

The Last Word

The writing on the wall

By Ted Brown

Most people have heard the expression, 'the writing on the wall,' a reference to a Biblical story found in the book of Daniel, where King Belshazzar of Babylon hosted a feast and, during the meal, used sacred vessels originally looted from the Temple of Solomon.

In doing so, he committed a major sacrilege. Immediately after toasting with the vessels, the group witnessed a disembodied hand 'writing on the wall,' and the words, when translated, foretold of the demise of the king and the Babylonian empire—in fact, Belshazzar was murdered later that night.

As a result of the Biblical story, the phrase 'the writing on the wall,' has come to signify the foretelling of doom.

But as I was sweeping in the granary at home recently, I noticed a different kind of writing on the wall.

And it had nothing to do with doom and gloom.

The granary is a unique place in most old barns. The original purpose of the granary was to store grain harvested from the fields in late summer, to be fed to the livestock downstairs in the stable below, during the winter.

Many of the old granaries were a study in workmanship and practicality. Built with fine pine lumber, they were divided into large bins, with one-inch lumber boards in each bin opening. The grain was fed throughout the year, by allowing it to flow downstairs by gravity into a feed cart or bin in the stable.

When built, most granaries were almost rodent-proof, keeping all but the smallest critters out of the grain stored in the bins.

Being so secure, the granary also had other uses.

Bags of grass seed, empty cloth seed bags, and naturally, a bag truck—that dolly with two steel wheels used to move bags of grain—would be found in any well-tended granary.

Many farmers stored parts of machinery in the granary. Parts from the old seed drills, for instance, were often buried deep in the grain away from the air, keeping them dry and rust-free until it was time to use them again.

At home, there is still a grain weigh scale in the granary. Today, many people buy them at flea markets and, after refinishing them, use them as a coffee table or conversation piece. Along with it and the bag truck, there's a wooden box mounted high on the



wall, with a hole in the bottom. One places a ball of twine in the box, and threads the end of the twine through the hole. It's positioned so a person bagging grain has twine handy, along with a sharpened metal blade mounted on the wall. That allows him to cut a piece of twine with one hand, to tie the bag, without letting go of the full bag of grain.

In spite of all those neat things in the granary, the most interesting thing I have found is the 'writing on the wall'.

Obviously, over the years, the granary was deemed to be the perfect place to record information and events—all written on the walls, bins and door jams.

At times, a piece of paper, probably part of a wrapper for some product, was nailed to the wall, and various items, like the yields for each field for the year, were written down, as a reminder of that year's crop.

Sometimes, a pencil would hang by a string close by, ready to record information, or simply make a note, as a reminder of some task that needed to be done.

'Recipes' for mixing grass seed, which was planted with the spring grain, were written out—"10 lbs. of alfalfa, 5 lbs. timothy, some added brome grass, red clover, at 16 lbs./per acre..." all recorded for posterity to inform future generations of the ratios of grass and legume seeds that were planted that particular year.

Like ancient hieroglyphics, there are records of loads of grain harvested, using the old tally counting method—four upright slashes for the first four loads, then a horizontal slash for the fifth load, and so on. The lines are carved right into the granary boards,

making them quite readable.

While some of the writings and scribbles date back to the early days of the barn, others were written within my time.

We had a hired hand named Art, who was notorious for recording info on the walls, in wet concrete, pretty much anywhere there was a clear smooth space on which to write.

On one wall, he wrote down the day our two dogs were killed by a car out on the road in front of the farm—'Buster and Jim, killed Nov 7/64.'

I always thought that someone reading it, who didn't know it was the names of our dogs, might wonder if it was nothing an American Civil War casualty from 1864, or perhaps a murder in the township.

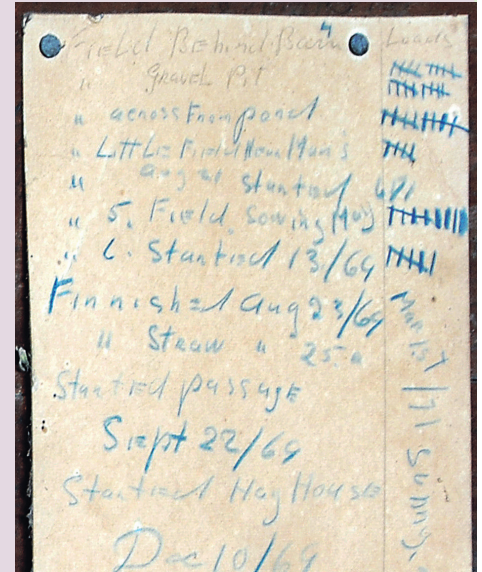
Nope, it was 1964—I was 13 at that time, and recall Art was pretty upset about those dogs—the marks on the road showed that someone had intentionally swerved to hit them, and

both were left dead on the road in front of our place.

Other notations tell which days grain was harvested in the 'Bush Field' or 'Above the Barn' in August of 1965. And like so many before him, Art methodically recorded the loads of grain unloaded in the barn, also using the tally count.

On the wall in one hay mow in the barn, the year '1880' is recorded in a reddish brown paint, the numbers about 24 inches high, verifying the date the barn was erected. The year is also featured in the peak of the barn, cut out of the pine wood, allowing the light to come through, showing the date.

In a stone and concrete wall in the



stable, the date 'Nov 1892' is recorded in the concrete—obviously the year that section of the cattle stable was built.

When I was a little boy, I rode on the tractor with my dad while plowing the fields. In one particular field, Dad pointed out how numerous trees had names and dates from the 1930s carved into the bark, a testimony to when those people took a break from plowing with the team of horses, standing in the shade to let the horses cool down.

In the basement of the farmhouse, there is another cache of 'writings' about various events over the years, including such things as the first snowfall of the year, or when the haying and harvest were started or finished.

But the nerve centre of the farm seemed to be the granary. Over the decades, notes on the productivity of the farm remain recorded there—and not one letter of that writing on the wall foretold any form of doom or gloom.

Instead, it tells a story of a farm that has undergone numerous metamorphosis over countless decades.

And in doing so, pays tribute to those who toiled so hard to maintain it, so many years ago.



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