

Fall

October/November 2009 • FREE

# at home

LIVING IN THE SAN JUAN ISLANDS



# Historic barns of San Juan County

By Mike Macdonald

Photos by Claudia La Cava



*The old wooden barns of San Juan County lie at anchor along main roads near the towns, great land ships from the last two centuries.*

Once indispensable structures to dairy farming and horse-drawn agriculture, they have endured gales, snow, and the drying winds and sun of summer.

Always threatened by fire, rot, and gravity, the largest structures in the islands have come to help define life here, even as the purpose for which they were built slowly receded and vanished.

All over the country, when old wooden barns succumb to the elements or a developer's bulldozer, they can never be replaced.

In San Juan County, Sandy Strehlou and Boyd Pratt decided to take an inventory of our remaining historic barns.

Strehlou is the Town of Friday Harbor's Historic Preservation Coordinator. Pratt is an architectural historian.

Together, they are the catalyst for 100 Friends of Old Island Barns and an ongoing inventory of structures eligible for inclusion in the Washington State Historic Barn Register.

"Our historic barns are iconic," Strehlou said. "They represent a way of life that is rapidly disappearing.

I believe the appreciation for old barns is deeply seated in the American psyche. They are tied to the essential reasons why we remember a place."

San Juan's inventory is administered through the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation.

"Although our barns were built to store hay and shelter animals, they have become a metaphor for the past, an enduring part of our changing landscape from primo agricultural land and a farmers' community to an island of second homes and retirees," Pratt said.

"There are values expressed in old wooden structures like barns," Pratt said. "They are gorgeous things that also ask, what do we do with them now? That is the genesis of the San Juan County Historical Barn Inventory. What do we still have and what shape is it in?"



*Top photo: Synergy Farm combines modern and traditional technologies in a hundred-year-old barn. Bottom photo from left: Dodie Gann, Greg Black, Boyd Pratt, and Sandy Strehlou.*

## *Form follows function*

Pratt may be a historian, but he and his wife Lovell were also farmers for many years, growing sustainable seasonal crops for local markets, so he approaches a building with a farmer's practical eye.

We were at Susan and Peter Corning's Synergy Farm on Beaverton Valley Road, examining their well-used and well-preserved barn, dating back to the Daniel B. Shull family in 1902.

Pratt said that the shape of the barn, where it was located on the property, and how it was situated all depended on the job it was asked to do.

"A barn is a building component in a system," Pratt said. "This barn housed six working horses that farmed about 16 acres to grow the feed that supported eight or nine dairy cows, the horses, and pigs."

So the entire system was designed to condense tons of water, hay, and grain into hundreds of pounds of cream and butter. In a sense, the barn was a form of still where natural processes and great effort were distilled into a cash crop that could be economically transported to market.

"In 1910, there were about 2,000 dairy cattle in San Juan County," Pratt said. "The Friday Harbor creamery produced about 120 tons of butter from those cows."

In a report accompanying the barn survey, Pratt has done research that identified the reason the old barns were so large. A ton of island grass hay occupies over 600 cubic feet.

The Cornings' barn, restored and responsibly modified, measures 64 by 75 feet, augmented by an 18 by 38 add-on section, is 32 feet tall to the roof ridge.

Pratt pointed out a hay rail running along the ridge. "Before the invention of hay balers, hay was stacked loose in the haymow (here mow rhymes with cow, not toe). A ton of hay compressed into square bales takes one quarter the space of loose hay."

So the reason old barns are so tall is to encompass giant mounds of loose hay. After the hay was dried in the fields, it was pitch forked onto hay wagons and driven to one side of the barn, where the hay rail stuck out a few feet.

A trolley, controlled and moved by a system of lines on blocks and tackles, moved piles of hay up to the top of the mow, where a trip line dumped it.

Once reliable hay balers reached the islands after about 1940, no more large three-story barns were constructed.

Pratt pointed out that changing laws and economic conditions gradually drove almost all island farmers out of the cream business. There were 3,000 dairy cattle in 1954. In 1959, there were less than 400. Beef cattle, less labor intensive, replaced their milk-producing sisters.

## Farmers adapt, barns endure

Peter estimated that his old barn had not been used for agricultural purposes for perhaps 60 years before he and wife Susan started Synergy Farm.

He and Pratt guessed that the metal roof had been put on the barn sometime in the 1950's.

"That's what saved this barn, and many like it. Shake or shingle roofs need to be maintained, with damaged shingles replaced every year. Fresh water leaking through a roof will kill old barns," Pratt said.

As we toured the 107-year-old structure, Corning counted 28 separate functions performed in the rehabilitated barn. Synergy Farm practices a modern, intensive form of agriculture, growing high-quality organic produce year around for restaurants, and for sale at their own farm store and the farmers' market.

The soaring roof and tall interior spaces are not used today, but lend an air of dignity, even gravitas, to the old barn. Farmers are not by nature sentimental, but there are aspects of going to work in a wooden cathedral when you walk into the Synergy Farm barn.

Corning believes his barn is a metaphor for the changes that have come and will continue to come for San Juan agriculture.

"These barns will survive and be maintained when new forms of farming find new uses for old buildings," Corning said.

## ed Mill Farm

Greg Black is the ranch manager of Dodie Gann's beef cattle operation on San Juan Valley's Red Mill Farm, site of two historic barns.

"Gordon Buchanan built the smaller barn in the 1930's from driftwood and about \$400 in hardware,"



ed Mill Farm's driftwood barn.

Black said. "Buchanan's folks homesteaded the place in the 1890's and had the bigger barn built then."

