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Interview with Chuck Whitley

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Chuck Whitley

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B. Tell me a little bit about what you do with the Barn Consultant.

C. As you drive through the country you notice there are a lot of old barns that are in trouble - they're going down. And part of the pattern is the great development that's going on - people come out and they buy five acres, ten acres, fifteen acres and there's a house and a barn on them. They know what to do with the house but they don't know where to start or what to do with the barn. So I work with a lot of those people in helping them decide what they can do or shouldn't do with that barn. Basically, I work with people of all kinds - barn owners, farmers, so forth. But there's a lot of activity in the areas around cities like Columbus or Cleveland, northeast Ohio, Cincinnati, Dayton, so forth. When you go out on a barn inspection I walk through the barn with the owner. I point out the various points that I recognize, either good or bad. When I leave, he immediately forgets about all that because it's swirling around in his mind. So when I get back here, I write out a written report of what I saw in that barn. And then if he gets working on it a year or year and a half down the road, he's got something to refer back to to assure that he starts in the right place, does the right thing, somebody doesn't sell him a bill of goods. It entails a lot of research on unusual barns. We've got a lot of historical barns that are icons of history, as far as agriculture is concerned, because the size, quality, and style of the barns is a pretty good indicator of the quality of the land around it, because these barns were built of timber from the farm on which the barns were built. Barns are really a key to knowing an area.

As you [follow the Kokosing] you're going to be, if you take a canoe down through there, you're going to see a lot of rich bottomland. Those areas are the ones that ??? early barns and the quality of barns, barns and farms both. If you were to follow the river like this, you'd see some pretty significant developments if you get into eastern Knox County where it's more hilly, lighter soil then the quality of the barns drops off. So, you're looking at a barometer of agricultural quality when you're looking at the barns.

B. When people build barns today, that probably doesn't play into consideration since most new barns are metal or aluminum.

C. Well, it's a little different. Let's back up just a minute. At one time the farms in Knox County might have averaged 80 or 100 acres a piece. And today we have a lot of farm operators that are working 1000 acres. So, if you had ten 100 acre farms, everyone of those had barns on them, so you had ten barns. And now those are all tied in to one 1000 acre tract, and really you only need one barn or set of buildings, as such. So, this means there's a multiplicity of barns out here that are really no longer efficient for today's operation because of the changing style of handling large baled hay and cash crops rather than live stock, a lot of factors say that these ten barns come into one set of buildings and you have all these extras that have to go somewhere. Sometimes they can be saved. Sometimes they are very significant structures from the standpoint of design. For instance, one down in Miami County. A man came in said, my son's got a barn, I think he'll want you to take a look at it. I went down there to the address they gave me and I was in suburbia north of Dayton. And I thought, what in the world is going on. So I stopped at the number they told me to. ... I drove back in there and here was a Pennsylvania four bay barn in fairly good condition that the vertical posts were all what we call gunstock posts which are bigger at the top than they are at the bottom. They're all hand-hewn out. A lot of features like that make it a very significant building - they didn't realize what they had. They bought it because the son wanted a place to work on cars. And they just figured it was an old building. A lot of these things go on. We've got a barn down in Perry County that by virtue of the chisel stone piece that was in the top of the stone wall was built in 1819, almost two hundred years ago. Very unusual structure, a lot of history behind it. So we run into a lot of very significant barns. We've got one right here on Sycamore Road but it had 30 outside doors and an equal number of windows and ??? for ventilation and had some very peculiar features inside. It had a root cellar, they had extensions for the cattle and the bottom of the manger - the bottom of the manger was removable so they could put dry feed in and feed the cattle then take the bottom of it out and run water down through there and water the cattle while they stood in the stalls. Unusual things like this that usually are individual features that somebody dreamed up and put into a barn. ...

