

WILSON AND ANN KENT: "THAT'S WHERE IT BEGINS FOR US HERE"

From the sweetness of molasses suckers to the sweat of barn raisings, **Wilson and Ann Kent** carry us through a lifetime rooted in Spring Creek. Their stories speak of stone walls and pine-sled rides, of hymns echoing through the holler, of hands that built and hearts that endured. In their telling, work becomes memory, memory becomes legacy, and even mischief finds its place in the fabric of a mountain community.



Born in a log cabin nestled into the hollows of Meadow Fork, what folks called Bluff back then, Wilson Dwight Kent came into the world on Valentine's Day, 1938. The property where he was born is the same land he lives on today, tucked into a fold of the Spring Creek community where stories take root like old trees.

"I was born on the property we live on," Wilson said. "In a little log cabin. At that time, it was called Bluff, North Carolina." He explained that back then, "We didn't associate with Spring Creek. It was Meadow Fork and Spring Creek, two separate communities." His family has lived on that land in Hickam Cove since the late 1700s. Generations of farmers, builders, and singers made lives among the creeks and ridgelines long before paved roads and power lines reached the valley.

Hard times shaped those years. Wartime rationing meant little kerosene, sugar, or gas. His father parked a 1937 Chevrolet in the barn, jacked it up, and poured oil in the carburetor to keep it from seizing. When new tires finally came after the war, he rolled it out and said, "Okay kids, we're going for a ride," and the family climbed in.

The Kents raised what they needed: hogs, chickens, milk cows, and gardens. His mother canned through the seasons, and the store was only for kerosene, coffee, sugar, and salt. Farming meant mules in the field, children carrying their weight, pulling weeds, hauling water, and bringing cows in from the woods. Some of those stories come with a smile.

Wilson's grin broadened as he remembered one of them. "My grandfather and older kids were burning tobacco ... So they were burning that off, and me and my two younger brothers ... we piled up the sagebrush and made it nice and neat. I put a match to it, and the wind was blowing, and it started out of the field area into the sagebrush. We were stomping ... trying to get it all out. We didn't get it out. The fire went up through the sagebrush, up through the fields.

"I blamed it on my next brother, four years younger than I. And he took the rap for years and years. My older brother paddled him for starting that fire. And I sat back and smiled."

In the heart of the mountains, music was the thread that stitched the community together through hard times. At home, Wilson's grandmother would pump the bellows of her organ while family voices rose in a rich blend of baritone and high tenor harmonies. Every Sunday, the Meadow Fork Baptist Church became a hub of string music, with the bright ring of guitars and mandolins filling the valley. Wilson's uncle, Floyd Baldwin, even traveled with a quartet, carrying their gospel songs from church to church.

Once a year, at Maple Springs near Max Patch, groups came from every direction, drawn by the promise of singing and fellowship. Cars lined the mountain, parked wherever there was space. "That mountain was full of cars," Wilson remembered. People sang all day, trading songs and harmonies, while children ran and played between the gatherings. "The kids had the best time," he said.

The valley made room for invention too. Uncle Frank Miller dug a pond, set a waterwheel, and wired lights into his home long before electricity came. He rigged a pulley to haul water from the spring up to the porch. When the lines finally reached Meadow Fork, he rewired the contraption with a switch.

When the family moved to West Asheville, Wilson's days changed shape. His father bought a 1952 Ford tractor and turned the mule team out to pasture. "That tractor was mine," Wilson said. "I plowed, cultivated, did it all."

He drove a school bus in high school, waking before dawn to farm, then collecting students before heading to class himself. He met his wife, Ann, at Enka High School in a commercial art class. "She was the only girl in the class," he recalled. "I was shy, but I finally asked her out." Ann added, "The day after Valentine's, I told my friend, 'I'm going to marry him.' She said, 'You've never even dated him.' I said, 'I'm still going to marry him.'" They did, that same year.

Wilson and Ann lived in Asheville, Waynesville, Charlotte, and Atlanta before returning to Wilson's home ground in 1997. "We came back to the land," Ann said. "We knew it was where we belonged." The fields no longer held rows of tobacco or corn. Trees had overtaken the pastures. The smoke of curing barns was only a memory.

