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When Bruce Earnheart of Dayton, Ohio, called for an appointment to tour the historic 1803 House in Emmaus, Richard Farmer, who has been involved in the matters of the home for more than 40 years, thought nothing of it.

The house is on the National Register of Historic Places and is considered a museum, but it's not open daily. You have to telephone Farmer or email him to get in, but he's always ready to share information about the place.

When Earnheart, who visited what he told Farmer, was "the holy grail" of his ancestry, made a reference to the fact that the patriarch of his family might be related to the Earnhardt's in North Carolina, Farmer's historic radar went crazy.

Earnhardt's in North Carolina? As in the late Dale Earnhardt Sr., NASCAR's famed Intimidator, and his son, Dale Jr.?

Could the North Carolina Earnhardt's be tied somehow to Jacob Ehrenhardt Sr., one of the two men who donated the land on which Emmaus was founded, and his son, Jacob Jr., who built the 1803 House and lived there with his wife and four children?

Tobacco Road with Pennsylvania Dutch roots?

"That's when I got serious," Farmer said of Bruce Earn heart's visit and the information provided in a book Earnheart was preparing on the history of his family, whose name has morphed over the years.

"When Bruce came into town, he kind of forced us to go all the way back to where the family began and how they started the community," he said.

Farmer is not a big NASCAR fan, but the name Earnhardt is to that segment of the sport what the name Andretti is to the Indy car set. It's legendary.

So, Farmer set out to discover all he could about the links between the Ehrenhardt's of the 18th century and the Earnhardt's of the 21st century.

He began putting together his own genealogy of the Ehrenhardt's, who arrived by boat in Philadelphia from Germany in 1740.

Digging into the past

Coincidentally, at the time all these loose ends were coming together in Emmaus, Dale Earnhardt Jr. was doing some genealogical digging of his own.

"I had no idea who my great-grandfather was," Dale Jr. told The Morning Call. "I didn't have any image of him, what he did for a living, what kind of person he was. Nothing. All I knew was my father and my grandfather Ralph, so just that curiosity led me down this crazy wormhole, and it's endless."

When he got to the point where he felt positive about the Pennsylvania-North Carolina connection, Farmer called JR Motorsports, Dale Jr.'s racing operation in North Carolina.

He said he'd like to talk to Dale Earnhardt Jr. about his finding and what he knew was an ancestral home.

The people at JR Motorsports were skeptical, to say the least.

“They said, ‘We get a lot of calls like these,’ ” Farmer said.

He said he would send a letter.

Don Hawk, a Lehigh Valley native who worked for Dale Earnhardt Sr. for years and who has retained a strong relationship with the family, was enlisted to help arrange for a response from Dale Jr. to Farmer’s letter.

A couple days later, Hawk said Dale Jr. was “very interested and actually copied his wife Amy and his sister ... He wants to get with Mr. Farmer ... done deal, ball rolling.”

Coming “home”

It just so happened that NASCAR was coming to Pocono for its second race of the summer on the last weekend in July, and Dale Jr., now part of the NBC telecasts, would be in the area.

His personal manager, Tony Mayhoff, a Northeast Pennsylvania native, set up an 1803 House tour for Friday afternoon of race week. Mayhoff, NBC play-by-play announcer Rick Allen and this Morning Call reporter accompanied Earnhardt Jr.

At the time, Earnhardt was not seeking publicity. This was to be an up-close-and-personal meeting between Dale Jr. and his family from more than 200 years ago.

“You know, I really didn’t have any high expectations,” Dale Jr. told The Morning Call weeks after the visit. “I didn’t know what I was going to experience or walk into, and it was pleasant that it was a personal experience, and not a lot of people around.

“I got to focus on the conversations we were having, and I got to focus on looking at the house; we just got down to business,” he said. “We talked about what the history of the house is and the history of the family in that town and what they meant to the particular town and so forth. All that stuff, I had no idea I was going to learn.”

Dale Jr. seemed to enjoy the visit very much. He leaned deep into the open hearth in the kitchen to take cellphone photos of the place where the 1803 House residents cooked their daily meals and that kept them warm.

He paused in every room to soak up the atmosphere.

He put his hand over the print that is believed to have been made by 9-year-old Anna Eleanora, one of Jacob Ehrenhardt Jr.’s four children.