This one was up in Holmes County. It's an octagon barn and stood there for many years. It was built way back in the early 1900's when people were pushing round or octagon barns because you can enclose more space with a given amount of material in a circle or octagon than you can a rectangular form. It was built with a bloom? frame meaning there were no vertical posts in the middle of it. In the blizzard of 77 and 78 it caved in. They rebuilt it. Then later, I think in the late 80's it burnt down. Then it was rebuilt by Josie Miller, one of the great old barn builders with a rectangular barn rather than an octagon barn, but that was a landmark for many, many years.

B. Is any particular type of barn more popular in this area or along the river?

C. Well, typically, barns are rectangular in shape. There was this time and era in the 1900's when these barns were built with false hopes really. ... These are displays I take out for meetings. This would be a typical rectangular barn with six different bays, and this one is a three story barns. ... This barn was down in southern Knox County and round barns typically have a pattern of twistedness - they have vertical siding typically, and in order to stop that, they put this siding on it at a slant trying to hold. Eventually it went down. Rectangular barns are the most popular, the others are novel and interesting to see.

B. Are there many barns like the Cassell barn, bank barns like that?

C. Yeah, in Ohio, there are quite a few bank barns, because the ground is rolling, and they used the rolling knolls to get up...when you get into western Ohio, there aren't as many, because it's level ground and you have the problem of getting filled up. It's possible, but I've never been in their barn, that their barn might have been built in the very early 1800's. I ought to go up there someday and do some scouting. I have ways of aging barns by saw curves and nails and methods of building and sawing and so forth. They can find any trace record wise of when it was built but I know of another barn that was cut with an up and down saw which means before 1850. Their's might be in that category or even earlier. And again they're on that bottom land along the river there which helped encourage the building of that barn.

B. Why do you do what you do? Are you trying to preserve something?

C. There's quite a movement right now to save these barns because, I like to use the term, there are icons of history. Originally, Ohio and America was an agricultural country, agricultural state. And this means that farms were very important, still very important and the barns were kind of the symbol of the quality of that operation. But there's a lot of interest right now.

B. It seems like a lot of people are interested in preserving that, and like you said, old barns are really a symbol of history and quality of agriculture. Do you think that with more new metal barns that are kind of generic and look the same that we lose some of those symbols.

C. The original barns were built with native material from the farm on which the barn was built. And this means that it was an indicator of the soil, the quality of the forest and so forth around there. Modern barns are built with steel or pressured treated timber that may have come from Alabama or wherever, which doesn't really tell you the story of agriculture the way the old barns did. There's another phase of this thing. Barn styles were effected by the ethnic background of the people who built them. Some were what we now call Pennsylvania four-bay barns like this one up here with the overhand over the barnyard; others were Dutch barns and English barns and certain other styles were affected by people who came from Scandanavia. Hubert Wilhelm at Ohio University did a lot of work on this ethnic thing. Bob Ingsman? in PA did a lot of work identifying the Pennsylvania barn and traced it from Switzerland to Germany and into PA then into Ohio. So there are a lot of things that are indicated by barns, but getting back to your question, the modern barns don't reflect as accurately the nature of the community that owners built in than the old barns do.

B. Do you think that in some way, that's affecting the identity of the community around here. Do you think a community came to identify with...

C. No, it's a changing world in agriculture just the same as the manufacturing world is changing, the retail world is changing, the electronic world is changing - it's hard to keep up with. So it's different. You lose some of the flavor of the early settlers when you use commercial buildings and things like that. You don't get the identity you would have had a woodsman built the barn.

