

Barn Lights

Remembering the barns and farms of Madison County's heritage

Quarterly Newsletter

VOL. 1, No. 2 Spring 2014

C'mon in! It's good to see you!

Now that the Appalachian Barn Alliance is entering its third year, we've begun the transition from all the organizational and legal chores to the boots-on-the-ground phase. We're working on our second self-guided tour brochure; we're planning our Barn Day event; we're submitting monthly stories about interesting local barns to the News Record & Sentinel. And we're growing! That's where you come in. You can help us grow by joining the Barn Alliance and, if you're already a member, you can provide the greatest advertising anywhere: Word of mouth. Tell a friend about us and suggest that they can help the Appalachian Barn Alliance to remember and document the farms and barns of our region by providing an exchange of information through meetings, lectures, classes, tours, workshops, photo contests and many more activities. You can honor the rural heritage of the region by joining and supporting the Appalachian Barn Alliance. For more information, go to our website, www.appalachianbarns.org or call 828-380-9066.



"Barn Day" to Feature Fun, Food, and Entertainment

A summer Saturday will become **Madison County Barn Day** as the Appalachian Barn Alliance launches its first annual celebration of regional history, culture, and barns. The event will include a bus tour of several significant barns in Madison County, with narration by historian Taylor Barnhill. Guests will learn about the history of the barns and how the various interior spaces were used. There will be plenty of opportunities to take pictures. Taylor will try to answer all your questions.

The tour will end at a barn where a barbecue dinner, barn dance and auction will round out the evening. During cocktail hour before dinner, guests can watch a local artist put the finishing touches on a watercolor painting of the host barn. The painting will be among the items auctioned off after dinner.

The Bailey Mountain Cloggers of Mars Hill University will perform—and give clogging lessons to the guests. The world-champion Bailey Mountain team is among Western North Carolina's most popular performing groups and winner of over 16 national championship clogging competitions.

Watch for more information about this fun event in our next newsletter.

From our President...

Like most of the US, we have been experiencing a rough winter. However, one thing that I like about Madison County is that we can experience four seasons—seeing different aspects of the county during each. Before I got so deeply involved in the Appalachian Barn Alliance, I enjoyed seeing the different contours of the land during the winter months when the vegetation was absent, but now I am discovering more barns set back from the roads that were not visible in the other seasons. I thought that there were only twelve barns in the two miles I drive from Highway 19 to my home but I found three more hidden ones. So many hidden gems that I might miss if we didn't have this winter season to reveal them! So, I challenge you to take a look as you drive on familiar roads and discover those hidden barns. Stay safe when you are driving and stay warm when the temperatures drop. But, let the beauty of those hidden barns revealed by the cold of the winter warm your heart as you pass by the treasures of our heritage. And, then look forward to the beautiful spring weather (we have had a few teasers) and the events that the Appalachian Barn Alliance will present when the temperatures allow for maximum enjoyment.

--*Sandy Stevenson*



Even if you don't have a barn in your backyard, you can now have one on your breakfast table! The Barn Alliance is offering a new series of coffee mugs featuring the barns that won the Alliance's 2013 Barn Photo Contest. The colorful images on the mugs depict perfect country scenes: rustic old tobacco barns in lush fields under big skies. One of the images even includes a rainbow. Whether your preference is coffee, tea, hot chocolate or your own secret wake-up concoction, you're sure to enjoy every drop when it comes from a mug with a bright, colorful scene of a Madison County barn. The mugs are available in a special new Barn Alliance space at the Fiddlestix antique emporium in Mars Hill. Check out our new display -- and take home a mug.

BARN MEMORIES...



"I was scared to death of heights, and my little brother Johnny was a year younger than me—he wasn't scared of anything. But he was too small to hang tobacco; I'd go up to the second tier, but not higher than that. But Johnny, he was like a squirrel. He'd go all the way to the top and then just hang out up there while Dad hung the tobacco." --Steven Tweed

Send us your barn memories at
info@appalachianbarns.org

Taylor Barnhill: History Sleuth

The first step in the effort to preserve the agricultural heritage of Madison County is to identify the historically significant barns that remain here. That project is proceeding under the capable stewardship of architect and barn aficionado Taylor Barnhill.

Growing up in Durham, Taylor spent many of his youthful summers working on a family farm for 50 cents an hour -- and loving every minute of it. Those summers meshed with his natural inclination to design, and now he looks back with a quiet laugh. "When you have the name Barnhill, you're also stuck with childhood fantasies that relate to your name. When I was a kid I used to design houses that were basically barns."



His design talents took him to an architectural degree at NC State and then a master's degree in city and regional planning at UNC Chapel Hill. He went to work designing rural health centers in North Carolina.

Along the way he found Madison County, bought a farm and hung out a shingle as a private consultant. His interest in history and Appalachian culture kept pace with his architecture practice, and he soon was involved in a state-funded project to identify the historic homes in Madison County. "The project was limited to houses, but I couldn't ignore some of the barns I was seeing. I was noticing how they were built, and that led to lots of questions about why they were designed that way.

