

# DILAPIDATED GRACE

BY ERIC FRANCIS

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE UPON THE LANDSCAPE that fails with as much grace and dignity as an old farm building?

I think a falling-down barn, its weather-grayed timbers cascading from one stubborn, upright wall, is a sight worth stopping for on Arkansas' back roads. More than that, it is a subject worthy of contemplation. It speaks quite plainly of a life of hard work and of a well-deserved rest at the end of that life.

The barn, the shed, the coop, the corn crib — they were masterpieces from the school of form following function. I don't suppose anyone really thinks of buildings as tools, but that's exactly what these structures were. Tools for survival, if you want to get right down to it. Back when Arkansas was the frontier, keeping the hay dry could actually be a matter of life or death for your livestock and, if they didn't make it through the winter, perhaps yourself. Keeping the tools out of the rain, the horses out of the neighbor's pasture, the chickens away from the foxes — these were not jobs for the meek. You wanted a building that could withstand Mother Nature in her most peevish moods, and points were not about to be awarded for style. So you built with thick posts, massive beams and broad planks. Also, a metal roof, even if it was just a sheet of corrugated tin big enough to bridge the rafters.

And red paint for the barns. *The Farmer's Almanac* — well, the website version of it, at least — proclaims that red became the *de rigueur* color of barns because farmers used to treat the wood with linseed oil and at some point discovered that adding rust made it an effective fungicide. It also turned the oil red, or at least, reddish. Whatever its provenance, the color shone like a beacon, drawing the eye and cementing the idea of red barns in our collective consciousness. When one of them came into your field of vision, you couldn't help but notice. The barn was one of the few elements of the farmstead that actively called attention to itself.

The rest of these hard-working structures, though, generally didn't warrant paint. They toiled in anonymity if not outright obscurity. A good-sized shed might be seen from the road, but it couldn't compete with the barn for eyeballs. And without paint to provide a modicum of protection from the elements, these structures tended to fail first while the red barn shrugged off yet another change of the seasons. But time is the great equalizer. Nothing can withstand the wind and sun and rain forever, and even the best red paint will eventually be eaten away. Without it, wood is just wood and a barn's just a bigger version of a shed.

When gravity finally triumphs over an old farm building, some just collapse

in a heap. But many more slide into oblivion, leaning farther and farther to one side until they have the appearance of reclining upon a chaise lounge. I'm just resting, it seems to be telling us, I'll get back up in a minute. This demise can produce a structure at complete odds with its useful lifespan, as the remains take on something more akin to art — which, as it's popularly defined, should have no practical purpose.

I'm particularly partial to those farm buildings that, for whatever reason, have lost their roofs at some point in their collapse. With this armor plating gone, you can really see the bones of the building, appreciate the geometry of its decay. Ruler-straight lines have been replaced by curves, right angles wax obtuse or wane acute, solid wood becomes something far less

substantial. Walk around just such a building until it's between you and the sun, and see how the light filters through it now. Could something so insubstantial ever really have stood once?

What you have now is a skeleton, of course. And an old farmstead is as rich in bones as any archaeological dig. Like the remnants of dinosaurs, these man-made bones speak of the end of an age, as well. The wooden farm building is fading from our landscape, its successors more permanent, if less charismatic. I doubt anyone will swoon over a pile of I-beams a few centuries hence, painting them into still lifes or hanging photos of them on the wall.

But so long as there are coops and sheds and the like standing, however precariously, we've got a link to this state's hardscrabble past, when neighbors rallied for barn raisings and juries came down hard on barn burners.

It's why an old, tumble-down farm building can mean something to us, even if you never spent a day on a farm in your life. You can be city born and bred, yet still feel a tug inside when you find that great old pile of timbers you always liked to see on the drive to your grandparents' place has turned, quite literally this time, into a great old pile of timbers. It's not because we're all farmers at heart or anything. But I believe there's something of the barn in each of us.

That's you. That's me. We're just framework with a little paint slapped on for good measure, when you get right down to it. We do what we were designed to do — we live — until we just can't anymore. That day will come when we, too, fail. We should all be so lucky to do so with the dignity of a century-old barn.

*Columnist Eric Francis lives in North Little Rock.*



COURTESY OF FRED GARCIA/CAPTURE ARKANSAS