into the bin, down the ladder, and poked the problem with this pipe till you broke the feed loose and it fell to the auger. The pipe was cabled to the beam there, you couldn’t drop it and it couldn’t fall.



“The barn chickens go out in 2 weeks. They look fine – gaining nicely. Have to mix so much feed as they get older. Mixed 5 tons this weekend. We ground corn Saturday afternoon.”

Mother, September 11, 1959

Feed mixing was on Saturday. A hammermill, powered by the tractor PTO at full throttle, ground corn, which was then augered into a bin from which it could be measured into a weigh-buggy and rolled to the mixer. The mixer was a great steel funnel on end, about 20 ft high, installed in the main bay of the barn. A motor on top powered it, a floor hatch opened to an auger screw at its base. When running it made a low tumbling rumble like a huge clothes dryer turning. The tractor still would be roaring at the hammermill 30 ft away. We shouted to be heard in there. The mixed feed would be augered to the feed bin or sent through a chute to a wagon in the yard below. Standing in the silent barn, now, I think in the barn's deep crevices, traces of the dust must be there.

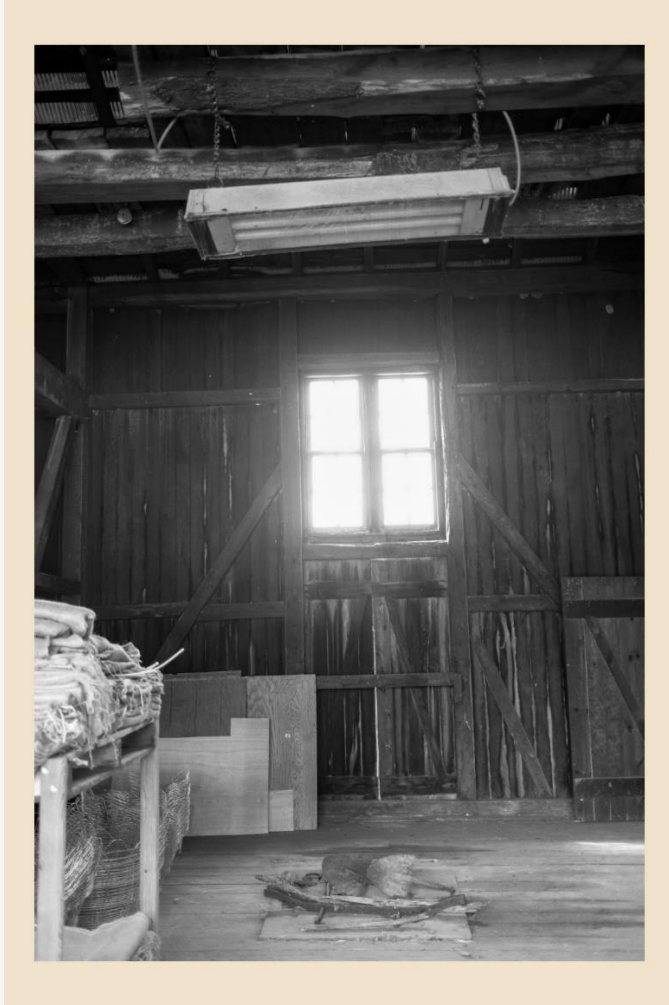


“We had the worst electrical storm we’ve ever had. We were by chance both in the barn at the same time when lightning either glanced off the roof or hit right beside it. There was a blue flash and we smelled sulphur all over the top of the barn after it. It burned out all the fuses in the upstairs of the barn. We felt very lucky.”

Mother, July 27, 1961

The augers and bins are still there, some switch boxes and timers, all the rest is gone. The chicken business ended here in 1972. Later, the mixer and hammermill of course were removed. They lay as dead things behind the barn for a while and eventually were sold as scrap.

I remember standing behind the barn looking over the pile with my father one day. I must have said something about feeling sorry that it all had to go. It was junk when I bought it, and it’s junk now, my father said, with no expression, as though all that time was gone like paper, but we both knew different. He looked over to the barn then, said he wanted to leave it as he found it, as though that were possible. I did not understand what he was saying then. I think I do now.



Here: This is where the mixer once stood. The square of plywood covers the gap where it was mounted through the floor. The plywood was nailed in well, but not by me, the old man did it.