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A Picture is Worth 972 Words: The Old, Red Barn

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by
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Photograph by the author



"Any respectable farm was dominated by the barn – in our case a round-roofed wooden structure that seemed to me absolutely immense. It sheltered some twenty milk cows standing in their assigned stanchions, several teams of horses stomping in well worn wooden stalls, and separate enclosures deep in manure for calves and a few steers being fed for market or butchering at home. A dozen and more cats at any

one time kept mice in reasonable bounds, their diets supplemented by fresh milk morning and night from the cattle under whose feet they scampered about. The place had a feeling of security about it, especially in winter, with its weathered walls and its aisles deep in straw and hay, the warmth and sounds of animals each in their assigned places, the smell of these animals and of silage from the tall silo that

stood alongside, barn swallows that swooped in and out the open doors, their mud nests plastered against the two-by-six beams that supported the hay loft above.

Such barns are becoming rare now in the Middle West, most having given way to much more sophisticated structures – dairy barns equipped with elec-

tric milkers, vast feeding sheds for beef cattle and pigs, with the teams of horses replaced by massive tractors standing cold and silent in their sheds. There was something special about those earlier barns where man and beast coexisted in close but comfortable and somehow reassuring proximity."

My great-uncle and former U.S. charge d'affaires to Iran, Bruce Laingen, wrote this in his self-published book *"Growing Up, Life on a Minnesota Farm - 1922 to 1940."* One of my prized possessions to this day remains a painting he did of this very barn during the 444 days he was held hostage in Tehran, Iran, from 1979 to 1981. It was this barn and his memories of growing up that gave him comfort during those trying times. To a stranger, this is simply an old, red barn. To my great-uncle, it was a symbol of home, family, and a way of life to which he hoped to return.

The barn was built by our family nearly a century ago after their journey from the rugged interior of Norway to the procumbent prairies of southern Minnesota. It fell into disuse after my father and his sister's 4-H days ended in the late 1960s. Our neighbors, the Petersons, who grazed cattle in the pastures surrounding the barn, used it only once in the past 33 years to store fresh bales of hay up in the loft. Since the mid-1980s, with the exception of my youthful imaginings of the barn, with its many ladders and nooks,

as my own naval war vessel, it has stood quiet. It has been nothing more than a sanctuary for the descendants of those barn swallows of my great-uncle's youth. My grandparents' 80-acres that my father farmed until the early 1980s, which produced fragrant hay that once filled this barn's spacious loft, are now cared for by trusted neighbors. The land is "ours" now by legal description alone. Tractors and corn have replaced cattle and hay bales, leaving most barns in the Corn Belt—like ours—largely obsolete and empty—though reminding us each day of their once important utility.

So what will be the fate of our old, red barns? They will likely continue to fade away as fewer rural residents participate in the noble enterprise of farming. Our farm's 80-acres have been in our family since the land was settled, and undoubtedly will remain ours. The farm-site itself, however, is another story. As has happened throughout the Corn Belt, many in my cohort left the farm for college, learned there was more to the world than what their own rendition of Odin, MN (pop. 120), had to offer, and never returned. My parents and sister still live in the extensively renovated original house. I reside in Illinois and my wife and I work in academe. My other sister lives near Minneapolis, which is as far removed from hog barns and corncocks as one can get in the North Star State. Those 80-acres, still solely owned by my grandmother, will one day be willed to my father and

my aunt as two 40-acre parcels. When they are gone, my sisters and I will share one of those parcels and my two cousins will share the other. In the not too distant future, five people and their families could share the financial fruit of those original 80 acres of prime, Des Moines Lobe Till Plain soil. I venture to guess that none of us will return to live at the old farm, though in my wildest dreams I someday hope that I do. I suspect the barn will continue to slowly fade away; shingles lost to wind storms, wood rotting as chipped paint no longer protects it from the elements, and foundations torn apart from the never-ending battles between frost and thaw during Minnesota's 10-month winters.

My great-uncle Bruce Laingen is now 89 years old, is retired, and is living out his days in Maryland. Each time I see him he asks me about the old, red barn. For the past twenty years he's hoped we'd fix it up, paint it, re-shingle it, and restore it to its once glorious condition. I simply tell him, "it's doing well, it's still red, and it's still standing," which is a nice way of saying, as any good Norwegian-Lutheran would, "it could be worse." Those words bring him comfort. Though today our barn stands empty, and one can almost feel its guilt of no longer being useful, it is still the most resplendent reminder of the place we have and will always call home. He is so proud of that barn. No doubt it will out-live him, and I pray it will also out-live me.