The two Red Mill barns now house hay stored in round bales, the most economical way to handle cattle feed. Some farmers are forced to keep the bales outside, but hay stored inside maintains its quality and nutrition longer. Round bales weigh 1,100 pounds, according to Black, and are only stacked three high.

Black is a practical Western farmer and rancher of near-iconic stature. If you were researching what works and doesn't work in any aspect of local agriculture, Black would be your first call, if he weren't too busy to talk to you.



"With the change in the way we store hay, some old barns had to be adapted. Barns fall down if you remove too many structural members," Black said.

Wind, ice, and snow – all the surprises nature throws at farmers has refined both the design of barns and the way farmers maintain them. Being right results in a structure that may endure for two centuries. Being wrong ends up in an old pile of wood on the ground. Old barns are monuments to the farmers' knowledge and tenacity, as well as a building's endurance.

## The old Dutch barn

The final barn we looked at with Strehlou and Pratt was the Hudson family barn on Douglas Road.

"This barn was built by Tommy Davis in 1927 with lumber salvaged from an old flour mill that once stood on Argyle Street in Friday Harbor," Pratt said.

Built in the Dutch style, with a gambrel roof that greatly increased the size of the haymow, the Hudson barn looks like what most people think of as a traditional dairy barn. It was used to support a dairy herd from 1927 until the late 1950's. The Friday Harbor creamery closed in 1962.

Although no longer used for agricultural purposes, the Hudson barn had been re-roofed with new cedar shakes and had rain damage repaired in 1979.

The gambrel roof incorporates many light trusses set close together, and could be built out of less expensive lumber than the post and beam or timber-framed barns of an earlier era.

Pratt pointed out the gaps in the siding on the end facing south into the prevailing wind to aerate the haymow.

Fire was an ever-present danger to wooden barns. Wet hay could spontaneously combust. So both farmers' harvesting methods and the building's design had to insure dry hay for safety.

"There was nothing haphazard about the siting of a barn," Pratt said. "They were often built incorporating a rocky outcrop, both for part of the foundation and also because that land wasn't useful for growing crops. You needed airflow to dry hay, but the doors had to be sheltered for bringing the hay in."

The effect in the Hudson barn was of a filtered light with a quality that exceeded just a space for the drying of hay. There is a nobility of work and purpose that seems to have seeped into the timbers of old barns.

You cannot view them closely without feeling tremendous admiration for the skill of their designers and builders. There is something honest and straightforward about their stance on the land, the way they define their fields without pretense. Barns are about plain speaking and practicality.

That quality that the 100 Friends of Old Island Barns seeks to preserve is articulated in a quote Pratt likes to use in his presentations.

“The beauty we see in the vernacular landscape is the image of our common humanity: hard work, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love,” John Brinckerhoff Jackson wrote.

Jackson is credited with creating the field of landscape studies. He elevated vernacular architecture and landscapes to a level of study once reserved for architect-designed buildings.

Vernacular architecture is the traditional architecture of a region; developed in response to the climate, land conditions, building materials, economic circumstances and culture.



Hudson Barn present day. Photo by Boyd Pratt



Photo property of San Juan Historical Society

*The Hudson Barn built in \_\_\_\_\_ by Tommy Davis.*

## Clever old barns

The old barns of San Juan County performed a clever trick as the dairy herds were sold off, beef cattle enjoyed their seasons in the sun, and hay storage changed from loose mows to square bales to big round bales, the current favorite of farmers.

As fewer people actually used barns for their designed purpose, more people, both residents and visitors, came to admire and love them.

The hardworking old buildings, through steadfast endurance, became a symbol for a way of living that was sliding away. Even people who wouldn't rise before dawn at gunpoint to milk and feed a herd of dairy cattle found themselves drawn to the patient wooden sentinels standing over the agricultural fields waiting for a new purpose.

“It's important to remember that the open fields and vistas in San Juan are due to agricultural practices,” Pratt said. “Without dairy farming and

fields cleared for hay and grain, the islands would look and feel more closed in.”

The San Juan Islands attract people who know it is foolish to discard something just because it is old. Even as we change, we know we must remember lessons hard earned by our predecessors.

Mother Ann Lee, who led the first “Quaking” Shakers to America in 1774, wrote of the connection between farming, design, and spirituality. “Beauty rests in utility. That is best which works best. God is in the details,” she wrote.

The Quakers as a religious sect have nearly disappeared, but you can still see Mother Lee's philosophy in the preservation of old barns and the launching of new agricultural endeavors.

Old barns made by hand and eye are books with much left to teach us through efforts like the historic barn inventory. **ah**



## The San Juan County Historic Barn Inventory, a

project of the 100 Friends of Old Island Barns, administered through the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation, began with a \$6,333 grant from the San Juan County Historic Preservation Fund – funded by an assessment on all legal forms filed with the County and allocated through a competitive grant application process. A \$5,000 gift from an anonymous barn lover has enabled the process to continue.

Upon learning about the project and the funding obstacles, another county resident and barn lover recently pledged a \$5,000 challenge, or matching grant, which, if successful, would get the 100 Friends closer to achieving their goal. The group has until December 31st to raise the matching \$5,000. Checks can be made out to the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation and mailed to the 100 Friends of Old Island Barns, P.O. Box 2053, Friday Harbor WA 98250.

For more information on the San Juan County Historic Barn Inventory, the 100 Friends of Old Island Barns, or the challenge grant, call Boyd Pratt at 378-7172 or email [mulnocove@rockisland.com](mailto:mulnocove@rockisland.com).