

## Death of the Aged Barn

What would she say if she could talk? What stories could she share if she had words? What secrets did she hold within her wooden planks bowed and cracked with age? How did she feel when the old, powerful draft horses were augmented, then eventually replaced, by tractors? When that first John Deere A pop-popped its way into the deep recesses of her sheltering arms, did she know that one day the horses would all be replaced, their sweet hay-scented breath and soft whiskers exchanged, first with the A, then with a plethora of other tractors.

Did she sigh in sympathy as Great-Grandpa's cracked and callous filled hands, regardless of the weather or time of year, squeezed and pulled on milk-filled udders, filling shiny tin buckets with sweet, warm, frothy milk? Did she smile at the antics of barn cats and dogs vying for a taste of the expertly streamed milk directed by those self-same hands? And how did she feel when electric milkers replaced the strain and struggle of time-worn hands? Two times a day, 365 days a year, the placid cows entered the barn for food and milking until they were phased out, replaced by beef cattle.

Did she grieve when the last cow boarded the old, blue stock trailer, the era of cows coming to an end with the clang of metal as the gate slammed shut behind the last hoof, and the truck and trailer rounded the big curve in the gravel driveway?

Standing tall and proud, the old barn served generations of farmers. Though designed for purpose and use, its high arches and beams unintentionally created a beauty that only old barn wood, silvered by time and weather, could portray. A home to fragrant hay, gas, then diesel fed tractors, mooing cows, and a variety of farm equipment, this practical multi-purpose edifice's stalwart walls kept the interior warm and dry. Burrowed in the cracks and crevices between hay bales, barn cats and farm dogs shared the comforting space.

Surely she watched, as, season after season, hay-laden trailers pulled by cranky tractors entered the barn to fill her up in the spring and fall, then, one by one, as the bales were removed to feed the horses and cattle throughout the cold and dreary winter. Even that changed, from loose hay fed into her yawning mouth with pitchforks, to square, compact bales stacked by strong, powerful arms, to the later harvest, giant round bales, only stackable by farm machinery.

The sounds of men's and women's voices would fill the space, directing the alignment of the bales, ensuring the giant stacks would remain upright and safe for little hands and feet to climb. With no room for gender roles when the harvest came in, did she nod her head in agreement as the farm folks worked together? In the oppressive heat of late spring and early fall, muscular men and wiry women garbed in long pants and long sleeves to protect them from the abrasive hay, labored to get the hay safely inside her open doors, sweat pouring down their faces and darkening their clothes.

Often the vagrancies of nature would lend a sense of urgency to the task. Was she soundlessly murmuring hurry, hurry, hurry? Wet hay was worth little and could cause untold damage should it mold and start a fire, and late afternoon thunderstorms were always a possibility. But whether loose, square-baled, or round-baled, she welcomed the harvest into her cavernous depths.

In the way of practical things such as barns, that same space that housed so many necessities of back-breaking, soul-crushing farm life could not possibly contain the exuberance of generations of children, as that same barn was the scene of races and contests, challenges and adventures, combined with healthy doses of imagination.

At times a pirate ship, a stagecoach, or a secret garden, and at others a club house, a circus tent, a rappelling tower or a spelunking cavern, the barn stood stalwart as small, lithe bodies with

stick, straight arms lowered themselves into the deep recesses between fragrant bales of sun-dried hay. Children's giggles, screams of theatrical fear, and quiet conversations filled the hallowed space. The grand old barn never disappointed.

"Race you to the top," one boy called to his companions, then, not waiting for their response, he scrambled, hand over fist, as fast as he could go, never doubting they would follow.

Another voice, "See, we'll tie this rope around your waist and lower you to the bottom. You'll be fine," he wheedled, seeing the doubt in the little girl's eyes. Knowing her thoughts he added, "I promise, we won't leave you – this time."

"I hear kittens," another voice whispered. "I bet they are under the hay bales. They probably need to be rescued. You're the smallest. You need to go."

And that, only that, the need to rescue baby kittens made up her mind. Allowing the boys to tie her up, she rappelled down the bales. Sure enough, a nest of kittens lay with the mother cat, clearly not needing any help. The outraged yowl of the mama cat warned her away, and for once, her teasing brothers hauled her up instead of pulling their usual pranks.

Another time, "I'll be Captain Hook. You can be Smee," he said, pointing to his cousin. The older sister claimed Wendy, and the younger, Peter Pan. "What about me?" came the cry of the youngest?

"You're Tinkerbell, of course."

Smiling, she nodded. Of course.

They'd spent the summer mornings doing chores, then as the sun slid in its downward arc, they were released to play, chasing each other, walking the plank and living in the world of the Lost Boys, an excellent way to while away the day.

The plots and cast of characters varied. Sometimes they pursued justice through the characters of Superman, Robin, Batman, Wonder Woman, Cat Woman, or Lois Lane, leaping from hay bale to hay bale or swinging down ropes tied to strong beams.

Other times they created their own world, their own characters, their own drama. Regardless of the story line, the loyal barn embraced their laughter, their dreams, the innocence of their childhoods on warm summer days.

Generation after generation of children played their games, building strong bodies and stronger imaginations. The adults smiled fondly, remembering their years of adventures in the barn.

And, of course, through every generation, the barn provided a haven for young lovers to meet, plan their lives and embrace. Did she smile gently at the first kiss? Did she mourn when young soldiers said farewells to their sweethearts before they proudly marched off to war? Did she celebrate when they returned home, older and wiser, ready to take on the reins of the farming life? Did her gracious walls provide a calm place to shelter them when they mourned the loss of their innocence, when their lives had been forever altered by the harshness of battle? Did she rejoice in their courtships, marriages, and the births of babies? Did she mourn with them when the older generation passed on?

In her golden years, the gracious old lady began listing to one side. As season by season the tilt became greater, bets were made as to how much longer she would survive, and yet, the outward jokes were shadowed by dread at the thought of the old lady's demise.

Time continued to take its toll, augmented by the vagrancies of weather, until an unusually deep and heavy snow created more weight than she could handle. A lady to the end, her passing came silently, with a creak and a sigh rather than a shriek of despair. The grand old lady regally

bowed her head to the unstoppable power of age, weather and time, and sank gracefully to the ground, never to rise again.