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Crowd Wowed by Zoch and Dutch Barn

Jackie Turnquist

The Carlisle Historical Society's Fall 2008 schedule began with a bang. Schoharie County Historian Harold Zoch offered a slide presentation on the "Characteristics of Dutch Barns" to a crowd of 35 enthralled listeners. The icing on the cake was the location of the presentation – inside the magnificent replica Dutch barn at the Graulich farm, Argus Acres, in Argusville. The group couldn't have asked for a more learned speaker or a more perfect setting.

As people arrived, they had time prior to the presentation to explore the 3 story building completed in 1993 by David Graulich. Although it is a working barn, one would be hard-pressed to find a similarly well-maintained building anywhere. Containing a working elevator, stairs and all the characteristics of a Dutch barn, the building was a wonderful compliment to the evening, and was invaluable in displaying the features Mr. Zoch referred to in his slides.

David Graulich started off the program by describing how his interest in Dutch Barns led him, with the help of Vince Shaffer, to begin the project in 1989. He designed the building himself using graph paper and keeping things simple, following the typical Dutch barn design and building characteristics. The beams were ordered in 1989 and arrived in early 1990. In the Spring he started working on the beams, and for the next 3 years he planed, sanded and tongue-oiled each beam in his shop. Once all the beams were ready, he hired a crane and had 20 guys help him with his barn-raising. It took 2 days for them to get the walls up, but the 10-inch thick roof required 7 men and 2 weeks to complete.

When building a Dutch barn, it is actually put together twice on the ground. Each support section is called a bent, and it is assembled on the ground in 1 dimension first and then each subsequent bent is stacked on top, in the order they will go in the barn. Luckily (or most likely due to careful planning and measuring), the barn went up very well, with little adjustments required.

The uprights carry the anchor beam, which have angled supports to help spread the load down to the ground. Where the uprights meet the ground, David had drilled a vertical hole in the bottom center of each upright to house a pipe coming up from the ground. A peg was then inserted horizontally through the bottom of the upright and pipe to secure them.

Mr. Zoch, past President of the Dutch Barn Society of New York State (now a board member) and Schoharie

County Historian for the past 10 years, has been actively searching for Dutch Barns in New York State and particularly throughout Schoharie County. He is also interested in cemeteries (the county has updated and is re-issuing a book on the cemeteries of Schoharie County) and archeology.



Exterior of the replica Dutch Barn at Argus Acres.



Inside look including the elevator and wide center aisle.



Typical beams and structure joints.

Dutch barns survive for two reasons: first, they are built “off the ground” on columns of field stone to encourage air circulation below the building which prevents rot; second, eighty-percent of the roof load is on the beams and not the sides, so they tend not to collapse. Examples of Dutch barns can be found throughout Schoharie County, although they are fast disappearing as they are being purchased, dismantled and moved out of state. Harold estimates that eighty-percent of the Dutch barns that were in the county 40 years ago are gone. The John Bates Family Farm has a Dutch barn. The Lutheran Parsonage in Schoharie, built in 1743, is a good example of a Dutch barn. It was moved 1 house length and during restoration the typical mud and straw-filled walls could be seen as well as the roman numerals used to identify the two pieces of a structure joint. One of his slides showed quite clearly how small pieces of sapling were used to hold the mud and straw in place.

What are some of the characteristics to look for in identifying a Dutch barn? A steeply pitched roof, doors on one end (not on the sides), a wide center aisle inside and narrow side aisles, big supporting columns within, are all indicative of a Dutch barn. The end with the doors will actually have a tall main door in the middle, a split door next to that, and animal doors on each side of the end. The main door will have a small roof over it to keep water off the sill below – again, preventing the rot that would lead to the demise of a barn. Originally, parts of the upper “floor” of the barn would consist of saplings laid side-by-side from one anchor beam to the next on which to lay hay. If the barn held animals, the beams were required to be white-washed. Lumber flooring rested along center beams and was held in place with wood pegs. Normally, Dutch barns were 40-foot-square, although Mr. Zoch remembers one in Middleburgh that was 60-foot-square.

Often, as dairy farming grew, barns needed more room for hay, so they would be “Td-on”, or added to. The Schaeffer-Ingold Dutch barn at the Old Stone Fort is a good example of this trend.

Mr. Zoch is well known for his ability to date buildings by nail and saw marks. With his large collections of nails dating back to Colonial times, Harold is an expert on the evolution of hand-made nails. Given a nail, he can tell the earliest a building was constructed. Upon examining beams and the marks left by the saw, he can tell if a circular saw was used or a vertical saw. Circular saws didn’t come into use until 1848-1850.

With his self-deprecating remarks and light humor to contrast with his informed presentation, Mr. Zoch enhanced the wonderful Dutch barn setting and left his audience well-educated. Many thanks to Harold Zoch, and David, Art and Ruth Graulich for their support and hospitality. What a memorable evening.

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