B. Are there any public programs in place to preserve old barns?

C. There are. There's a program called Barn Again which encourages reworking of barns, but the way it's administered, to be crude, they eat drink and burp and don't know what to do with it. And that's why I started my service so I could go back out there and say, well listen, you've got a great old barn and you ought to take every step possible, or I can look at it and say this barn is so far gone there's no way you can really save it. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has a program where they can participate some and then there are some tax incentive programs that encourage people. When you get all done, say if you want to put a barn on the national register, there's certain things they let you do, certain things they won't let you do, and then you're in a harness. Unless you're just dedicated to that national register thing, sometimes it's more economical to just do your own thing than it is to get involved in a program. But there are alot of things that are drawing attention to barns, for instance the state is using barns for this Bicentennial sign on the barns. And there's one b/w here and

Centerburg and this calls attention to barns. I'm in hopes that out of this meeting we have in Delaware, that we may get some strength going to do more for old barns than anybody's done so far because we're hands on people, and the speakers we got are people who are out there everyday working on barns...and we're trying to limit some of the people out there who don't do it right.

...We don't object if these barns are dismantled and then used judiciously in other structures. We call that contributory material. For instance, there's a firm outside of town here that takes down old barns, and a lot of times, they'll just bundle up everything from a barn - the timbers, the barn siding, joyce material, all the posts, ship it to Virginia and the people in Virginia put it together to send to France and Portugal....

B. Has the use of barns changed because of how they're built now?

C. Well, they're built the way there are because material has changed. Instead of putting up long rows of loosed hay, they went first to small square bales then to larger round bales. The typical barn that was built in the 1800's, early 1900's was built for a combination use for feed storage and livestock handling and today very few people have livestock unless they're dairy. People like Grasbaugh out here and there are some large dairy's in northeastern Knox County up beyond Danville, that still have some large barns that are used in a typical way. Tye typical rotation for most Ohio farmers today is corn, soybeans, and either Florida or Arizona and they don't have any livestock to bother with. And then they're need for buildings changed dramatically. There's another angle in this reuse deal. The big objection to the older barns by the modern crop farmers is that, for instance, the basement level wasn't built high enough to get the equipment in there. We have builders who can arrange new trusses in the top of the barn to give it strength, cut out the beams in the way, and you can driver in there are go anywhere you want, clearspan.

We have people that are converting older barns to grain storage by reinforcing the underpinning, putting bins up above. It has an advantage in ...

But as you follow the Kokosing there are alot of other historical features that you ought to be thinking about besides barns which is, of course, my interest. Let's trace down through here a little bit.

...

There's a lot of interesting history in the Knox County history book about Waterford and Batemontown. They ought to be researched for the purpose of your total project. And then I come down here to this Kokosing Resovoir which was built to protect against floodwater coming down into Fredericktown and into Mt. Vernon. Then as you come down along through here, you find interesting names. Here's a road that says Craft Mill. There was a water-powered mill there at one time - where the road got its name. You come down to Fredericktown and just north here in the same valley in this Kokosing Valley just north of town, there is a huge spring. I'm surprised that the drainoff from that doesn't show on here. But at one time when Busch Brewing Company that built the big plant north of Columbus - they looked at this location for a plant because of the water from that big spring up there. One of the other things that very few people know about is the Teays River system that started way down in the Carolians and West Virginia and came up north and followed basically the Scioto River up through Columbus - and all these gravel deposits in here are part of that river system. And all this water they're fighting about over here with Del-Co, they're taking water of that aquifier that covers the whole area in here. Runs clear into Indiana and Illinois. It was a prehisitoric river that was covered up by the Glaciers. But the gravel deposit that was there is full of water. There's enough water in that aquifier for everybody if somebody doesn't get crazy and contaminate it. That would be a tragic thing.

So we come along down from Fredericktown. This is all bottomland along here, you see big farms, big barns, and so forth. And then you come down here just north of Mt. Vernon. Up here, just north of where Russ Brothers salvage yard is, their land came to the Kokosing River, there was a plank dam in there, instead of being a masonry dam it was a plank dam. (describes it...)

