

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

Carroll's Yesteryears
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Tour highlights Pennsylvania German traditions
By Joe Getty

Picturesque scenes of thatched roofs frequently bring to mind nostalgia for England and our European homelands. The use of thatching for roofs, however, occurred in Carroll County especially as roofing for log barns.

Historical documentation indicates that thatching was a Pennsylvania German crafts tradition in south-central Pennsylvania and was brought into Carroll County during the settlement period of the mid-1700s. Demonstrations of traditions such as thatching are popular at Pennsylvania German folk festivals. The Historical Society of Carroll County will be sponsoring a bus tour of the Goschenhoppen Folk Festival this summer where thatching and other tools and domestic traditions will be on display.

Thatched roofs are documented as a Carroll County architectural tradition in nineteenth century references. The earliest known reference is the Clotworthy Birnie diary of 1811. Birnie lived near Taneytown and described the day-to-day activities of his farm in brief diary entries. He wrote about construction of a new barn in 1811 and on July 22 to 24 the men were employed thatching the barn roof.

When Manchester resident Oliver Troxel Everhart wrote a history of the Everhart and Shower families in 1883, he reminisced about the farmstead of George Everhart in the Bachman's Valley:

"He also built a large Swiss barn of logs, with a thatched roof. As his farming operations increased this became too small when he built a large frame addition, also with a thatched roof, to the south end, the whole length of the buildings measuring 150 feet ... As the dropping water wears away the stone, so time and the elements wore away the old barn, which had withstood the storms of 90 years; at which once stood forth its fresh hewn logs and golden straw roof, as bright and fresh as the new coined dollar. But all things must have an end, and the old barn had to give way to the march of improvement. It was torn down in the year 1864, and replaced with a modern bank barn."

Late nineteenth century improvements to barn properties were often described in the local newspapers. A reference to a thatched roof barn appears in the description of the improvements

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made by William H. Bankert to his farmstead near Union Mills. This description appears in the *American Sentinel* of May 21, 1887:

"Mr. Wm. H. Bankert, instead of repairing the house he now occupies, as was his first intention, is erecting a new frame dwelling directly in front of it, a short distance further down the hill. The old building, which is a one and a half story log structure, was built over a hundred years ago and was the home of Mr. Bankert's father, the late Isaac Bankert, for more than a half century. It is an interesting relic of the days of our forefathers and is particularly attractive because of its beautifully picturesque and romantic location, being perched upon the side of a steep hill from the base of which extends a vast expanse of meadow through which gently flow the crystal waters of Big Pipe Creek and Deep Run. Along the hill-side a winding path leads from the house in one direction to an old-fashioned thatched roof barn, and in the other to a cozy, well-shaded spring-house. And as it is also among the few remaining old landmarks that one by one are disappearing, it is with feelings of no little regret that we realize that its days are numbered and that it must soon give way to the mark of progress, although it be to make room for a more modern and comfortable home."

The Pennsylvania German crafts traditions of Carroll County weave a fabric of rich heritage in our communities. The Goschenhoppen Folk Festival is nationally known for maintaining a high degree of purity in its portrayal of the folk culture of eighteenth and nineteenth century Pennsylvania Germans. More than 500 skilled and apprentice craftspeople, in appropriate attire of the period, demonstrate more than 150 trades and home skills, using authentic tools and technology which early settlers used in their daily lives.

The historical society bus tour to the Goschenhoppen Folk Festival will be on August 7. If you would like to join the tour, please call the historical society at 848-6494.

Photo credit: Joe Getty

Photo caption: Demonstrations of Pennsylvania German domestic traditions will be viewed on a historical society bus tour.