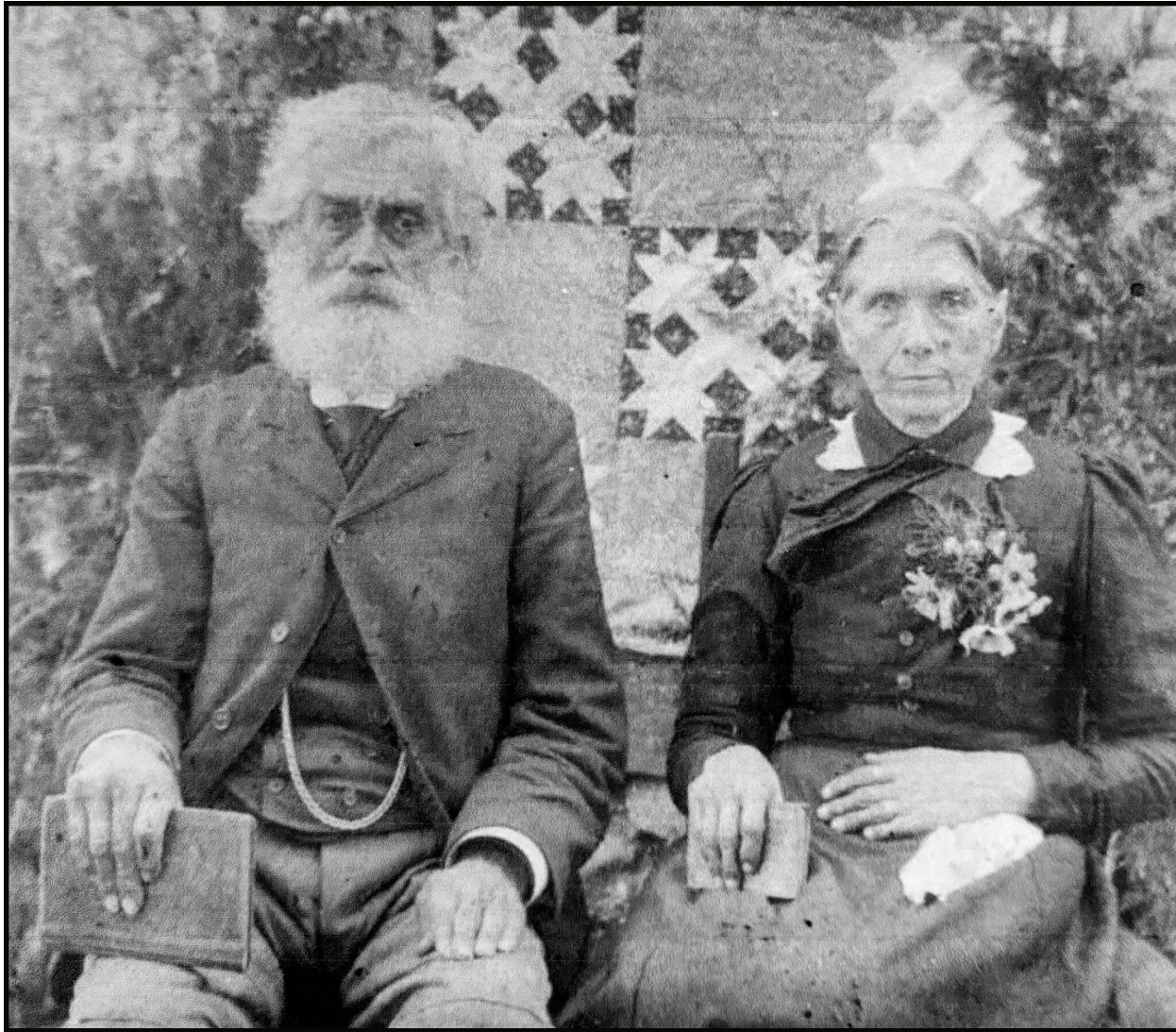
"Most of the natives are dying out," Wilson said quietly. On their land, an old family cemetery lay tucked among the trees, holding generations of Hickams and Kents. The same names appeared again and again, worn into stone by time and weather. "And the ones who stayed got tired of farming and moved on. Back then, when teenagers finished high school, most left straight away, to the military, the car factories in Detroit, or the shipyards."

