



TODAY



COLUMN

Book looks at farm's heart

The weathered grey barn on my farm had been there long before I arrived, back in 1970. It was gigantic, an old Ontario structure, 110 feet by 60, a bank barn with hay lofts, huge beams, shrunkened siding that let in the light, a cedar-lined granary and a foundation made of granite hard heads, collected one by one from the surrounding fields.

After too many years without the heat of livestock, the old 19th century Veitch barn finally succumbed. It had to come down. Watching that noble building fall was one of the saddest days of my life. A few of the beams and a mantelpiece in the kitchen live on, hand-adzed reminders of this Sydenham farm, now over a century and a half old.

Barns had been on my mind after recently reading Gail Gallant's *Apparition*, a barn tale of old Grey. And then there is Mabel Williamson's *Barn Stories: A Social History of Farm Life* and John Radojkovic's two marvellous visual portraits of that first building to go up on a new settler's land.

Dropping by Owen Sound's



ANDREW
ARMITAGE

Read this

Ginger Press on a Friday afternoon, I was gifted with a copy of a new barn book, one that I took home and read in a few hours. Usually, I devote this column to several books each week – but not today.

Instead, I want to introduce you to Laura Lush and her new book, *Swing Beam: My Father's Story of Life on the Farm and the Barns He Loved and Lost* (Life Rattle Press, \$20).

Lush teaches creative writing and academic English in the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto. Her poems and short stories have been anthologized in both Canadian and international journals. She now lives in Guelph. But she grew up on farms, helping her dad with the everyday chores. Laura remembers it all well in *Swing Beam*, a canny combination of oral history and poetry.

The words are her father's, a

lifetime of memories that Barry Lush carried with him. The poetry is Laura Lush's and the combination of the two make this small book a classic for many generations of farmers who have loved the land, their animals, fields and barns.

Barry was not only a farmer, he also worked for seed companies, raised a family and was a marathoner who got up in the morning, running from St. George to Brantford before tending to the farm. Lush participated in both the 1954 British Empire Games in Vancouver and later, the Pan American Games in Mexico.

Swing Beam alternates between poetry and reminiscence. Barry recalls, "You had the spring when you plowed, disced and seeded. You had the summer when you brought in all your hay. You had to fill the barn right up to the top. Late summer and fall, you harvested. Come winter, that's when you'd really work 'cause you were cleaning manure. You never ran out of work."

Laura Lush describes that barn and Barry's day:

Morning
Wake up, slip on my
coveralls,



my barn boots – a hat, a pair of gloves.

Then walk out to those barns. Hundred-year-old-boards sawing in sleep.

Barn anchored to earth, the earth anchored to barn.

I can't tell you how they do it –

shuck winter, bust winds, ping hail tighten their beam.

Tell me what has more stories than these barns living?

Barry remembered barns, thatched ones, bank barns, Dutch barns, Mennonite barns. Laura makes them speak. "Tenoned and pegged/ Morticed and boxed/ I rust no nails/ I am into each post/ Driven hard/ Driven hard so wind can't break me/ Driven hard so nobody can take me down."

By 1976, Barry Lush had moved north to Owen Sound, lock, stock and pigs. "We came," he said, "at one of the worst times in farming in thirty years, the taxes were up, when interest rates were up. You had to borrow money to farm – eighteen and twenty percent."

The farm was on Hwy. 21 near Jackson. Lush raised geese on it. A reproduced 1983 Sun Times article by Jim Algie describes geese as "a tasty Christmas choice." Barry remembers, "There were great birds to look after. They knew me. I know when I had thirteen hundred, they had the run of the whole farm and they'd go back to the bush and eat there. I climbed up on the barn roof one day and took a picture of them. I could see their trail going right back to the bush."

Eventually, Barry had to give up farming ("I didn't leave

the farm – I still farmed in my mind"). And then came the day when the barn had to come down. Laura describes it in poetry.

"The Barn, Broken:

The beams. The posts. The lofts.

The columns.

The bays that separated the columns. The rafters.

The purlins supporting the rafters. This is the barn they tore down.

The life of a farmer! "He spends hours in his barns, inhales the sweet-thick aroma of silage, runs this hands up and down the roughened hand-hewn beams, shoots rats buried in feedbags, watches the steamy breath of his cows huddled in the lower barn, the whip and run of his horses across the field."

Swing Beam is, I believe, now available at the Ginger Press (or check with on-line services). This is a book for you, your father, husband or child, for anyone who ever hayed a field and loaded a barn. Memories are short, brief and then passing – like the barns of the Queen's Bush.