

Book Reviews

Without Right Angles: The Round Barns of Iowa, by Lowell J. Soike. Des Moines: Iowa State Historical Department, 1983. viii, 103 pp. Illustrations, graphs, map, catalog of round barns, notes, bibliography, indexes. \$8.95 paper.

Lowell J. Soike was one of those historians recruited to historic preservation by the nationwide system of State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO) created by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. That legislative milestone in American preservation financed the first comprehensive survey in each state of individual landmarks and ensembles as the basis for selecting some to be designated in the National Register of Historic Places. Although all SHPOs maintain the resulting survey records for public access in their offices and/or duplicated form, few publish histories adding context to the vital statistics of name, location, building type, architect/builder, and construction date for each surveyed landmark. Individual SHPO staff and consultants have published survey research independently; the Kentucky and North Carolina SHPOs have published a series of county surveys with the widest exposure. As chief of historical survey for Iowa's SHPO, Soike published *Without Right Angles*, the first state history of a building type in the surveys launched by the 1966 act.

His book, like the other SHPO publications, contributed to the boom of interest in vernacular architecture begun twenty years ago by scholars and architectural critics. The latter legitimated the vernacular as an alternative to modernism for design inspiration. The academic source was the cultural geographer Fred Kniffen's article "Folk Housing: Key to Diffusion" (*Annals, Association of American Geographers* 55 [1965]), which invited use of vernacular architecture to delineate zones of past ethnic settlement. Momentum gathered in numerous articles and books and a few courses utilizing all kinds of vernacular structures for more than locating past ethnic settlements and in 1979 coalesced into a separate organization, the Vernacular Architecture Forum, whose quarterly newsletter comprises mostly a bibliography averaging about 175 new publications last year.

Barns are defined as round in Soike's book if they have circular or polygonal walls. Iowa had at least 160, one of the largest number in any state, and Soike's treatment of this special heritage is informed by his plan to preserve some surviving examples starting with an architectural inventory. Initially, it is to be the documentation required for National Register designation. Soike further hoped readers would respond by adding unrecorded information about the barns and that the SHPO would refine a method for researching other farm buildings in a larger project, "The Changing Iowa Farm: Agricultural History

Through Buildings." The ultimate aim is that readers will be stimulated as preservationists. For the first step, however, Soike patiently addressed the topics of an architectural survey: (1) sources of the round barn idea; (2) personality of the round barn farmer; (3) regional incidence; (4) market range of the builders; and (5) construction details. By examining the agricultural literature, mailed questionnaires from current owners, and the extant barns, Soike reports a wealth of facts.

Round barn construction peaked in two periods: the 1880s when octagons dominated, and 1905 to 1920, when the true round barns predominated with a few polygons. All were purchased by "progressive" members of the farm community (6, 44). They were not inspired by early nineteenth-century examples and publicists, contrary to common misconceptions. In the 1880s round barns were inspired either by the national writings of Elliott W. Stewart, a New Yorker, or the circulation in Iowa of the writings of Lorenzo Coffin, an agriculturalist near Fort Dodge. In the period from 1905 to 1920, publicists at three midwestern universities' agricultural experiment stations—including J. B. Davidson and Matt King at Ames, Iowa—influenced round barn construction. Their reason was to gain cheaper, stronger, and more labor-saving barns. True round barns predominated in the later period because the development of construction techniques made them possible and the introduction of the circular silo at the barn center made circular walls acceptable. Although it is unclear whether farmers or contractors built the barns of the 1880s, the later production was certainly the work of commercial fabricators of plans and pre-cut kits. The value of Soike's book as an architectural tool of preservation is clinched in the concluding inventory of each barn with its vital statistics; their tabulation by wall shape, building material, and roof type; and the preponderance of representational photographs lacking artistic effects throughout the text.

Ample satisfaction of the requirements of the preservationist survey perhaps explains Soike's limited examination of the barns' immediate causes. Although presenting the first thorough search of Iowa's primary literature about the round barn, and assiduously attributing the relative influence of the various promoters by attention to many as-built barns' construction details, Soike laments the lack of a complete architectural record of every barn. Geographic relationships are only lightly treated. He notes the apparently random distribution of barns throughout the counties, but without an effort at explanation, except the unsubstantiated afterthought that there are two groups along a southwest-northeast axis in Iowa. The high concentration of examples in the northeastern dairy region is overlooked. (Allamakee County alone, one percent of the counties, had five percent of the state's round barns.) Clay tile, the most popular round barn building

Book Reviews

material in Iowa, is correlated with clay deposits and wealth to attribute the location of tile barns throughout the state; but these barns are not seen as just one example of Iowa's reputation for applying tile to agricultural innovations. Lastly, round barn patronage is attributed to "progressive" farmers without analysis of those inventoried to determine if this meant something in addition to psychological disposition such as the farmer's age, education, and type of farming and if it was expressed in the use of other innovations.

Neither does Soike adequately treat the long-term reasons for the round barn's brief career. Commercialization of Iowa farms encouraged by the demands of an international market and scientific farming as the means to increase supply, beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century, is not the setting for the round barn's introduction. Hence, Soike does not see it as merely one of hundreds of innovations tried for greater efficiency and lower cost to increase profit and either abandoned because the desired results were not achieved or because success required further innovation for improvement. The argument that the round barn was not adopted because farmers and carpenters "were accustomed to working in time-worn rectangular grooves of habit" is unconvincing (60). Why then, for example, did the circular silo become popular simultaneously? Profit calculation was probably more important than Soike implies.

Soike comes closer than anyone, however, to explaining the round barn's demise. He correctly notes that the agricultural depression in the 1920s coincided with opposition from round-barn publicists to construction of Iowa's last round barns. But the construction moratorium during World War I is unobserved as an earlier economic phase causing decline. Finally, the complicated subject of the round barn's disappearance may have more to do with emphasis shifted by the agricultural experiment stations and their extension advisers than even Soike implies in this first analysis of the subject. After all, Soike documents farmers' general satisfaction with round barns in use (59-60).

In all, *Without Right Angles* is not without merit. As the first intensive survey of a barn type throughout an entire state, Soike's aim merits high praise, especially since he researched and wrote the book while administering other work for the Iowa SHPO. Soike's achievement is a national model for architectural surveys tailored to National Register designation. A fuller treatment of the causes for the beginning and end of Iowa's round barn interest, however, possibly awaits the speculations of those who are not historian-administrators. In any case, Soike's field and literature survey is a welcome first installment.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.