

## BARNs OF MADISON COUNTY

## Gravel Pit Barn faces new life in new era

By Jim Murphy

Hidden on the uphill side of a hairpin turn on a long, steep, path running up the side of a mountain, the barn shows a weathered face with a strong spirit.

More than a hundred years old, the structure has long been retired. No more cows in the lower-level stalls. No more tobacco hanging from the wall-to-wall crossbeams. No more farm equipment rolling in and out for a day's work.

The barn was beginning to sag, to droop a bit at the corners, giving in to the ravages of a century. Then nearly four years ago, Debbie and Bob Davis bought the property overlooking the Ivy River at the end of Gravel Pit Road. They were ready to leave Washington, D.C., for a rural experience, and they found it in this high meadow property with the aging barn.

"I've always sort of had a fascination with barns," Bob says. "I grew up in a rural area of Chester County, Pennsylvania. Maybe it reminded me of my youth, I don't know. But I thought it was cool to have a barn on the property. It was not the deciding factor in buying the property, but it was an added benefit."

Debbie shares his enthusiasm. "I like the history of it. If it were something we could have fixed to live in, that would have been great."

They couldn't fix it to live in; in fact they had to do some fixing just to keep it standing. "The



Debbie and Bob Davis bought the property overlooking the Ivy River at the end of Gravel Pit Road. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-RECORD & SENTINEL

property had been left in disrepair," Bob says. "We had to cut through overgrowth to get to the barn. One of things that hurt it was the farmer had let a lot of trees grow up against it. Their root system had caused part of the barn to cave in. We had to have the back regraded."

Bob hired a restoration specialist, and together the two of them tore down, shored up, repaired, replaced, refurbished and restored the old barn.

The project took more than a year of sporadic work, and Bob

grins at the memory. "It was amazing that the barn was standing as well as it was. The thing is well put together."

On the lower level one wall is dry-stacked stone about five feet high in a pattern that's almost as tight as a jig-saw puzzle. The other walls are tree-trunk size logs notched together in a snug arrangement to form the perimeter of the building. Two rows of animal stalls open onto a central pass-through. When they were working on this lower level, Bob says they found

pieces of harness and hardware and "a lot of rotting leather."

The upper floor still shows three tiers of tobacco beams. "I took out the lowest beams because I got tired of hitting my head against them," Bob says. But the upper tiers remain, offering silent witness to the cash crop of the region in the 20th Century.

Bob says they also found evidence that the original farmer might have also grown corn. He suggests the crop was probably to feed the livestock living in

For more information about the Appalachian Barn Alliance, go to: [www.appalachianbarns.org](http://www.appalachianbarns.org)

the basement. However, considering the remote, inaccessible – almost secret – location of the barn and its proximity to a convenient underground stream, one might suspect that the corn crop could also have been used to quench a thirst.

Now, all these decades later, the essential restoration is complete and the barn is ready for its next assignment. The upper-level space holds Bob's exercise equipment in one corner and occasional patio furniture put away for the winter.

By the back wall a generator sits idly, not operating yet, but hinting at Bob's and Debbie's separate plans for the space.

"My thought is eventually to get a couple of ceiling fans," Bob says. "Then I'll bring my woodworking equipment down from Virginia and set it up as a woodworking shop."

Debbie has a different vision. "At some point I have the idea of stringing lights in there and having a party."

As different as their plans appear, the two scenarios do share one thing in common: They will give a piece of Madison County's history a place in Madison County's future.