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RURAL APPALACHIA



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Ross Young, North Carolina Cooperative Extension agent for Madison County, left, Sandy Stevenson, Appalachian Barn Alliance board president, and Taylor Barnhill, Appalachian Barn Alliance researcher and historian, walk away from the Floyd Wallin barn in Shelton Laurel.

The 10,000 barns of Madison County

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Drive just a few minutes north of Asheville on the interstate or up the old river highway and Madison County quickly turns rural. You'll pass by more barns than people in the countryside.

"We believe we are the barn county," said Sandy Stevenson, director of the Madison County Visitor's Center. But just how many barns dot Madison's countryside, no one had really counted until Taylor Barnhill came along.

"I started driving up and down the road and doing a windshield survey," Barnhill said. It quickly averaged out to five barns a mile in some sections of the county.

With a conservative estimate of 10,000 barns, Madison likely boasts a barn for every two residents. But Barnhill believes it may be closer to 17,000 or more.

Barnhill is the researcher for the Appalachian Barn Alliance, a nonprofit compiling a database and organizing tours around Madison's multitude of barns.

While the cribs, stalls and lofts no longer house tobacco following the demise of the cash crop, the barns still hold potential for tourism, said Stevenson, who serves as the Appalachian Barn Alliance board president.

More than 10,000 sounds about right to Ross Young, who's served as the North



Taylor Barnhill points out initials carved into a crib with a chisel in the Floyd Wallin barn off N.C. 212 in Madison County. Barnhill believes the initials belong to the builder of the barn.

Carolina Cooperative Extension agent for Madison for 26 years. Young said he had never given the number much thought before talking with a colleague organizing a photo contest for old barns in another county.

Young started when Madison's 2,500 growers led the state in burley tobacco production. Many of those farmers had two or three barns on their property. But

when the federal subsidy program for tobacco ended in 2004, so did Madison's main cash crop and the need for many of those barns.

Madison still boasts 750 working farms, including some 300 dairy farmers who used their barns to house their herds, Young said. Others have moved

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The Floyd Wallin barn off Highway 212 in Shelton Laurel in Madison County is believed to have been built in the late 1800s.

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Barns

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into vegetable or organic farming, perhaps using old barns to store equipment these days.

Viewing the vernacular

Driving around the county, township by township, Barnhill has documented some 75 historic barns, tracking down genealogy of the builders and delving into the history of the families who settled Madison's remote coves and valleys.

Barnhill knows his barns, as an architect would say, the vernacular of each township with distinctive designs.

In the Floyd Wallin barn off Highway 212 in Shelton Laurel, Barnhill points out details that date the structure to the late 1800s.

Timbers were hewn by hand with broadax and chisel, with smooth cuts instead of the tell-tale fuzzy cuts a sawmill blade would have left. The mysterious initials "E.G." were chiseled into the timber of one crib, maybe a clue to the name of the original builder, probably a member of the Tweed family.

Original shingle roofing was replaced in the late 19th and early 20th century by metal roofing, that was shipped by the railroad. "But there were a lot of wood

shingle roofs on the barns up until the 1960s," Barnhill said. Keeping the roof watertight and the timbers dry can keep a barn standing for a century or more.

In Shelton Laurel, a builder, perhaps one of the Tweed family, liked to create barns with a long raised roof profile, which may have helped draw more air into the top of the barn and helped in the curing of the burley leaves.

Barnhill marvels at the builders, who showed skilled craftsmanship in timber framing, using mortise and tendons instead of nails. The timbers came from nearby ridges, chestnut before the blight that killed off the Southern Appalachian's most common tree in the 1920s. Tulip poplar, a lighter wood, made good beams.

The earliest barns were designed around livestock back when the Buncombe Turnpike passed along the river and through the heart of Madison County, which was divided off from Buncombe in 1851. The barns would have been spacious with cribs below for the animals, and haylofts above to shovel down the daily feed. "With thousands and thousands of animals passing down the road, the amount of corn and grain they needed to feed these animals would have been tremendous, and to corral them each night," Barnhill said.

The oldest surviving barn dates to the early 1800s, owned by William Nielson. With two-foot-thick rock walls and wood

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frames, the barn likely stabled the horse of Bishop Francis Asbury, who passed through the area on his travels, when he stayed in Nielson's home.

The coming of the railroad changed the economy again, but Madison farmers adapted with their barns.

Bright leaf or flue-cured tobacco came into the region after the Civil War. Farmers began building square barns, chinking the logs air-tight with rock furnaces inside that would heat and cure the tobacco.

But by 1915, bright leaf gave way to a new cash crop with burley tobacco, which was dried in the air.

When burley tobacco caught on in the early 20th century, Madison farmers built even larger barns or added on to existing livestock barns.

The flue-leaf barns would have been converted to the new crop as farmers knocked out the chinking to let in the air. Old haylofts were converted to hang tiers of tobacco.

The barns reached high overhead toward the steep sloped tin roofs, as field hands climbed the rafters to hang up to seven tiers of long leaves of tobacco to cure in the fall before the auction. The dirt floors below are dry and powdery with old tobacco, the ghosts of a century of crops.

Hand-hewn timbers are wrapped with what Barnhill jokingly refers to as old-growth poison ivy. A stall's only sign of life is a hole left by a groundhog.

"The dominant theme in this story is abandonment," he said. "Folks are very proud of their farm heritage here, but many of them have been embarrassed by the condition of their barns. 'If you don't have \$10,000 to do basic repairs, the banks aren't going to lend you any money and the burley program is long gone,'" Barnhill said.

The future of barns

The National Trust for Historic Preservation awarded the alliance a \$6,000 grant to continue documenting barns in the Mars Hill Township. The Alliance had previously received funding from the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area.

But there's no money for upkeep or helping owners maintain barns that no longer house cash crops.

"It's the inability to afford repairs that's the biggest threat we're facing as far as these barns. A lot of people are living hand to mouth in the county with the economy being such a crapshoot," Barnhill said.

"Our primary goal is to document and create a record of these barns, even if they are torn down later."

The alliance wants to create a series of brochures for self-guided tours, documenting particular barns in all 11 townships of Madison County. Stevenson said a Barn Day held last spring proved very popular with a waiting list of 35 for the bus tour.

Stevenson moved to the county 15 years ago. A native of Wisconsin, she grew up



Ross Young, the North Carolina Cooperative Extension agent for Madison County, explains how tobacco would have been hung to cure using stakes inside the Floyd Wallin barn.

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around dairy barns. "I think it's genetic. There's something about a barn that people love. I used to take them for granted, but now when I travel, I try to notice them."

Going to work at the Madison County

Visitor's Center in Marshall, Stevenson said, "I drive by about 20 barns every single day. Madison really does have more barns than most places. They are so beautiful."