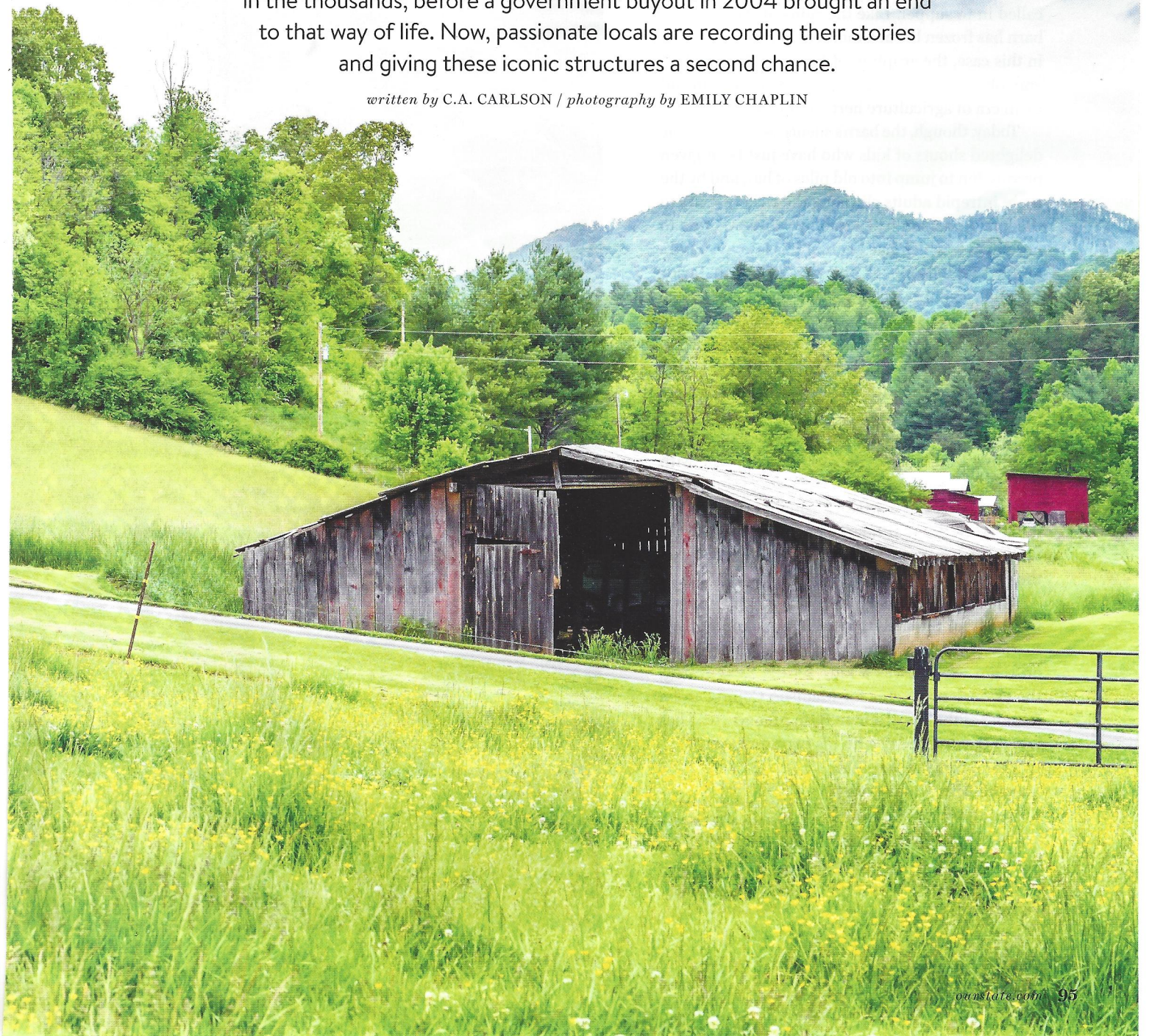


The Appalachian Barn Alliance has documented more than a hundred barns, like these on California Creek Road, in an effort to preserve an important part of Madison County history.