Asked what he was thinking as he did so, Dale Jr. said, “It felt ... I don’t know ... it felt almost surreal, unbelievable, unreal to be in that home, and it reminds you of how delicate life is.

“When I did my ancestry, I uncovered several circumstances and many moments throughout the generations where a simple decision or something very small or insignificant could have altered the lineage and possibly my existence,” he said. “And so, when I’m standing in that house and looking at the history ... it makes you feel how delicate and fragile life is. And how lucky we are that we made it. It sounds kind of silly, but there are so many instances in my family’s history where something could have gone one way or another.”

Preserving history

One of those things that “could have gone one way or another” was the mere existence of the 1803 House.

Jacob Ehrenhardt Jr. died in 1865. The house had a number of owners and renters, but 100 years later, it was unoccupied. And it was really uninhabitable.

“They [owner, locally based magazine publisher Rodale Inc.] didn’t know what to do with it,” Farmer said. “It was empty, it was derelict, it was a nuisance and a liability to Rodale.”

But Elsie J. Yarema, who lived in a home adjacent to the 1803 House, didn’t agree with that.

In a 1990 Morning Call story about renovation work that was to be done at the 1803 House, Yarema remembered telling Bob Rodale, founder of the company that owned the property, “If you bulldoze the house, you’re going to have to bulldoze me. I’ll lie in front of the bulldozer.”

Rodale's wife, Ardath, apparently agreed and persuaded him to change the plan. The Rodales donated the 1803 House property to the borough for \$1.

Dale Jr. praised Emmaus for preserving the house.

"To be able to stand there at that house and try to imagine the kids walking to school, the family cooking, what daily activities in life must have been like; we really got a true sense of that with our visit to Emmaus," Dale Jr. said. "The work that the town has done to be able to provide anyone with that knowledge, that's such an interesting and fun activity regardless of whether my family is connected to the house and town at all.

"I learned so much about the way of life, and so I have to give a lot of credit to the town of Emmaus for taking such great care to document and preserve that part of the history of the town," he said. "I went there thinking I'm going to look at this house and I'm going to see something connected to my family. But, I didn't know I was going to learn so much about their history in the town, the way life was for citizens back then, how they got there. It was just so much more to it that was so pleasant."

An ongoing journey

Dale Jr. has been working at his genealogy for seven or eight years now, and he said the visit to the 1803 House "ranks really high" among everything he has discovered. He has not found another home that dates anywhere near as far back as the Emmaus home.

And he said he could come back... "I hope to be able to bring my daughter," he said. "She's 4 months old, I hope to be able to take her there [sometime] down the road to be able to show her and tell her some of the stories and the connection we have, to let her understand how much history there is and how many generations back we need to be thankful for for the decisions they made and the perseverance they had.

"The way of life back then must have been so challenging," he said. "And for them to have the strength and mentality to not only make a living, but, damn, man, they created opportunity for everyone there. It's incredible that they had that type of attitude and approach to the people around them."

In the meantime, he will continue building his own mountain of information about the family – no matter how the name is spelled.

Still work to be done

Farmer and the Friends of the 1803 House continue their work as well. The circumstances that came together to make Dale Jr.'s visit happen renewed Farmer's enthusiasm.

For example, Johannes Ehrenhardt, who was Jacob Ehrenhardt Jr.'s grandfather and the patriarch of the family that came over from Germany, lived in Weisenberg Township, worshipped in the Lutheran church there and is reportedly buried in the church cemetery.

But his grave has not been found and Farmer said it seems like that man's importance to the history of the area hasn't been recognized.

Farmer has been president of the Friends of the 1803 House Inc., for the last five years, and admits that finding the Dale Earnhardt Jr. tie-in to the house is going to be hard to top.

Same goes for Dale Jr... "I think the more you can learn about the deep history of your family, that stuff is so hard to discover on your own," he said. "I didn't stumble on [the 1803 House] by accident, but somebody brought it to our attention. Those kind of surprises ... it was really pleasant to have somebody care enough to say, 'Hey, man, I think this is something you might be interested in.'

"I learned even more being there and seeing it with my own eyes, it helped me to double check a lot of the particulars and put the home and the owners and the location and all that stuff in the timeline that I have and that I have been forming myself through my own effort," he said. "I'm glad we went over there and made the effort to go see it for ourselves."