

# Barns Remembered, Documented, and Restored: A Review Essay

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*The Pennsylvania Barn: Its Origin, Evolution, and Distribution in North America*, by Robert F. Ensminger. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. xvii, 238 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendices, glossary, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

*Barn: The Art of a Working Building*, by Elric Endersby, Alexander Greenwood, and David Larkin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992. 256 pp. 278 photographs, glossary, bibliography. \$50.00 cloth.

BARNs seem to live in the netherlands of feeling among Iowans, wandering somewhere between general indifference and nostalgic sentiment. During the pinch of urban difficulties, paintings and photographs of old farm buildings help bring comfort to those wishing for a simpler day when life seemed uncomplicated. Mostly, though, old farm buildings are taken for granted or get no respect. They are typically dubbed old-fashioned and out-of-date by modern agriculturalists, farm extension engineers, and building providers. And among the many self-conscious rural children of farmers who have moved to the city, barns go unmentioned even as they persist in their memories of the family farm.

Those who study and appreciate barns, therefore, ordinarily live and work outside the agricultural sector. The books under review here fit this pattern, with their authors drawn to the subject out of a sense of cultural traditions disappear-

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ing, bygone ways of life fading from memory, and buildings being rapidly lost that recall past rural times. Residents of Iowa know this loss all too well; decades of farm consolidation and the erasure of half our farms have seen to that. "Iowa will always be rural but it won't remain familiar," commented Adrian Anderson (former director of the Iowa State Historical Department), and so it is good that barns—prominent reminders of earlier farming—increasingly attract practitioners in historic preservation, folklore studies, and cultural geography who are trying to document their characteristics and keep alive an appreciation of their artisanship.

Geographer Robert F. Ensminger devotes his book to the Pennsylvania-type barn, or *forebay bank barn*. This type is typically built into the sloping bank of a hill. Entry into the main loft level is made from the uphill side for hay/grain storage and threshing, while the downhill side gives shelter for animals in the basement. The upper loft story extends out over the entry to the lower level. This loft overhang, sometimes supported by posts, is variously termed an overshot or gallery but is mainly known as a forebay. These two diagnostic features—its forebay and two-level hillside placement—give distinctive character to the barn. Between the 1790s and the Civil War, the Pennsylvania barn became the recognized ideal of large, heavy timber frame design and, thereafter, a lauded example of notable rural architecture.

The five-chapter book opens with an analysis of the barn's origins and ends with thoughts on its future prospects for survival. Between these are three chapters that offer Ensminger's clear and tightly argued efforts to classify varieties of the barn, delineate how the varieties evolved, and describe the distribution and diffusion of the Pennsylvania barn from its core of concentration in southeastern Pennsylvania on westward through the midwestern states. While Ensminger's work builds on the excellent work by others (such as the earlier classification by Charles Dornbusch and the scholarly geographic research by Joseph Glass), his synthesis and broader research beyond the immediate region of southeastern Pennsylvania makes it the single best reference work on the subject.

Three findings in particular deserve special mention. First, Ensminger's research leads him to reject the theory of Pennsylvania barn origins as "an American invention" without Old World prototypes that gradually evolved by combining indigenous elements. Instead, the author's field work at home and abroad lead him to conclude that Switzerland—in particular, the Pratigau area—provided direct European prototypes. This conclusion of Swiss origins for the Pennsylvania barn derives extra strength, Ensminger writes, from identical findings reached independently by Terry Jordan, who during the same period had been conducting European research into the antecedents of American log architecture.

Second, the author advances our understanding of Pennsylvania barn varieties by grouping them into three basic classes: the Sweitzer Pennsylvania Barn, 1730–1850; the Standard Pennsylvania Barn, 1790–1890; and the Extended Pennsylvania Barn, 1790–1920. This usefully broadens and simplifies the classification of eleven types first established by Charles Dornbusch in 1958.

