

Barn Lights

Remembering the barns and farms of Madison County's heritage

Quarterly Newsletter

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Good Times on Tap

The Barn Alliance is about to launch an eventful summer. That's "event-full" as in *full of events*. Between now and September you can take a driving tour, take a workshop, take in a concert and take a dinner break with the Barn Alliance. Here are the highlights:

Photo Workshop

Renowned photographer Don McGowan will conduct a photo workshop exclusively for the Barn Alliance in July. Don's professional workshops draw professional and experienced amateur photographers from across the country. "In my first barn workshop earlier this year, I had two people come in from Boston and two from Indiana," Don said. "I began to realize that there's a lot of interest in photographing barns among people...from all over the country." Don has become a supporter of the Barn Alliance, and offered to conduct a weekend workshop for local residents who have an interest in photography and who would like to improve their understanding of what makes a good picture a great picture.

"I grew up playing in barns and I've always loved them," he said. "This workshop is about helping to generate awareness about what the Barn Alliance is doing. And I hope it will spread to other counties." The workshop will begin on Friday evening, July 18, with an introductory session. On Saturday, the group will leave at 8 a.m. to photograph barns in Beech Glen, Grapevine and Laurel. Taylor Barnhill, the ABA's resident history buff, will accompany the group and give a history of each of the barns. Don McGowan will offer the photographers individual coaching and professional tips about how to get the best shot in outdoor surroundings. On Sunday afternoon, the weekend will conclude with another instructional program and a critique of participants' images. ABA is grateful to Don for donating his time and talents to this unique project. Thanks to his generosity the Alliance is able to offer the entire weekend workshop for \$150. For members of the Alliance who have paid their \$25 dues for 2014, the fee will be \$125. All proceeds will go to the Appalachian Barn Alliance. In order to promote interest in photographing the barns of Madison County, the Alliance will offer a limited number of scholarships. To assure ample personal instruction, Don wants to limit the event to 10 participants, so if you're interested in taking better pictures and having a good time while you learn, don't hesitate. It promises to be a rewarding weekend.

For registration and scholarship information, call 828-380-9146.

Joe Penland/Laura Boosinger Concert

Two of the area's most popular performers will team up for a Barn Alliance concert in August. Joe Penland and Laura Boosinger have agreed to combine their talents in a joint concert on August 24 at the Ebbs Chapel Performing Arts Center.

"We're excited to have not one, but two, of our favorite mountain musicians performing to raise money for the Barn Alliance," said Alliance chair Sandy Stevenson. "With Joe and Laura, we know we'll enjoy a delightful musical adventure, and we're sure to have a successful event as well."

Joe Penland has been described as a "cultural treasure" by the Asheville Citizen Times. A steward of 12 generations of music in our county, he brings new life to old ballads as well as telling "love stories" in his own compositions. Joe is a recipient of the Bascom Lamar Lunsford Award for his "significant contribution to preserving our mountain music."

Laura Boosinger has performed on stages from Marshall to Munich. Both in her performances and her work as executive director of the Madison County Arts Council, her focus is on preserving mountain culture. "My job is to tell people why this music is important and why the people who play it are important," she says. "A lot of places in America don't have culture like we do here. They didn't save it. But here, people learned to value their cultural traditions."

Tickets for the concert are \$20. To make reservations, call 828-380-9146.

The BIG Event: Madison County Barn Day

The Barn Alliance busy summer schedule will conclude with a day-long celebration of our culture and our ability to enjoy it. Madison County Barn Day will combine several elements into a major fund-raiser and "fun-raiser."

The event will begin with a bus tour with stops at several significant and photogenic barns in the county. The tour will be narrated by Taylor Barnhill, and participants will have the opportunity to take pictures, ask questions and enjoy a close-up look at these rural icons.

The tour will end at the Mars Hill party-barn owned by Reese and Lynn Steen. The bright red structure sits against a long-range background of Appalachian peaks, making it one of the more picturesque settings in the county. Participants will enjoy a cocktail hour as they watch popular watercolor artist Polly Gott put the finishing touches on a plein air painting of the barn and the surrounding mountains. Her completed painting will be the featured item in a live auction after a barbecue dinner.

Following the auction, the world champion Bailey Mountain Cloggers of Mars Hill University will perform -- and perhaps even conduct a clogging class for any brave participants. And then everyone will be encouraged to join in a square dance called by Peter Gott.

"We have tried to include something for everyone in what we hope will become our signature annual event," says Alliance chair Sandy Stevenson. "With the barn tour, the dinner, the auction and entertainment, we think we will have a unique event that includes all the best of our mountain culture."

Tickets for the entire event are priced at \$35. Watch for details. Seating will be limited, so the Alliance recommends that you make reservations early.

Barn Memories...Some of the original farm tools are still functional like a corn sheller that is operated with a crank. One of the daily chores might be to stick the ears of corn into the top so that the kernels would come out in the wooden box underneath and the cob would be spit out to be fed to the hogs. Those farming chores Randy performed as a child are now part of his blood just as they were part of the life of his parents, grandparents and great-grandparents before him. Randy Bailey

New Barn Tour

Taylor Barnhill has completed work on the second of the Alliance's regional barn tours, featuring eight picturesque and significant barns in the Laurel area.

