# The Heart of the farm

## A History of Barns and Fences in the Eastern Townships of Quebec

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*Extracts, pages 12, 14, 15, 18*

### FOREWORD

My fascination with barns –old barns, in particular– began during my childhood, when my parents bought Roswell Farm overlooking Lake Memphremagog in the Eastern Townships. I delighted in playing hide-and-seek amidst the prickly hay bales in our round barn. As I got older, I realized that this cedar-shingled building was special and much admired by visitors.

My husband has also had a longstanding appreciation for barns. Before Niels opened a custom cabinetmaking shop near our home in Tomifobia, he worked as a general contractor and built or restored several barns.

Over the course of our lives together, Niels and I have witnessed a profound transformation in the Townships as agricultural practices have changed, small family farms have ceased operations and traditional rural life has vanished. In the late 1990s, we became increasingly aware of the abandonment of historic barns. We eventually began to make day and overnight trips to photograph examples of this vernacular architecture, knowing that in some cases it might be our last chance –the barns were collapsing or slated for demolition.

Along the way, we became interested in the wooden and stone fences that were once central to farming in the Townships and traditionally defined the rural landscape here. In planning this book, therefore, we decided to highlight farm fences along with barns. We felt it important to incorporate a chapter on corn-houses and silos, too.

In order to trace the evolution of barn building and fence making in the Townships, we had to understand the settlement patterns and the agricultural, economic, industrial, political and social history of the area –a tail order.

We also had to understand the origins of barns and fences beyond the borders of the Townships, as well as the changes that have occurred in agricultural technology over the past couple of centuries. All of these things have influenced barn and fence design.

We consulted a broad range of published literature, along with handwritten diaries, deeds and letters in local archives or in private hands. In addition, we visited sites like Upper Canada Village where antique farming practices live on. Our most valuable sources of information, however, were the farmers who accompanied us around barns, showed us fences and shared reminiscences of their farms and forebears. Time and again they reminded us that Townships farmers, like farmers everywhere, have always been pragmatic, using whatever construction materials and methods were expedient to satisfy their needs. Although I have organized the text and visuals around the classifications that architectural historians have devised, most of the barns presented deviate from the prototypes. Fences also show noticeable variation within a given genre.

It is not only how, when and by whom barns have been built that has absorbed us, but also what has gone on within their walls. Barns

were originally granaries: the word barn derives from the Old English bere, or barley, and erm, or house. In the Townships, as throughout North America, they came to be used for much more than crop storage. They have been maternity wards, dining rooms, surgeries and, before the introduction of commercial abbatoirs, slaughter-houses for animals. They have been workplaces, observation posts and dance halls for farmers; playgrounds and learning grounds for children; getaways for courting couples; hideouts for combatants, thieves and runaways; sanctuaries for itinerant preachers; and death chambers for the luckless or the world-weary.

Round Barn of Mansonville

Barns were as essential to villagers and townspeople as they were to farmers: until the advent of the automobile, virtually every Townships family needed at least one driving horse and a place to stable it.

In addition to their crucial everyday role, barns have figured in some of the most dramatic episodes in Townships history. The Fenian Raids of 1866 and 1870 included skirmishes around barns in Pigeon Hill and Eccles Hill. The conflagration of barns on a farm in the Scottish Settlement west of Lake Megantic and the flight of the suspected arsonist -Donald Morrison, the Megantic Outlaw, as he became known- triggered what turned into the largest manhunt ever undertaken in Quebec history to that date.

Townships barns have also made history more quietly. In the early 1880s, a prosperous visionary named Alexander Walbridge erected a unique twelve-sided, twelve-gabled barn in Mystic with a turntable to convey horse-drawn hay wagons around the haymows. In 1912, a wealthy eccentric named Eugene Baldwin put up a gambrel-roofed dairy barn in Coaticook that was 280 feet long -the longest of its kind in the world.

Townships fences may never have found their way into any record books, but they have been notable for their multiplicity of styles.

During the course of our research for *The Heart of the Farm*, Niels and I made some exciting finds. We discovered that Dutch barns, which were once prominent in New York State and existed in a localized concentration in southeastern Ontario, had also been built in the Townships, although their presence here had never been documented. Best of all, we learned that two were still standing and in agricultural use in St. Armand. We were able to examine and photograph both of them.

We were also pleased to fill many gaps in information regarding the historic round barns in the region that are so sought-after by artists, heritage buffs and tourists.

Thanks to Errol Cushing, we obtained photos of a round barn under construction near Dixville in Barford Township in 1905. Like most of our archival and contemporary photos and illustrations, they have never been reproduced in any book before.

With the aid of period newspaper articles and of tips from people that we met, we were able to pinpoint the names of more barn builders or crew members than we had ever imagined possible. We even tracked down and interviewed three nonagenarians -Lyall Rhicard, Thurston Spicer and Doug Johnston-

who had worked on barns as far back as the 1920s. Regrettably, none lived to see *The Heart of the Farm* in print.

As we travelled Townships roads, we were surprised by the diversity of silo styles. Although we came across many late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century silos that were derelict, we found a few that were handsomely preserved, including a polygonal stacked-wood silo and two tiled silos.

In our conversations with farmers and other landowners, we were informed that most of the preeminent barns in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century were built by Townshippers of American or British descent. Our investigations revealed that these longer-established Townshippers, who were a minority in the region by 1881, were more apt to read agricultural publications, embrace agricultural innovations and maintain better breeds of livestock and larger herds or flocks than their more recently arrived, less affluent French-speaking neighbours.

Today all that has changed: it is francophones who dominate the Townships agricultural scene, and in many cases, it is francophones who are conserving heritage barns built by long-departed anglophone families.

Because our interviewees and the archival reference material that we accessed all gave barn dimensions in feet and inches, as well as distance in miles, and land measure in acres, I decided to use the imperial system of measurement throughout the text. I should point out to readers who are familiar only with the metric system that an inch is equivalent to 2.540 centimetres; a foot, to 0.305 metres; a mile, to 1.609 kilometres; and an acre, to 0.405 hectares.

I also decided to retain traditional placenames and respect the sometimes-quirky spelling and punctuation of the historic diaries that I selected to quote. Thus when a diarist consistently wrote "sode" for "sewed," or "nise" for "nice", I made no alterations in his diary entries. I made punctuation changes, indicated in square brackets, only when I felt that it was absolutely necessary for comprehension of the sentence.

Although Niels and I have done a great deal of work to produce *The Heart of the Farm*, we know that there is much more to be done. We hope that other researchers will pick up where we have left off and continue to dig up documents, speak to farmers, crawl around haylofts, look at fences, take photos and then report back on their findings. We believe that the rural built heritage of the Townships deserves to be studied attentively and commemorated proudly.

Louise Abbott, Tomifobia, Qc, July 2008