

Barn of the Damned

To strip an old barn of its old-growth bounty, we used the usual tools: empty fertilizer bags, two wild cats and a high falsetto.



Prior to 1960, Seaford Road was dotted with small houses, boat shacks and many barns. The majority of those barns were built from oak, ash, hickory or occasionally, chestnut. As the buildings and their owners aged, both gradually declined and faded to a subtle, silvery grey before finally disappearing.

There are exceptions, of course, and Margaret Kirby was a fine example.

When I was a boy it was common knowledge that Mrs. Kirby was a witch – a spell-casting, dead-raising, broom-riding harpy. We would circle around the Methodist church, through the graveyard and down into the swamp to *avoid* walking past her house.

Having inherited a tidy sum from her father, a prominent boat builder, Mrs. Kirby had the luxury of staying at home, looking after her army of feral cats and conjuring demons all day. As the years passed, we all expected that she would sell her place and move to a more temperate climate. But Mrs. Kirby was in it for the long haul, and two more generations of youngsters would slink through the cemetery in fear before the “Seaford Witch” succumbed to her fate.

By the time Old Lady Kirby’s estate was settled, the only barns still standing in Seaford (the rest having been scraped away in favor of single family dwellings) were three large buildings that her father had used to refit boats. On the day that the county auctioned her property to a local real-estate developer, we all knew that those three barns – and all of that seasoned oak – would soon fall victim to some stroke of misfortune that would free the builder from the unreasonable expense of demolition.

Well, it took less than three hours from when the “sold” sign was planted in the yard, before my brother John and I were huddled around the dining room table developing our plan of attack – “scheming” is the term my wife, Helga, would use. Like Helga, I’m sure that many of you are wondering why we didn’t just ask for the lumber. Perhaps we might call the real-estate developer and say, “Hey, you think we could peel some of the flooring out of that old barn before you send your arsonists over to burn it to the ground?” Well, let me assure you (as I did Helga) – that’s not the way things are done around here. So with bail money in our pockets, we grabbed our crowbars and set off in search of a barn.

It was almost midnight as we crept across the field and closed in on the free-range lumber. We approached as stealthily as we could. It was no easy task considering that every other step landed on some part of a cat. As we descended upon the largest of the barns, we could hear voices coming from inside. But, because we had come this far, it seemed prudent to climb up into the loft and have a peek inside. From the rafters we immediately identified the culprits: the Patton boys.

It seems that the lust for lumber is a common affliction. Because the Pattons lived only a mile down the road, they had arrived before us and had busied themselves stripping down the interior wall boards. Now, had this been any other occasion, we would have been happy to see Clyde and Cecil and we probably would have sat down and had a drink. However, on this night...well, this was family business and there was only so much lumber to go around. The Pattons would have

to go. But, rather than risk an armed conflict, John decided to pursue a more diplomatic approach. He reached down and grabbed two empty fertilizer bags from the floor and slipped back out through the loft door. He was only gone for a minute or two, but when he returned, the bags were no longer empty.

They say that the mark of brilliance is being able to say just the right thing at just the right time. If that’s the standard, then John proved himself an intellectual giant that night. He strode to the edge of the loft and with the highest, raspiest voice he could muster shrieked, “I’m back, boys...and this time I’m taking you two with me!”

With that he started screaming like a mad woman, slapped the fertilizer bags together and then dumped two feral cats down on Clyde and Cecil’s heads. I can’t say if the Pattons believed that Old Lady Kirby had come back to take her revenge or if they just had an unnatural fear of flying felines. But I can tell you that Cecil was halfway across the county by the time Clyde knocked the barn door off its hinges while making his escape.

We spent the rest of the evening celebrating our victory by harvesting the remainder of the wall boards and half of the loft floor. We finally retired at 5 a.m., just before the sun came up. By the end of the week, a sudden (and unexpected) fire would gut the old barns. We didn’t take it too hard; we’d collected our piece of Seaford heritage. **PW**

Walt Akers now purchases all his lumber in Seaford, Virginia.