Then there was a water way that came down the side of that. If you drive out this Banning Road, you can almost see some of the remnants up there. Then that picked up water way up here and came down through town and this mill race is still so visible clear down through town. You can walk the whole distance and see it. It picked up water...it's a ditch...to run the Northeastern Mill here, which was big flour mill run by water power. Then you could pick up that right here along Chestnut Street, there's one building left of that old mill. And then they had to exhaust that water down through this tail race, they called it, and it comes out into the river way down here beside the railroad. You can trace that whole thing clear down through there. When that tail race comes under Chestnut Street it goes under the corner of the old depot that's on West High Street which poses some structural problems for anybody who might buy that and want to rework it. But historically it's been known to run right under that.

And then come along down here. This is the area where Ellis Brothers and United Concrete are - the old maps of the city show a sizeable island in the river there. It's no longer there.

B. Do you know what's happened to it?

C. I assume it's just washed out. I've never traced it out, but some of the old city maps, they show it. And then we come down here through Mt. Vernon and down here where the bike path parking lot is, there's a bluff up above, that was the site of the first murder in Knox County, where a runaway slave had been traced from Virginia way up here and they got into a fight and two or three men got killed and so on. There are pictures of steam shovels quarrying stone along the river, along, on the opposite side of the river from Lower Gambier Road.

We come down here to Gambier. Bishop Chase started Kenyon and Gambier by remote control he still controls it by the policies he set up. One of the first things he did was build that big water power mill that you could see when you go east on 229. [The Gambier Mill]. It was on this side of this horseshoe and they wanted to get water from here to across there to run that mill. Bottomland. Heavy clay subsoil. And they were working on that waterway, mill race, and they were doing it with horses and could hardly get it dug. They were beginning to wonder if they could really do it, it was so tough for them. Well they did it. A flood came along and washed it out. They had a scar there, so the water followed it and washed it out more.

Then down over here to Howard. Howard used to be called Kinderhook, and Indian name. And right on the corner there where the bike path is an old, railroad warehouse and mill that Bob Kirk has rebuilt into a fine, fine home. But it's one of the historical points along the Kokosing River right there in Howard. Then we come over here to Millwood and there's another interesting story. There was a mill at Millwood, right on the south edge of the village. When they set the mill up, they wanted to be sure they had water, so when they purchased the land, they didn't just purchase the lot where the mill was. They purchased all the land back up here for I guess a half a mile, so many feet back from the river. and the deed for that mill is pages long where it describes every crook along there, every turn, so that they wanted that land so they could flood it. And they built a dam to back it up then they wouldn't have any water problems with their neighbors by doing that.

There was an island that at the upper end of that area where they had the right of way. One was Duck Island and one was Sycamore Island. And they are no more. But you know where the campground is? They're located right in the upper end of that area where that mill property was. ..When they wrote the description for the deed, they didn't include the description of the islands, and they had to write a deed of correction. They're not there, but they had to be shown in order to be legal and correct.

And then you follow along out here a little farther to Zook. Are you familiar with Zook? It was a little tiny town which was completed. It has several stores and blacksmiths shops and I'm going to say an elevator but I'm not sure about that. Several houses. And in 1913 it was flooded out. So all there's left there is some concrete foundations, some remnants like that, but it's quite a historical point right there.

And then we come out here to the county line and the elevation there is 840 ft. which is the lowest point in the county, because all this water has to drain out this way. And here's the highest point in the county back here at 1421 feet. See this is high here and all drains here towards your Kokosing River and comes out here. Then, when you get across the county line here, where the Kokosing runs into the Mohican River to form the Muskingum or Licking...anyway...right there at that confluence, they come together. The Knox County history book will tell you there was a lamp black factory there. They used to use a lot of lamp black to polish their ..coal? stones... things like that. It was called Black Diamond. I'm not sure exactly where that plant was located but it was right at that confluence there, very closely. And think you'll find there's a big high bridge that goes over the Kokosing just before the two rivers come together and if you're going north across that bridge up toward Newcastle, I think that factory was on the right on high ground, because all the rest of it was low ground.

The river comes along here like this and here's this big bridge that comes up here to Newcastle, then the river comes down here and joins the Mohican. Right in here, the river went wild...

