

THE HIGH LONESOME BARN SILLS OF OUR PAST

BY TAYLOR BARNHILL

Early Appalachian barns tended to be built on land that was close to the harvest of wheat and hay and the husbandry of the livestock. In Madison County that meant an elevation above sea level ranging from 1,800 to 2,800 feet. Today, you might find a few barns while crossing the higher mountains at places like Betsy's Gap or Troublesome Gap, barns that sit quietly in a high, lonesome pasture, just below the breath of clouds.

The Dewey Brown farmstead resides at 3,700 feet, not that high when you think about our highest mountains but very high when you consider what was required to sustain life at that altitude. At the geo-climatic equivalent of New York State, this farm is the first to have the smell of imminent snow on the air and the last to celebrate spring. The home was a small log cabin, the classic housing stock of the period when Brown acquired the land from J.J. Gudger in 1904. Gudger was a prominent 19th-century businessman and politician and had acquired the farm in 1862, part of a land grant of 60,000 acres, for taxes due of \$26.80.

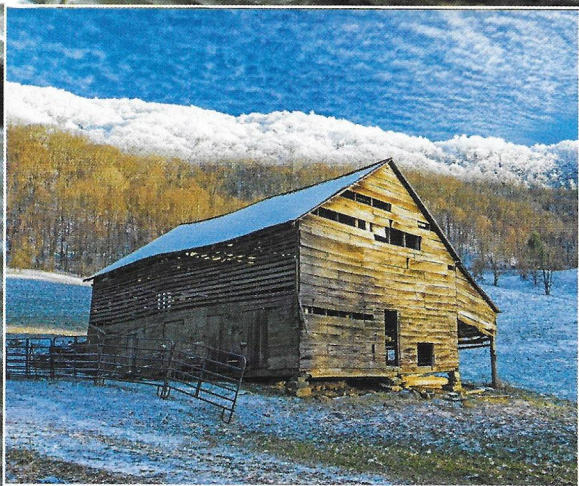
Today the farm is home to all manner of beast except humans. The large livestock barn rests on the high slope of a pasture that sustains a flock of scruffy sheep. The largest inhabitant is the Great Pyrenees shepherd dog Barney, whose job it is to intimidate anything with a taste for mutton or lamb. Barney is usually found under the large, hewn chestnut wood sills of the barn, between the dry-laid foundation stones. On warm days his companion is a six-foot long, black rat snake that winds its way among the weathered timbers of the barn.

The large barn is not typical of livestock barns of the period, which would have been built upon hewn log cribs that formed enclosures for the animal stalls. This barn's ground level is framed with sawn lumber, an innovation for its time, signaling a transition from the old ways of the 19th century. The animal stalls are also atypical, with doors opening from the outer walls instead of into a long central hallway. As was the tradition, it is a bank barn, built so that horse-drawn wagons and sleds of hay and wheat could be driven from the upper hillside level into the hay loft above the stalls. The loft level's exterior is covered with chestnut lattice strips that allow a free-flow of air to the hay.

The ends of the barn are sided with simple, horizontal boards. Some have the telltale warping and cupping which indicates that they were cut from trees harvested at the "wrong" time: when the tree sap was up or in the wrong sign of the Zodiac or phase of the moon. Mountain farmers depended upon "the signs"; ignoring these laws could result in a failed potato crop or a barn that deteriorated prematurely.

More than half a century has passed since the Brown family worked this land. The barn is now a lonesome relic of a courageous lifestyle, from a period of high expectations and hope.

The Appalachian Barn Alliance celebrates May as Madison County Barn Month. Barn photos will be displayed at Zuma Cafe and the Madison County Arts Council Gallery. The 5th Annual Barn Day will be held Saturday, May 19. For more information, visit appalachianbarns.org or call 828.380.9146.



A high lonesome barn. Photo by Don McGowan Earthsong Photography; (Background) Curious barn resident. Photo by Taylor Barnhill Photo