Third, in explaining the spread of Pennsylvania barns elsewhere, Ensminger finds the greatest predictor broadly to be where Pennsylvania-German settlers migrated, but in particular where Amish, Mennonite, and Brethren pioneers established their settlements, for it is among these more inward-looking groups that one found a stronger adherence to using earlier established practices and forms. Lest Iowans think that the author's work has nothing to say to them, Ensminger writes, "the most significant cluster of Pennsylvania barns west of the Mississippi River is in southeastern Iowa, in Washington and Johnson counties, near the town of Kalona," where Amish settlers from Pennsylvania and Ohio began arriving as far back as 1846.

The author's findings and conclusions are made all the more persuasive with the help of more than 40 drawings, diagrams, and maps, and over 150 photographs. These usefully illustrate methods of construction, evolution of types within his scheme of classification, and distributions across geographic sections of the country.

*The Pennsylvania Barn* ably meets the author's hopes to provide a record for other scholars to build upon. One line of

such future research might further connect this barn to its changing agricultural context of emerging crop and livestock patterns and farming practices as glimpsed through social and economic data. How do Ensminger's findings, for example, fit with what James T. Lemon found about the area's agricultural development in *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1972)? Further examination of old agricultural newspapers and journals, which Alfred L. Shoemaker and Don Yoder had begun in the 1950s, would doubtless also yield more valuable historical information. Further analysis of specific barn histories might reveal to what extent Pennsylvania barns were ever built by persons outside Pennsylvania-German culture groups. In Iowa, for example, it is suggestive of further research needing to be done that, of the fourteen Pennsylvania barns portrayed in the 1875 *Andreas Atlas of Iowa*, not one was located in Johnson or Washington counties, which Ensminger singles out as an Amish-settlement area where Pennsylvania barns were clustered. Ensminger's work admirably sets the stage for answering these and other questions and for what is hoped will be more studies to come that concern important types of barns that characterized the nation's farming experience.

Scholarly treatments offer new understanding about our rural past, but another way to appreciate barns and their history is through the eye of photography, art, and stories about building or rehabilitating them for modern uses. *Barn: The Art of a Working Building* taps into this dimension of understanding by giving us a beautifully illustrated tribute to the "symbol of shelter and harvest, warmth and honest effort—a simple form wedded to the most ancient of civilized activities, the tilling of the land." Authors Elric Endersby and Alexander Greenwood—aided by the artistry of book designer David Larkin—have combined their graduate interests in history, folklife, and historic preservation with the experience of a decade-long partnership in The New Jersey Barn Company, a design and restoration firm, to offer a portrait of the barn as they see it.

Roughly one-half of the book is given over to the history of barns, and the other half is devoted to the physical tasks

of raising and reusing barns. The latter focus is in keeping with the authors' active work to save and relocate threatened historic structures. The opening chapter on the barn's Old World origins gives the bulk of attention to barn-building traditions of England and Germany, with briefer mention of influences from Holland, Switzerland, Scandinavian countries, and France. In the chapter that follows, "The New World Barn," the authors begin by pointing out how American farmers capitalized on the country's great forests to build substantial barns. Timber-frame designs came to characterize areas of the eastern states; English, Dutch, and Swiss-German varieties and vernacular forms were erected in the Appalachian and Great Smoky mountains. Of the remaining chapters, readers will especially enjoy the photographic stories of two barn raisings: one in 1988 when costumed participants erected a replica of a nearby eighteenth-century barn at Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts; and the second in 1989 when a crew dismantled and reassembled a nineteenth-century barn in New Jersey.

The writing is clear and forceful, but the book's most powerful attraction is its magnificent photography. Full-page photographic views allow readers to fully appreciate the spaciousness and artisanship of barn interiors, while the effective use of wood models reveals their heavy timber-frame configurations and structural complexity.

Iowans will notice but one view of a barn located in their state, but they will find several from among the largely eastern photographic coverage that are similar to what they have here. Some will be disappointed that heavy timber-framed barns get all the attention; light plank and balloon-frame varieties—the majority in the Midwest—are erased from the rural landscape as though they did not exist or have no historical value. In fact, lighter frame barns receive mention only as having marked "the close of the timber-frame era." This distortion notwithstanding, the book is a welcome and visually rich addition to the literature on barns and barn building.

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