Electricity, paved roads, and telephones came late, and by then many had already gone. "If it hadn't been for people moving in from outside," Ann added, "a lot of what's happening here now wouldn't be. They've helped keep the community alive."



The Hickam Cove House

Built in the 1790s, the home where Wilson grew up.



Sidney and Susan (Looper) Blankenship

Wilson's great-grandparents, early settlers of Spring Creek.

There's a certain stillness that comes when old photographs are spread across a table. Ann laid hers out carefully, as though unwrapping something fragile. The images were sepia and soft at the edges, corners rounded by years of handling. Each picture carried more than faces. They held seasons, hardships, and the weight of memory. Ann sorted through them with the ease of someone who has told these stories before, and the reverence of someone who knows how much they matter.

She began with a portrait of two solemn faces. Sidney and Susan Blankenship sat straight-backed before a patterned quilt, their expressions steady, their eyes set with the resolve mountain living requires.

"This is Sidney and Susan," Ann said, pointing to Wilson's great-grandparents. "They came from Alexander County, and then moved through Wilkes County in that way and came in to Madison. He lived in Hot Springs. He lived in Spring Creek. He lived on Hopis Branch." Susan's maiden name was Looper.

They raised children, traded work with neighbors, and over time their bloodline wound into nearly every hollow in Spring Creek. Wilson leaned closer, studying the faces that look familiar in their features yet distant in their century. These were the roots from which his family grew in this place.

Wilson's father, Elmer, was known for his hands—broad and sure. He was a rock mason, a carpenter, a mechanic: the kind of man neighbors called when something needed building or fixing. His work still stands across the valley—barns with a distinct pitch, hog pens and smokehouses weathered by time, and houses sturdy enough to carry a family through.

When the Spring Creek School was rising, Elmer was among the young men who hauled stone from fields and creek banks to keep the masons supplied. Farmers worked their own land half a day, then turned out in the afternoon to load wagons with rock. Elmer's hands set many of those stones, and the walls still carry the sound of that labor. "Elmer built a lot of the barns here," Ann said. "If you see a barn that comes up and does this bit, he probably built it. He built houses. He was a master." He worked as a mechanic too, in a shop next to the church where people brought their cars to be fixed.

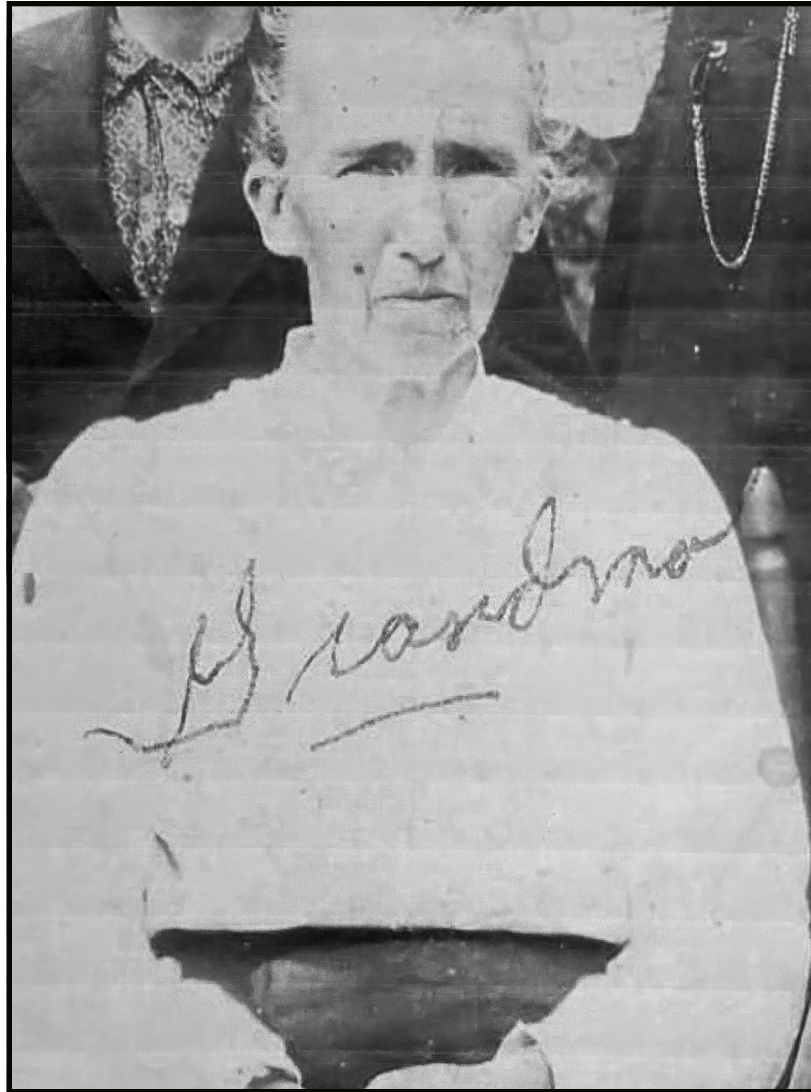
Beside him was Ora. Where Elmer built in stone and timber, she built in steadiness. She canned and preserved the food that kept the family through winter and raised five sons in Hickam Cove. Granddaughter of Sidney and Susan Looper through her parents James and Altha Blankenship, she carried their strength into her own time.

