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4.17 - 5-1

MISC.

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INSIGHT

by Greg Doering
Kansas Farm Bureau

The legacy of round barns



The ubiquitous image of a farm includes a red barn, which historically took that shade because iron oxide, or rust, was added to the linseed oil to prevent mold and fungus. It also added the red hue that became synonymous with barns. Despite a wide variety of pigments to choose from today, tradition still means there's plenty of red barns across the countryside.

Aside from color, a barn also conjures up specific shapes. A sturdy, square structure with a gable or gambrel roofline. That's what the barn on my grandparents' ranch looked like growing up. It wasn't red because it was built during World War II and a lack of material meant the plentiful limestone rock was used for the walls.

Inside there was an alleyway down the middle lined with stalls on either side with a grainery in one corner. Hay storage was on the second floor with cutouts above the stalls below for feeding. Aside from housing horses or the occasional bottle calf, the barn became outdated shortly after it was completed. A low ceiling on the first floor meant nothing larger than the Ford 8N tractor could fit inside.

For a brief period in the early 20th century, a subset of barns were not traditional in any sense, rather they were round or nearly so. The technical term for these structures is nonorthogonal, which is fancy for not orthogonal. That's fancy for lack of perpendicularity.

Fewer than 1,400 round barns are estimated to have been built around the turn of the last century, mostly in the Midwest. George Washington has a 16-sided structure on his Mount Vernon estate, but it was New Yorker Elliot W. Stewart's octagonal barn built in 1874 that really started the wheels turning on round barns.

Stewart touted the structure's geometric advantages relating to cost of construction since a cylinder's exterior surface allows for a larger interior volume than a rectangle.

According to an article from University of Kansas geography professor James R. Shortridge, Stewart's ideas spread westward and reached Kansas in the early 1880s when two octagonal barns were built in Shawnee County. The next record of a nonorthogonal barn was a 12-sided structure built near Olathe in 1903.

Kansas' first pure circle barn was erected in Harper County the following year.

The majority of the 41 round or roundish barns in Kansas were built in the following decade. Shortridge's research shows no strong correlation between farm practices and where the barns were built in Kansas. Local influence appears to have played a key role in the construction of round barns. If you were in an area where one irregular barn was built, there's likely to be another one nearby.

That's likely how Marshall County became home to three circular barns in less than a decade. The first built a few miles east of Blue Rapids in 1906 and the last was constructed southwest of Marysville in 1914. The middle barn was finished in 1913 by Benton Steele, who was a prolific architect and builder of round barns from Indiana.

Charles and James Drennen commissioned the barn for their Hereford breeding operation, and it's still in use today. Herefords still graze along the bunks lining the perimeter nearly every day, and heifers still calve under the conical roof.

The most recent estimate of 24 round barns still standing in Kansas comes from Shortridge's article in 1999. Some are being preserved by owners on working farms and ranchers, others have found new life as event venues while others are being worn away by Kansas weather.

While red barns are the best known image of rural architecture, the brief building burst of round barns have left a legacy across the state as well.

"Insight" is a weekly column published by Kansas Farm Bureau, the state's largest farm organization whose mission is to strengthen agriculture and the lives of Kansans through advocacy, education and service.

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