

## BARNs OF MADISON COUNTY

# Hanging burley and holding secrets

By Jim Murphy

The barn has worked for more than a century, home to a couple of draft mules and milk cows, seasonal hangout for two or three acres of drying tobacco, storage space for heavy farm equipment and tools.

It sits overlooking Shelton Laurel Creek at the edge of a deep green field of rye grass. Random sprigs of bright yellow daffodils line the creek bank, giving the scene a finishing touch of springtime color. Taken together, the flowers, the creek, the field, the barn present an image worthy of a great American country postcard.

But there is more here — much more — than a pretty scene. Taylor Barnhill, a history-minded architect working with the Appalachian Barn Alliance, points to curiosities — even a mystery — in the old structure.

First of all, Taylor points out the taller end of the barn is actually an addition built much later than the original structure. “That end is a classic post World War Two addition,” he says. “Soldiers came home; they needed to make a living. Demand for tobacco was growing and they needed more space to dry it.”

But that later addition points up one of the curiosities of the original barn. The tier poles in the newer section have the standard vertical spacing. They’re about four feet apart. The tiers in the original barn are only about three feet apart — not enough space to hang burley.

Those shorter tiers lead to a couple of possible solutions. Taylor speculates that the barn might have hung the shorter leafed bull-face tobacco, a chewing variety that had a short and indeterminate lifespan back around the turn of the 20th Century.

But Jerry Wallin suggests that way back then the burley leaf was simply smaller. “It just didn’t grow as big as it does now. Back then we didn’t have the kind of fertilizers we have now, the growing methods weren’t as advanced. Back then all we had was little old scrubby tobacco. The leaves were just shorter.”



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The barn was part of Wallin’s youth. His father, Floyd, bought it “some time in the 30’s,” Jerry estimates. “It was before I was born, and I don’t even know who he bought it from.” The barn remained in the Wallin family more than 70 years, long enough for it to take on the name. “The Floyd Wallin barn.” That leaves the unanswered question: Who was the original owner?

Perhaps a small clue to the original owner is carved into the hewn log wall on one of the animal stalls. The initials EG are chiseled into the wood, perhaps the first owner or perhaps a contractor who was hired to build the barn.

Who built it? Who owned it? Those are questions still waiting for answers. But the construction details leave no mystery as to when it was built. Square-head cut nails date the structure to the 1800s or very early 1900s. The hand hewn

logs of the livestock stalls are mortise and tenon with a half-dovetail notch. And they are big, running from 13 to 17 inches high. And several of the structural beams run the entire length of the barn, a single beam covering the 36-foot span. As the saying goes, They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.

About 10 years ago Jerry Wallin sold the property to Larry Burda of Mars Hill. “I like the spot,” Burda says. “It has a 900-foot trout stream. I’ve been planning to build a cabin on the property but I haven’t had time to get over there. In the meantime Rayboy Tweed uses the barn to hang tobacco and we use the field for hay.”

After more than a century the barn still holds its secrets, and Barnhill says, “If we did enough research we could probably figure it out, but leaving the questions unanswered is part of the charm.”

For more information about the Appalachian Barn Alliance, go to: [www.appalachianbarns.org](http://www.appalachianbarns.org)