Later in life, when Parkinson's began to take hold, the family added indoor plumbing and a bathroom so that Ora could manage with dignity. Even as her health declined, she remained the heart of the home, her calm a match for Elmer's tireless work. Together they left more than buildings behind. They left an ethic of persistence, of making do, of carrying on.



Elmer and Ora Jane (Blankenship) Kent

Elmer, a master builder and mechanic, and Ora, the steady heart of their home in Hickam Cove.

**Jane Elizabeth (Plemmons) Hickam**

Labeled “Grandma” in a careful hand, this portrait honors her place at the center of the family’s early Spring Creek lineage.

Ann picked up another photograph, its edges worn soft, the word *Grandma* written in a careful hand across the top. The woman in the picture held herself with a steady kind of dignity, her gaze fixed forward, unbothered by the passing of years.

"This lady is Jane Elizabeth Hickam," Ann said. "She was the daughter of a Plemmons here in Spring Creek." Her voice carried the familiar mix shared by so many families in these hills, a blend of pride and humor and the quiet acceptance that kinship lines twist in unexpected ways. "Robert Burton Hickam, who she married, is the son of the J. J. Hickam. The Hickam family are German, and they came here from Virginia. Where Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia all meet in the corner."

She paused, then added with a spark of delight, "Do you remember the movie *October Sky* by Homer Hickam? Sonny, in that movie was Homer. And that's a true story. He became a NASA engineer. He lives in Huntsville, Alabama. He taught astronauts how to go to space. That's one of his cousins," she said, nodding toward Wilson. He leaned in with a grin. "One of his kitties went into space. Paco."

That story gives a sense of how far a mountain family can reach. A line ran straight from the rocky fields of Spring Creek to the launch pads.

Ann set out another photo. Three young women stood in modest dresses, hair neatly pinned, a child perched among them with a serious look. The faces were clear, the edges gone soft with time.

"These are the Blankenships," Ann said. "Dola, Ada, and Bonnie. And the child is Elmer Clark. They were the children of James Thomas Blankenship and Altha Rena Miller." Her hand rested on the image. "Rena was a midwife. She delivered a whole bunch of youngins up here."

Wilson nodded. "There was a big rock going up Blankenship Branch. My grandfather James used to hold court right there. He was a judge in the community and he would hold court standing on that rock."

Ann added, "And under that rock is where Uncle George put his white lightning. He would make his white lightning and put it under a rock, and then the people would come and get it and put their money under there."

Wilson laughed. "That was the cash crop—selling cough syrup."



Dola, Ada, and Bonnie Blankenship

Shown with young Elmer Clark, daughters of James Thomas Blankenship and midwife Altha Rena Miller Blankenship.

As the photographs settled back into their envelope, the stories only deepened. Wilson and Ann sat side by side, unlocking memory after memory with the ease of those who tell stories to keep them alive.

Wilson spoke with pride about molasses-making, a fall tradition that turned hard labor into a sweet reward. Cane pressed through a horse-powered mill, juice caught in barrels, the slow simmer over a rock furnace. "Granddaddy would skim the real thick part off the sides of the evaporator and put it on a birch stick and make a sucker," he said. "You very seldom ever got any candy. You might get a peppermint stick at Christmas, maybe an apple or an orange." He smiled, remembering those children running around with molasses suckers stuck to their hands and cheeks.