THE BARNs *of* MADISON COUNTY

Tobacco barns once dotted the Appalachian landscape in the thousands, before a government buyout in 2004 brought an end to that way of life. Now, passionate locals are recording their stories and giving these iconic structures a second chance.

written by C.A. CARLSON / photography by EMILY CHAPLIN



IN THE HUSHED AND DUSTY LOFT of Evelyn Anderson's barn, not far from Mars Hill, time has come to a hard stop. Someone could have gotten up from that old chair, put down that yellowed newspaper, and finished the soda in that empty bottle just a few minutes ago, if it weren't for the cobwebs. A child might have thrown that bicycle down when he was called in to supper. Like the ruins of Pompeii, the barn has frozen life at a moment of cataclysm: not, in this case, the eruption of Vesuvius, but the federal tobacco buyout of 2004, which brought an end to an era of agriculture here in Madison County.

Today, though, the barn's silence is broken by the delighted shouts of kids who have just been given permission to jump into old piles of hay, and by the more intrepid adults climbing the rickety stairs to the loft. Anderson has welcomed these visitors to her farm — which has been in her late husband's family since 1797 — as part of a tour with Taylor Barnhill, lead researcher for the Appalachian Barn Alliance. The barn is one of more than a hundred that the organization has documented in Madison County to preserve and share the history of the structures, along with the stories of the people who made them.

"You try to imagine people with just hand tools building these things," Barnhill says, looking with an architect's admiration at the barn's framework. "These doors, those six-inch square posts — how much work did that take? That beam up there — that's one log that started out as a tree just up on the ridgeline."

The hills around the farm also supplied sassafras trees for the sleds that mountain farmers used to transport nearly everything. "We hauled tobacco on them when I was a kid," recalls Ross Young, the extension director for Madison County and a founder of the Appalachian Barn Alliance, who has joined the tour today with his two young sons.

From spring through fall, Barnhill brings tour groups — mainly visitors and new arrivals to the region, drawn by the cachet of Asheville and the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains — to the

Tours with the Appalachian Barn Alliance often come to Evelyn Anderson's property near Mars Hill, which has been in her late husband's family since 1797.





Anderson barn. “Understanding these barns helps you to understand the people who built them,” Barnhill says. “Despite the stereotypes, these weren’t lazy hillbillies. They were some of the hardest-working people on the planet.”

THE DAUNTING MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPE OF WESTERN North Carolina wasn’t settled by European-Americans until the late 18th and early 19th centuries, nearly 200 years after the first coastal colonies. The Scots-Irish farmers who patched together a living from the rocky, sloping fields had to be infinitely tough and entirely self-sufficient.

It was a hundred years before a cash crop gave these families — Robinsons and Robertses, Sheltons and Andersons, names that still dominate the hills and hollers — a chance at something more than subsistence. Flue-cured tobacco came into the county after the Civil War, and eventually, most farms had little plots of it tucked around their cornfields and

pastures. Many mountain women grew a patch in their kitchen garden and sold it for spending money. “I knew a lady who grew tobacco to pay for her false teeth,” Barnhill says.

By the 1920s, those plots and patches were mostly planted with Burley tobacco, an air-cured variety that didn’t require the same heat treatment as the flue-cured varieties that were more popular

in the eastern parts of the state. What Burley tobacco *did* require was space and air to dry the leaves. Many farmers converted their old barns from livestock to Burley, or knocked out the mud chinking between logs on their flue-cured tobacco barns to create better air-flow. Federal price support

for the tobacco industry encouraged more western North Carolina farmers to get into the game, and Madison County eventually became top in the state for Burley.

As late as the 1990s, more than half of the county’s population — about 10,000 out of 20,000

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Tours of the Anderson farm include the cabin, built in the 1840s, that served as the family’s home until 1890, when it was converted to a flue-cured tobacco barn.



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“A whole lot of community happened when you were sitting in those barns at night, just talking.”

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people — was involved in tobacco farming, Young says. A fourth-generation tobacco farmer himself, Young spent much of his childhood in his family’s Burley barns. “There were times when we spent more time in those barns than we did in the house or at school,” he says.

After the tobacco had been harvested and hung, there would be the process of casing and classing — softening the dried leaves enough that they could be sorted by quality and packed for sale. At peak times, that could stretch from 4 p.m., when Young got home from school, until midnight or beyond. Families and neighbors would come together to help each other at every stage of the process.