The brochures will direct you along a driving tour of the beautiful Laurel countryside with pictures and information about each of the featured barns along the way.

Taylor, who is compiling the brochures for the Barn Alliance, says of this Laurel group: "The remote Laurel communities retain antique barns that demonstrate many creative, signature features from individual builders who were making the highest and best use of the materials at hand. The historic barns of the Laurel communities quietly tell the stories of the lifestyle of the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century. The barns of the late 1800's that have survived are typically those of higher quality construction built by the more successful farm families. Although the timber frame barn of the 19th century is nearly forgotten, barn building then consisted of hand-hewn log structures or "pens" used as animal stalls, supporting large timber-framed structures above. These barns housed the livestock, equipment, and any other function to support the farm. Mountain subsistence farming changed dramatically when "bright leaf" or flue-cured tobacco was introduced in 1870. The first commercial cash crop, it required a specialized wood heated barn built of logs with mud chinking. None of these rare barns are now visible from the road. The next major change in barn function came in the 1920's with the introduction of burley tobacco. The existing livestock barns, with their large hay lofts and lattice siding were well suited for this new air-cured tobacco and were retrofitted with horizontal tier poles to allow the hanging of the green tobacco. Until the early 20th century all barns had split oak shingle roofs and, as that material began to deteriorate, it was replaced with the newly available sheet metal. It was this new roof technology that allowed the builder to depart from the steep A-roof and progress to the gambrel roof, or "hip barn roof", as it is known, and later to the low-pitched A-roof found on the mid-20th century burley tobacco barns that became the standard after WWII. The majority of barns seen while traveling the roads of the Laurels are the classic burley tobacco barns from the mid to late 20th century. But keep an eye open for the older steep-roofed barns with log bases. They are the true and rare antiques.

W. Gaither Shelton / Carson King barn



W. Gaither Shelton (1855 - 1927) was a successful farmer and is said to have owned most of the Big Creek valley. He likely built this barn soon after his marriage in 1884. This barn is a good example of one in which the roof was raised to enlarge the loft and add a side shed in the 1960's when the original wood shingles needed replacing. The timber framing is with mortise and tenon joinery, and one stall door survives with its very rare wooden hinge. Unlike most barns of this period, there is no lattice work. The hay fork is still in place, which is uncommon, as are the 19th century style hay racks with angled split palings. The Shelton family has been the most influential family in the Shelton Laurel valley since the colonial settlement period.

From our President...

One of the upcoming events for this Fall is our inaugural Annual Barn Tour. Our excitement for that day grew when the other Board Members and I were treated to a "sneak preview" of what will be included. Last month, we went on a "field trip" with our Lead Researcher Taylor Barnhill to tour the three Anderson barns in the Beech Glen Community. It just made everything we do and every discussion that we have had in our meetings come alive! Nothing can replace the reality of standing where history happened. And, it does not have to be as powerful a memory as one evoked by standing on a battlefield such as Gettysburg--as we found out. To look closely at the workmanship easily transported me back to that time and brought up a mental image of farmers hammering nails into the planks of wood or hanging tobacco leaves on the tier poles or simply leading the animals in. Each of the barns that is being documented has a story to tell. What better way to hear that story than to stand in the "footprints" of those who lived on these farms? This was a reminder to all of us of the importance of capturing all the information about Madison County's agricultural heritage.

--*Sandy Stevenson*

A New Life for Some Old Sticks

Just about every old barn in Madison County is home to a massive pile of tobacco sticks that at one time were an indispensable tool of the trade. But now they just sit there, a quiet reminder of a bygone era. When an accomplished woodworker considered the pile of sticks in his Marshall barn, he decided to turn them into something useful; repurpose them, to use the popular jargon. Chuck Blethen considered the possibilities, and what emerged is a new product line of tobacco-stick products, sold exclusively by the Appalachian Barn Alliance.

Chuck has produced three products: Cutting boards, napkin rings and trivets. "When he got the idea about making cutting boards, he used my cutting board as a pattern," says his wife, Jeannie, who is a member of the ABA board of directors. "They came out so nice and pretty that we decided to make them available through the Barn Alliance."

The finished pieces represent a significant era in the history of Madison County, and they make a handsome addition to any local kitchen. Their creator is a longtime woodworker, who until now has limited his talents to the category of a hobby. His engineering background includes a time when he worked with NASA, helping to invent devices that became part of our space program. Now he is turning tobacco sticks into kitchen gadgets -- a hobby that means good business for the Barn Alliance. The cutting boards sell for \$25; the napkin rings \$20 for a set of four, and the trivets sell for \$10.



Chuck's creations are available at the Mad for Madison gallery in Marshall and at Fiddlestix in Mars Hill. You can also check them out at www.appalachianbarns.org.