

Yearning for a Ruin

Written & photographed
by Gloria Hildebrandt

I have ruin envy. Driving around the countryside, I often see the remains of barns and concrete silos. Always drawn to them, I wonder what might be done with them. I even like old wood henhouses, imagining them as cute playhouses or garden sheds. I like stone ruins best. There's such beauty in a fieldstone wall, whether cemented together or only partially standing. The foundations of old barns are particularly attractive. Even if all they held were cows, pigs or farming equipment, they suggest a place of grand beauty.

My neighbours on the north side of my property have a barn ruin. I remember, as a child, that barn standing tall and being used for at least one goat.

There may have been more animals but I best remember Billy, who would come eagerly to the fence, stand on the wire strands and lean over to nibble the clothes of anyone standing near. He had strange eyes, circular ridges on his two curving horns and beneath his chin, a beard that you could tug. Billy seemed to be constantly chewing.

Some time ago, when I was living in Toronto, there were many changes to the neighbouring property, including the disappearance of the wood barn. All that now remain are the stone foundation walls, although they have broken down in some areas. And even the remains were vanishing under vines covering them, tall weeds filling the inside and surrounding the walls outside. The current neighbours said

they dream of making a rose garden there. But they've been consumed with completely renovating the entire 1902-era stone farmhouse, planting trees, rebuilding their drive shed and creating a vegetable garden. The rose garden must wait.

"I need a barn ruin like a hole in the head."

I need a barn ruin like a hole in the head. As if I don't have enough to do, tending my woods and clearing out buckthorn, garlic mustard, periwinkle, grapevine and Virginia creeper, all of which threaten to take over my land. Plus paths to maintain, bridges to repair and firewood to bring back. And the old wire fence to restore where it has vanished under plant growth. I have plenty to do.

Yet I'd love a barn ruin, a stone foundation wall. I could clear all around it, and inside too. If I couldn't manage a garden within or without, I could keep the growth mown down to a kind of lawn. It's a strange blessing that regular mowing here, where rocks permit, quickly turns the ground into lawn, without having to seed or put down sod. The place is so lush, that plants grow at top speed everywhere. Regular cutting keeps them in check. Inside my barn ruin, I could at least plant a couple of small deciduous trees, to provide summer shade for a few lawn chairs. I'm not looking to create Sissinghurst-type gardens. But a fieldstone wall looks so good, even next to green grass.

Fieldstones

I was sighing over barn ruins recently when I realized with a start that while I don't have a fieldstone wall, I do have

fieldstone rows, built by settlers or farmers. A by-product of clearing land, they border two areas on my property that used to be cultivated; one is the yard around my small house, where there once was an apple orchard. I remember many large, varied apple trees still growing here and producing fruit when I was young. A historical map of the area in 1877 even shows the location as an orchard. Over the years, these apple trees died off and were not replaced.

Cleared Land

The other fieldstone rows border three acres on the south side of my property, which used to be part of a huge field that was farmed for wheat or hay. The people who cleared the land would have used a horse-drawn stoneboat to hold the gathered rocks before taking them to the edge of the field. The stone row now borders the roadside edge and snakes along the rocky section of the property, separating arable land, now naturalized back to forest, from Escarpment outcrops of rocks, swamp and seasonal wetland.

The trouble is that the stone rows are barely visible. Trees have grown up through them, while brambles, dogwood and tall weeds form choking barriers next to them and fallen branches have landed on top.

If I want a stone ruin to clear of growth and maintain, these rows of rocks are a fair substitute. Turning them into attractive features that people will be able to see, is a big job. Yet another one. Even bigger than maintaining an old barn foundation.

Gloria Hildebrandt is the co-founder, co-publisher and editor of Niagara Escarpment Views.



▲ My neighbours' fine barn ruin with great potential for a walled garden.