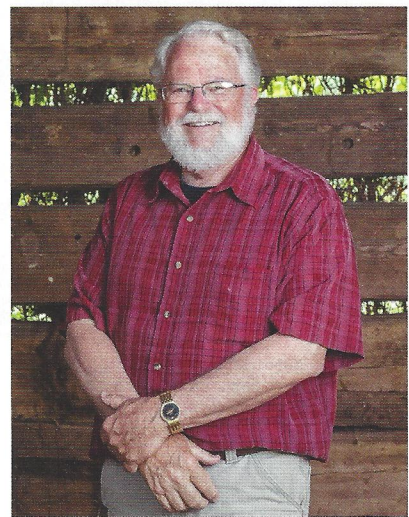
“I didn’t recognize it then, but looking back on it, a whole lot of community happened when you were sitting in those barns at night, just talking with neighbors, friends,” Young says. “Young boys like me heard stories of manhood in those barns, and probably grew up a little. You weren’t off in

a bedroom by yourself; you weren’t on Nintendo. You were with your elders, often three generations there, talking. That’s something you don’t get now, and I really appreciate it now that it’s gone.”

It’s gone because in 2004, the Fair and Equitable Tobacco Reform Act (known in these parts and elsewhere as “the tobacco buyout”) ended federal price support for the industry and opened it to global competition.

That was the eruption of Vesuvius.

The number of tobacco farms in the “Burley Belt” of western North Carolina dropped from 2,707 in 1997 to 74 in 2012, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. With the help of organizations like the NC Cooperative Extension and the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, some farmers transitioned to other crops, but many simply left farming altogether. And the barns that had been at the center of family and community life for generations — more than 10,000 of them, Young estimates — were either repurposed or left empty.



Taylor Barnhill spends about 30 hours documenting the history, architecture, and functions of each historic barn, like the one on the Carswell property (above).

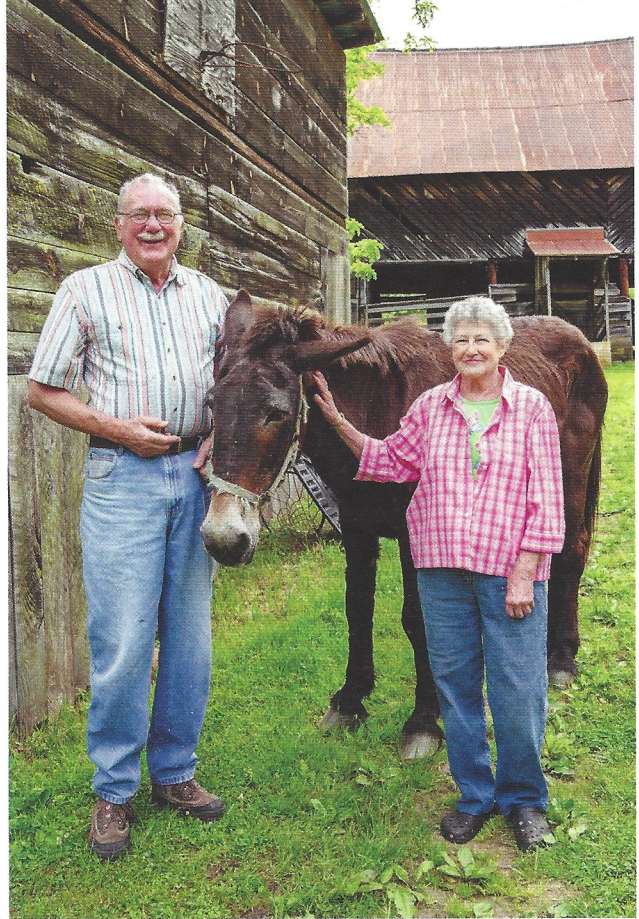
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**“I haven’t met
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“Almost immediately, you saw fields growing up [where tobacco had been], and you saw barns deteriorating,” Young says. Old wooden buildings need near-constant attention and maintenance to resist the elements, wood-boring insects, and the forces of gravity and time. It doesn’t take long for a barn to go from functional to picturesque to decrepit. Young saw it happening before his eyes. “In my opinion, those barns were the most iconic symbol of Madison County’s agricultural heritage, and they were falling by the wayside,” he says.

One day in 2011, Young shared his desire to



save some of the county’s agricultural history with Sandy Stevenson, a retired high school history teacher and now the part-time director of the Madison County

James and Geneva Roberts with their mule, Jack. The Robinson barn (left) is another regular stop on the tour.

Visitor Center. A Midwest native, she understood what barns meant to Young, and what they could mean to visitors in the region. “When you look at a barn, you think of a time when life was simpler, when people worked hard and worked together,” she says. “I haven’t met a single person who doesn’t say, ‘Oh, I love barns.’”