"Crawling around in an old barn was my idea of a good time," he says, adding, "And a strong desire to document the history of the area."

When the Barn Alliance approached him to document the barns, Taylor saw the project as a perfect expression of his interests. "One objective is to help the community realize the importance of their traditions and the history of their lifestyle."

The barns represent more than attractive landmarks in Madison County, and along with that history, the traditions and rural landscape. They embody much of the working history of values that comprised the fabric of life.

"I see the barn project as a way to restore the value in that mountain lifestyle, especially the self-reliance and resiliency."

Taylor's first project was to identify the significant barns in the Beech Glen area. Some of his findings are represented in a brochure for a driving tour that includes nine of the barns. The brochure is available at the Madison County Visitors Center in Mars Hill and downloadable from www.appalachianbarns.org under "Our Barns." Taylor's current focus is the Laurel community.

WHO'S WHO AT THE BARN ALLIANCE

The Appalachian Barn Alliance consists a number of individual members, several business supporters and a seven-member board of directors. The board includes lifetime Madison County residents, longtime transplants, and relative newcomers, all of whom have one thing in common: They appreciate the agricultural and cultural history of Madison County. And they want everyone to recognize and treasure its unique importance.

The current president of the Alliance is **Sandy Stevenson**, who also serves as the Director of the Madison County Visitors Center in Mars Hill. The vice-president and treasurer is **Rob Kraft**, who raises grass-fed beef at his ranch in Sodom. **Katie Estridge** is the secretary. A lifetime resident of Mars Hill, Katie teaches science and math at Madison High School. Other board members include **Jeannie Blethen** who, along with her husband, Chuck, has a teaching vineyard and small family farm in Marshall; **Ryan Cody**, whose family roots in Madison County go back several generations; and two recent transplants: **Jim Murphy**, a retired news reporter who moved to Mars Hill four years ago; and **Les Reker**, the Director of the Rural Life Museum at Mars Hill University.



The Flue-cured Tobacco Barns of Madison County

by
Taylor Barnhill



The most notable yet forgotten older barn type in Madison County is the "flue-cured" tobacco barn. It was used for heat-curing "bright leaf" tobacco, a hybrid tobacco which appeared for the first time in Madison County in 1872. That year Zachariah Henderson reported that his 2-3/4 acre of tobacco netted him \$1027 after expenses--quite a windfall for the period. (Wellman, 1973) Very different from today's air-cured burley tobacco, bright leaf was the "golden leaf" standard for at least 36 years. The first mention of burley tobacco came in 1918, when "truck farming was offering top dollar and a new tobacco called burley was introduced into the mountains and brought more at market than flue-cured." (Painter, 1994) Burley became the new cash king. Some farmers did, however, continue raising bright leaf as late as 1924.

The leaves of the bright leaf tobacco were more compact and succulent and the plants did relatively well on the depleted soil in the mountains of the late 1800's. Individual leaves were pulled or "primed" from the stalks, in contrast with burley harvesting where the entire stalk is cut, wilted in the field, then hung in the barn to air cure. The pulled bright leaf leaves were tied to sticks approximately four feet long. Several workers would work together to gather bunches of three or four leaves and hand them to a person standing at a "tying horse." The person tying the leaves onto the stick would take the "hand" of leaves from the hander and wrap cotton string around the stems in a special knot, tight against the stick. After about sixteen "hands" were tied, the stick of leaves would be taken off and placed in a rack to wait until the curing barn was ready, where they would be hung.

The flue-cured barn was log and had a rock and clay furnace ("flue") built onto the ground inside the barn, with an outside opening for feeding firewood. The log walls were chinked with clay to keep in the heat. The tobacco would cure in the hot, dry air of the barn over about a week's time.

The bright leaf annual crop value in Madison County went from \$50,000 in 1872 to \$250,000 in 1882, with the estimated value per acre of \$200. The average acreage per household was four and a half acres. By 1897 the county's tobacco crop totaled 2 ½ million pounds. A well-known county leader, W.W Rollins, employed sixty tenants to produce tobacco on his extensive land holdings, and county farms went from subsistence to a burgeoning cash economy. (Wellman, 1973) As described in the 1896 issue of North Carolina and Its Resources: "For ten years or more Madison County had been foremost the production of a very superior bright leaf tobacco. The impulse given by its culture has had marked effect upon the condition of the county. Land held at nominal prices has increased in value. Mountain sides and tops that seemed destined forever to wear their vesture and crown of forest have been brought into cultivation. Men that ten years ago scarcely knew the sight of or name of money have become prosperous and relatively rich, and the county is now one most forward in improvement..."

Now, 118 years later, the Appalachian Barn Alliance has the ability to document the few surviving flue-cured barns.

A Very Friendly Reminder...It's time to renew your membership in the Appalachian Barn Alliance. If you haven't already done so, or in case you've misplaced your membership letter and renewal envelope, just go to our website (www.appalachianbarns.org) or call us at 828-380-9066. We'll be happy to have you back!