

# The Last Word

*Monuments to those  
who went before*

By Ted Brown

**W**henever I'm out and about on the back roads, I love to see the old barns that dot the countryside around us. Winter, spring, summer or fall, they all take on a different look during the seasons, as they stand there, a testament to those who worked the land generations ago.

There are numerous styles, shapes, sizes and layouts of barns, and they all have their own distinct personalities so to speak, as they stand facing the elements— just like they have for years, often times more than a century.

I find there tends to be two distinct categories of old barns— those in good repair and those that no one cares about.

Old barns are a reminder, perhaps even a monument to the people who built them, worked them, and eked out a living by raising livestock and storing feed in them. Those barns no longer being utilized seem to be ominously standing there, reminding me of a huge gravestone, erected to the honour of generations who

have gone before.

And sadly, just like many old gravestones in pioneer cemeteries, they are starting to fall down among us.

I suppose the most tragic aspect of the whole thing is we just stand there and watch it happen.

As the owner of two barns in good repair, I realize these structures demand a great deal of maintenance;

making sure the boards are tight, the roof is intact and the stone foundation is sound. But they require no more maintenance than our houses, garages or cottages.

Every year, I spend time and money on my two barns, keeping them ahead of the ravages of time, be it reattaching boards, replacing broken windows or building a new door, or mortaring up some cracks in the stone foundations. They're just like any other old building, they require a bit of tender loving care to keep them standing.

I find it ironic that some consider the old barns a liability and a visual nuisance, and often have them bulldozed flat and drawn away.

Yet given the opportunity, a group of Mennonites will gladly come in, take down the structure, board by board, beam by beam, then re-erect it in another place, ready to be put back into service for another life of several decades.

Lately, there has been a trend as some owners have had their old barns re-boarded, taking off the old original weathered pine boards and replacing them with brand-new rough-cut pine,



making them look like they did 100-odd years ago when they were first built.

When I first heard of it, I expected the cost of having that job done would be completely prohibitive, but apparently salvaging the original pine boards offsets the cost dramatically.

Seems there's quite a market for old weathered barn boards.

A barn, located on the west side of Trafalgar Road just north of Ashgrove, was re-boarded a couple years ago.

I smile when I see that barn.

According to my grandfather, that particular barn was a 'twin' to my large barn at home, built at the same time, using a similar beam configuration and dimensions, by the same team of barn-builders.

When it was freshly re-boarded a couple years ago, I couldn't help but think how my own barn must have looked the same, when it was completed back in 1880.

Although most people only see the outside of an old barn, there is another dimension when you step inside the barn, upstairs where the drive floor and hay mows are located.

Take a sunny day, stand in a barn and look up at the old beams. If a shaft of sunlight happens to come through the window and lands on the wood, one can see a warm glow of the honey-coloured old wooden beams that speaks volumes of the days when the barn was a bustling beehive of activity, be it threshing time, haying time, or the middle of a cold winter, when the farmer was upstairs pushing down

some hay to the warm stable below.

Barns are a statement of history. One can often find notes about the yield from a particular year penciled on a board in the granary, or perhaps a set of initials and a date carved into the soft wood.

They're all bits and pieces of the past— often our past.

Our remaining local barns are remnants of our history and heritage— a resource that is quietly slipping away. Every time a barn falls down, is knocked down, or burns down, that connection with history becomes that much more tenuous.

In Holland, some of the original windmills dotting the North Sea date back to the mid 1700s. They are considered a national symbol of heritage by the Dutch people, and there has been a movement lately to make sure they are protected and maintained, so that they will be around for years to come.

But in spite of the fact that our old barns are a tribute to our pioneer forefathers, in Canada, unfortunately that type of forward thinking doesn't seem to exist when it comes to protecting the old barns.

There may be loads of money to protect other aspects of our history and heritage, but the original pioneer barns apparently aren't that important to those who make such decisions.

It's unfortunate, because, like everything else, by the time we realize their cultural and heritage value, they will be long gone.



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