Stevenson and Young soon gathered a group that became the Appalachian Barn Alliance. Stevenson took on the role of president, and Barnhill, a familiar figure to hundreds of Madison County residents, was contracted to document barns and their history through architectural drawings, photos, and interviews. His last name — the word for the earthen banks into which his Scottish ancestors would build their barns, he says — is just one of the coincidences that suit him to the work. A native of the Piedmont, Barnhill spent summers on his uncle’s tobacco farm in eastern North Carolina, and he studied architecture at NC State University and regional planning at UNC Chapel Hill. After a stint as a consulting architect with the Hot Springs Health Program in the 1970s, he bought a farm and settled in the area.



"I was part of the first back-to-the-land movement 40 years ago, and the local people were so welcoming, even though we looked like bearded hippies," he recalls. Barnhill married a woman whose family went back seven generations in Madison County, a connection that helped him when he did an architectural survey of the area for the state in the 1980s. He interviewed hundreds of residents about the history of their properties, and he has gone back to many of them in his work for the Barn Alliance.

ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR STOPS ON BARNHILL'S tours is the creek-side farmstead of James and Geneva Roberts. The property, blooming with American wisteria and other native species that Geneva carefully cultivates, has been in the Roberts family for more generations than James can rightly

recall. While he's mostly retired from farming, he still tills his garden with the help of a 29-year-old mule named Jack, just as nimble as the mules who helped James's ancestors plow their sloping fields.

Jack makes his home in one of the several barns that survive on the Roberts property. No one is quite sure when that barn was built, but it's old enough that the "new" addition, built by James's grandfather and aunt, dates back to 1924. Across the road and up a holler, there's an old flue-cured tobacco barn, one of the few remaining in the county.

"My daddy could tell you all about it if he were still alive," James says, eyeing the log building. "They'd leave him and a bunch of the boys here overnight to keep the fire going." When the farm switched over to Burley tobacco, the mud was knocked out from between the logs, but there are still patches of it inside, bearing the little

The latticework on the Andersons' barn is a distinctive feature allowing for greater air-flow to dry Burley tobacco.





Barnhill is in the process of documenting the Audie Cody barn on Big Laurel Creek. The Cody family ran the local general store and post office, and remains active in the community.

fingerprints of the children who helped build the barn.

James remembers when his uncles all came to help his granddaddy replace the big barn's hand-split white oak shingles with tin. "I forget a lot of stuff, though," he says. "And I wish I'd found out more about it when my daddy and granddaddy were still alive, but you don't think to ask those questions when you're young."

He's grateful that Barnhill is asking barn owners those questions now. "It needs to be recorded, and pictures kept so people will know," James says, walking the property where so many Robertses have walked before him. "In not a great many years, it'll all be gone. Sooner or later, everything goes."

MAYBE NOT EVERYTHING. EVELYN ANDERSON offers a rare treat to the visitors on the tour today: the chance to step into an even older barn on her property. The log structure was originally built as a home for her late husband's family in the 1840s, nine generations or so ago, and there are V-shaped

Recent arrivals are seeing the beauty and value of old barns and giving them new lives.

notches in the walls where they could prop a gun to defend against attacks from the Native Americans living in the region before settlers arrived. Later, when the family grew more affluent, they moved to a house nearby and turned the cabin into a barn.

As light filters through the vine-covered log walls, the high-ceilinged space feels like a chapel, and Barnhill — who has never been inside before — becomes reverent. "This is why we're doing this work," he says softly, admiring the nearly 200-year-old handiwork.

Recent arrivals to the countryside are also seeing the beauty and value of old barns and giving them new lives. Barnhill has worked with clients who are buying old structures, moving them to new sites, and restoring them as homes or vacation rentals. The next generation of back-to-the-landers ("baby hippies," Barnhill calls them) are starting small-scale farms in the region and making use of the buildings they find on their properties.

In the years since the Appalachian Barn Alliance started, Young has noticed changes at the farms he visits in his work for the extension service. "It just warms my heart to go to a farm, and you're looking at his grapevines or her Christmas trees — whatever they've transitioned to after tobacco — and they say, 'Ross, come here. I got to show you what I've done to the barn,'" he says. "They've painted, they've fixed this or that, and there's pride in it. They've seen a culture change. They've seen what the Barn Alliance is doing, and they say, 'Someone else is taking an interest in my barn, so why shouldn't I?'" **Os**

C.A. Carlson is a writer and editor living in Asheville.

Tours with the Appalachian Barn Alliance are held April through October. For information about annual events and guided, self-guided, and private tours, call (828) 380-9146 or visit appalachianbarns.org.