

Barns: vanishing symbols of American agriculture



Farmer's Daughter
By ANNA ZIEGLER

DISTINCTLY remember the day the old red barn met its final demise. Billowing flames interrupted the

bright blue sky of the early summer morning as our neighbors burned the hundred-year-old structure, which sat just across the property line beyond my house.

The barn had been severely damaged by a tornado the previous year, but I was sorry to see it go.

A massive, rectangular, two-story building with big double doors and a hayloft, the barn fit the stereotype of its kind. The rustic red paint was streaked gray along the wood grain, weathered by the sunlight, wind, rain and snow of countless seasons.

Barns are cultural icons, capturing



the essence of American agriculture in a way words cannot fully describe. The centerpiece of family farmsteads for generations, barns speak to the agrarian romanticism of our past.

If barns could talk, they would tell of morning chores and evening milkings, hay crews and threshing teams, hard work and children's play. Worn floorboards mixed with the lingering smells of livestock and hay bear silent testimony to labor-intensive farming before mechanization.

Some barns have a more unusual story to tell. The famous round barns at the University of Illinois were built as an experimental design for dairy cattle. A barn a few miles from my house is believed to have been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The structure and layout of a barn reveals details about what it was used for, when it was constructed and the farmer who built it.

My grandfather remembers wallpaper in his Great Uncle Ed's barn, a remnant from when Ed and his wife lived in the corner of the barn before building a house.

On family trips through northern Illinois or Wisconsin, my dad likes to point out the old dairy barns scattered among the hilltops and estimate their age. He enjoys seeing well-maintained barns still used for livestock.

Ornate but practical

Although some barns have elaborate trim and ornate decorations, most were basic structures designed for practical use. Even the cupola on the rooftop was not just for show, but served as part of the ventilation system.

Relics of a bygone era, barns add color and texture to the landscape with their simple beauty. The steel machine sheds that have replaced them fail to convey the same sense of warmth and nostalgia.

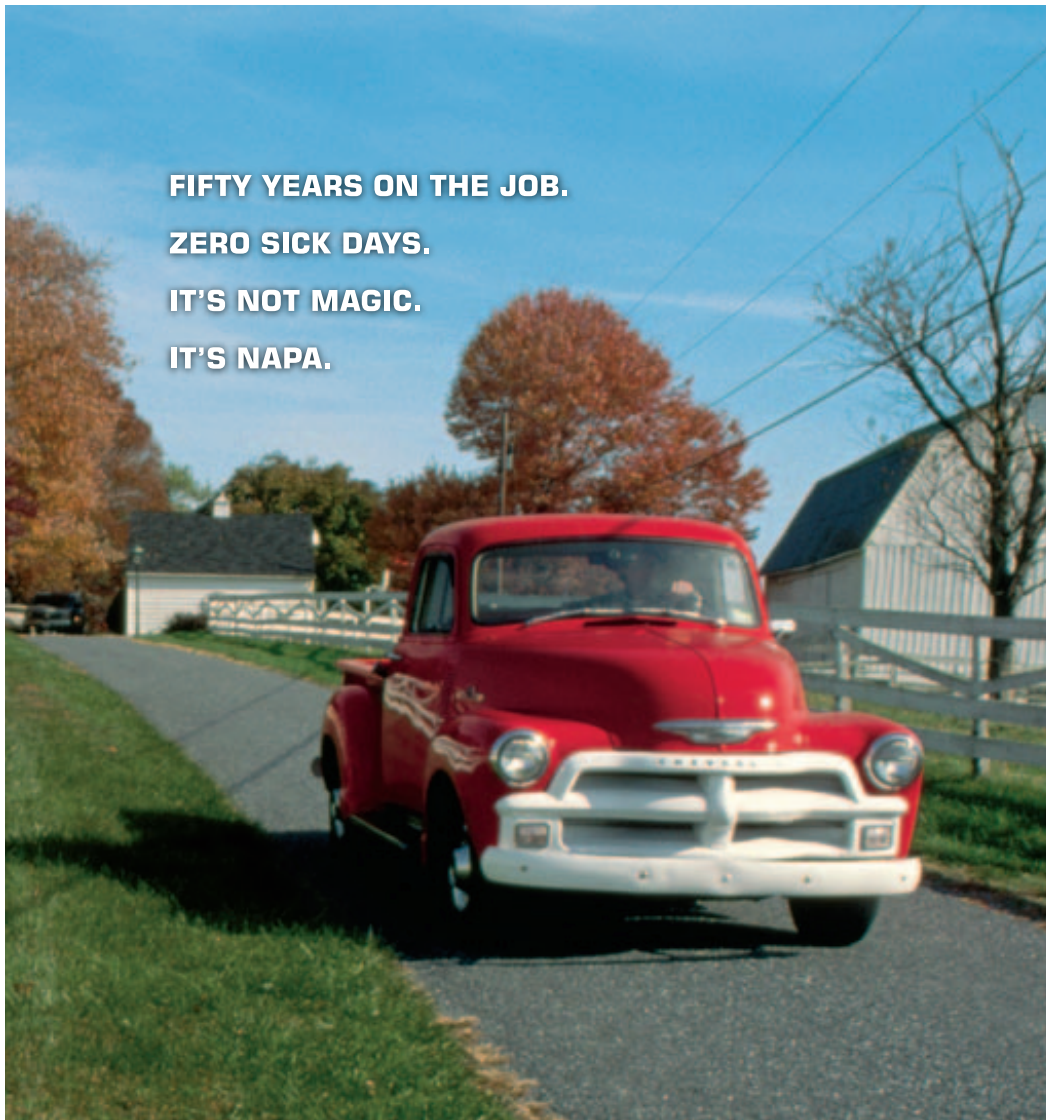
The originality and character of a barn lends itself to greater sentimental value than a prefabricated, mass-produced machine shed.

The need for functional buildings on the farm has not changed, but the nature of the need has shifted. Steel structures are better suited for modern machinery and livestock production.

Neglected and decaying barns are on the verge of disappearing from the landscape. Some barns have found new life as restaurants, antique shops and even homes, but the cost of restoration and maintenance can be hard to justify compared to investing the capital in more productive use.

For barns beyond repair, perhaps the best we can do is to preserve their story.

Ziegler grew up on a family farm near LaHarpe and is a senior in agricultural communications at the University of Illinois.



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