So there's a lot of history along there. I'm trying to think if there are some really significant barns. Knox County doesn't have many distinctive barns. We've got a lot of barns but they aren't particularly big, pretty, fancy. They're sturdy and all that. Probably the Cassell's barn is one of the best historical barns that we've got besides this one over here on Sycamore Road. But the interesting thing is, you drive across the state or county and you see a nice big barn and you know immediately there was some good soil there to support it. We had a barn tour down in Perry County, generally not well known as an agricultural county because it's so rough - light soil, a lot of rock. But we had four just tremendously fine barns for that tour. When you look at it very carefully, they're all on the edge, mostly on high ground above a rich valley that laid in there unusual for Perry County, that supported those barns, and those barns today tells us that when the people moved in there, there was good timber there and good soil there.

Here's another interesting thing...here's the railroad that comes up from Columbus through Centerburg and Mt. Liberty and along the 3-C highway... You'll notice the bike path and highway follow the river because that would be comparatively level ground for building.

There are stories on the Mohican River around Greer and Brinkhaven and that kind of thing where it kind of gets away from your thing but it's the same type of thing. As an example, I went up to Mohican Wilderness Park on Wally Road. I guess it's Jericho Road in Knox County, Wally Road across the County Line. He had two barns there that weren't big but from the standpoint of construction were quite significant. When I looked at the first one we went in to the straw barn was all framed in pine, big pieces of pine. To my knowledge, pine was not a native timber in this area. And so I made a note on that and did some research and Harold Bauer the forester told me that there was a stand of big pines on Cobol Road - deadend road now - the bridge was out here and couldn't get in there for some time. I finally got up in there and there's a tremendous stand of big pine trees up in there, some up on the hill, some down in the valley, some of them are rooted down by the creek fifty feet below the road where you're driving and the tops are way up here - huge things. So it was quite apparent that they got into that forest and got timber to build the barn on Wally Road.

B. We actually are going the town of Greer even though it's off the river. We wanted to include the Mohican, so that's a good place to talk about that.

C. If you do that, you ought to do some studying on Strobel Road. There used to be - wish I had that map - a Wally railroad that came down from Mansfield clear down to Newcastle. It came down along the backcountry here and they had what they call cream stops. They'd have a little stand along the river and the farmer take his cream, put it on the stand, the train come along and pick it up and give credit for his weight and take it down some where and have it churned into butter.

So, there's a whole story about the Wally Railroad that came down through here. And all the little old times, one of them was named Unkle. There was six or eight stops clear down through there, nothing but place in the country for trains to stop and pick up the cream.

When you get down to Brinkhaven, there's all kind of history out there. The old stores that are left - it's a dead town. The story of the old trussel - a huge wooden trussel they built to get across that valley. They got it all built and the engineers wouldn't go over it - they were afraid of it. And there was a man who had been an engineer that was standing around listening to them and said, I'll make you a deal. I'll take your train across, I'm not afraid of it, but if I take it across then you got to give me back my job - he got his job back.

There are a lot of pictures of the flood in the Brinkhaven area. Right in here on Hunter Road, that bridge is the longest bridge in Knox County (across the Mohican).

...

B. What do you think is important for us to cover on a project like this? I'm focusing specifically on agriculture but can you think of anything we haven't talked about that would be important?

C. For emphasis, I'll repeat this. When people settled this country, they used the rivers because it was the easiest way to get up through the forest, first time through, before they started making trails and eventually roads and things like that. And part of that was that they wanted the bottomland because it was rich. And continuing today, our big farmers look for that kind of land. For instance, Burke's that had this big operation west of town - had crops on the bottomland all the way up the river. They work all that land up there along the bike path just east of Mt. Vernon and way on out. And then if you're doing the Mohican River, you'll have to do something on the Mohawk Dam which is a huge deal.

...

That dam is right in there. What I wanted to show you, see the dam is here.