Wilson described the corn shucking gatherings. "The community would come around, and in a half a day they'd have all of that corn shucked and thrown into the crib. The men would be throwing ears, and the girls would get together and make candy." He laughed. "I was too little to do much corn shucking. If you didn't really know what you were doing or wasn't fast, you'd get hit on the head with the corn as it was headed for the crib."

There were barn raisings too. "There'd be guys in the woods pulling in logs, and there'd be other men putting the logs together as the barn went up," Wilson said. "I was too small to help much, but I could always carry water."

He told the wilder tales next. "We'd hike to the top of the mountain where the pine thickets were. Late spring, early summer. Pine needles covered the slopes." They built a board with a foot brace and launched themselves down the slick slope. "We'd wear out

the seat of our pants," Wilson said with a grin. Sometimes they climbed young saplings and rode them as they bent from tree to tree. "One time a pine tree broke out with me in it. I went down through the saw briars and everything, got all scratched up, but I went right back to doing it again."

Health care was mostly homemade. "I never went to the doctor until I was grown and getting my exam for marriage," Wilson said. "That was my first time." For toothbrushes they chewed birch twigs. For sweeteners they used molasses and honey from the several hives of bees his grandfather kept. "We didn't have candy around. If you didn't have sugar, you sweetened with honey."

The stories turned toward the room around them, the old Spring Creek School where they sat. Wilson rubbed the scar on his head. "I've got bruises from remodeling this place," he shrugged. "We had that hallway open, and all those years of oil on the floor to keep down dust, the underwood was saturated with it. My foot slipped off, and I went down through the joists. When I hit, the side of my head just ripped open."

Ann had sewn curtains and painted walls. "My problem is that I become possessive," she said. "When I walked in there and found a footprint against the wall that I had worked so hard to paint, I went ballistic." But her smile softened the words. They had poured themselves into bringing this building back to life.

As the sun moved across the floor, the talk shifted from what was to what had changed. "When I was a boy, you'd be hard pressed to find a tractor," Wilson said. "Most folks had a team of mules. Maybe one family, the Reeves, had an old steel-wheeled Ford." Electricity did not come until 1947. Telephones came later, after the

family had already moved away. The pavement too. "We'd come back to visit Granny, and it was still dirt roads all the way in."

The deeper change, they agreed, was in the people. "The natives are dying out," Wilson said quietly. "The ones who stay aren't farming like we did. They raise cattle and hay now. Uh, life really changed." Young people, when they finished high school, left for opportunities elsewhere. "They were sick and tired of farming by the time they got out of high school," Wilson said.

Still, something has shifted in recent years. "If it hadn't been for the people moving in here that were not from here, this wouldn't be going on," Wilson said, gesturing to the community center around them. Ann nodded. "The natives that live here are too busy taking care of what they got left. Without the newcomers, there would not be a community thing going on."

"Churches used to be full," Wilson said. "Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night—if the door was open, we were there. There's a big falling away from going to churches these days. After 9/11, the churches filled back up for a short time and then it gradually dropped right back out."

The conversation quieted for a moment, both of them looking out at the valley visible through the windows. The same ridges their people had worked for generations. The same creeks that carried water and stories in equal measure. "I go out on my back porch," Ann said finally, "and I think, why would I want to live anywhere but here?"

Wilson nodded. The land had changed hands, changed uses, changed rhythms. But it was still Spring Creek. Still home. And in the photographs spread across the table, in the stories they carried, in the building where they sat—built with rocks their fathers hauled and shaped—the past and present held each other close.

Some things fade. Some things last. And some things, if you tend them right, find new life in unexpected hands. The Spring Creek they knew as children would not return. But in its place, something else was growing: a community rebuilt not just by blood, but by choice. By people who came from away and decided to stay. By neighbors who saw value in what remained and worked to keep it alive.

Wilson and Ann had come full circle—born in these hills, raised by their rhythms, drawn away by necessity, and called back by something deeper than memory. They had returned to the land that made them and, in doing so, helped make a place for others to find home too.

The stories would continue. The photographs would be passed down. And the old school building, scarred and mended, would stand as proof that what matters most is not whether things stay the same, but whether they stay loved.

