

Early Spring Houses

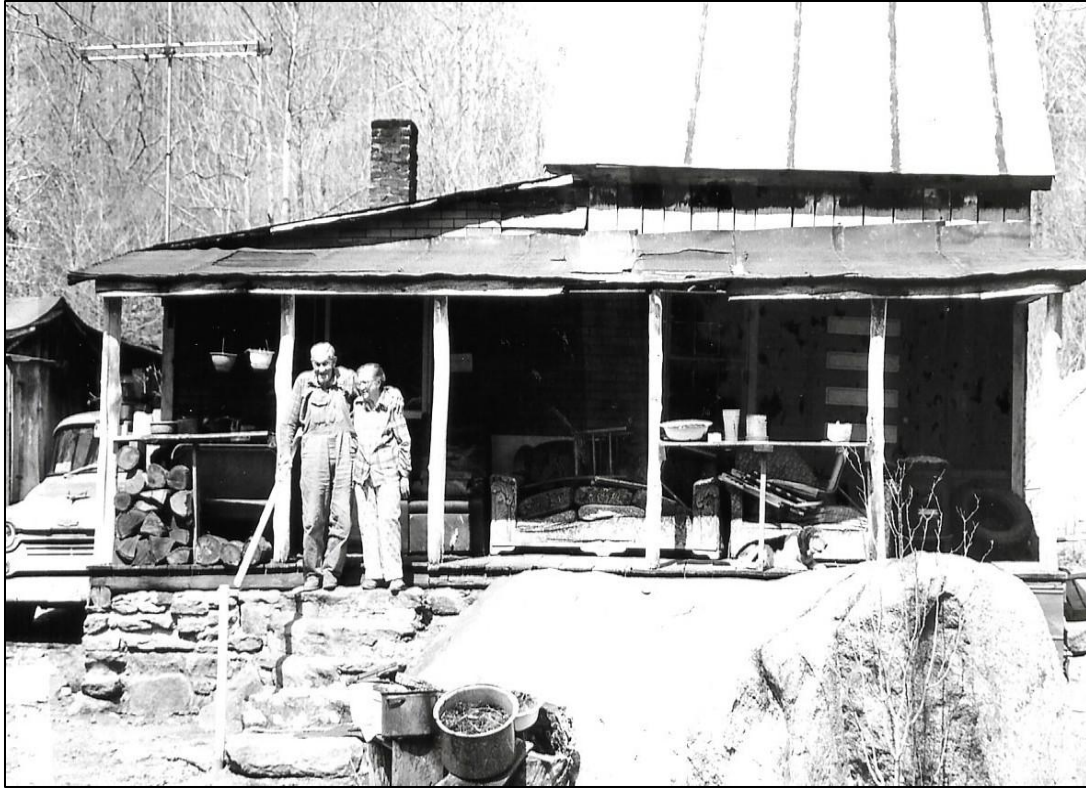
By Lynn Coffey



Before there were in-home ice boxes and later, the hum of refrigerators, people kept their milk, butter, cheese, eggs, and anything else perishable in a springhouse or spring box with cold clear water running through it. These structures relied on the steady flow of cold groundwater to create a consistently chilled interior. Springhouses on farms, both large and small, protected the clean water supply from dirt, debris, and animals. Built from rock, stone, or concrete, these small buildings or some type of box built over top of, or adjacent to, a natural spring, were an essential part of everyday living and served as a cold storage facility for food preservation. Larger springhouses may have had shelves made of wood or stone built into the walls where foodstuffs could be placed. Because

A small springhouse made of natural stone the houses were built of stone instead of wood, they survived long after many outbuildings have disappeared.

In the early 1980s, when I was first began publishing Backroads newspaper, one of the first interviews outside of the Love community I ever went on was over on Spruce Creek, to the rustic home of Vernon and Clara Truslow. As we were talking, Mr. Truslow asked if I would like to have a cold glass of spring water. It was a cold, icy March and I didn't particularly want a glass of water but to be polite, I said, "Yes, I'd love to have one." He brought back a clear glass with water so cold it formed ice on the outside. I noticed he had left the kitchen faucet on and when I said as much, he smiled and said that the water was gravity fed into the house and came out of the pipe and right back down the drain without every having to turn it on, or off. I thought that was pretty ingenious!



Vernon and Clora Truslow at their rustic Spruce Creek home



Closeup of the Truslow's on their front porch



Tamp Campbell's springhouse at the Pioneer Farm at Humpback Rocks Visitor Center

At the mountain farm located at Humpback Rocks Visitor Center (mile marker 5.8 on the Blue Ridge Parkway) one can meander through an early farmstead exhibit, complete with outbuildings that would have been part of a farm of that period. Although the buildings are not original, the area where William J. Carter and his family lived, is. The land was purchased by Carter in the late 1800s for three dollars an acre, Confederate money. In the 1950s, Parkway planners moved period buildings from other areas and arranged them on the property to show to show what a typical 19th century mountain farm might have looked like. The rustic log cabin belonged to Billy and Nannie Ramsey who built the cabin in 1890 and lived near the 51.4-mile marker on the Blue Ridge Parkway. The Ramsey's lived in the cabin for thirty years before it was moved to the Humpback Rocks Pioneer Farm. Every homestead was situated near a spring where fresh cold water was available at any time. The springhouse at the farm is constructed of logs set on a rock base and the inside shows the trench where the water passes through, with rock shelves on either side where foodstuffs could be stored. Lowell Humphreys of Montebello said the springhouse formerly belonged to George Tampton Polk Campbell of Cashtown before the government bought and moved it.

My husband, Billy, was raised back in a holler where there were no basic conveniences such as indoor plumbing, electricity, or telephone service, remembers the family spring

box; “The main spring was uphill and the water flowed down into a wooden box that was built overtop of the water. My mother would carry buckets of water up a steep hill to the cabin for all our personal use as well as for the 1,300 chickens my dad raised for a local hatchery. I loved clabbered milk, a by-product of the butter my mother churned, and would go to the spring box and tip up a crock to drink my fill. Mom always knew what I was up to by the white “mustache” attached to my upper lip!”

Billy also remembered his great-uncle, Jake Hewitt’s early springhouse that was photographed by Jack Jeffers in the 1960s. He recalled the enamel dipper that hung on the outside wall and said he took many a drink of the spring’s cold, clear water whenever he went to their house. When he saw the photo of the old springhouse in one of Jack’s books for the first time, he got very emotional at the sight. Later, after a cousin bought the Hewitt’s property, the old springhouse was torn down and another made of cinder blocks was built over the bold spring. I, myself, have opened the springhouse door and watched as water bubbled up from the earth in a constant flow that over many years has never gone dry, even in times of severe drought.



Jake Hewitt’s springhouse, 1960s. Photo by Jack Jeffers

In and around the community of Love, I photographed various springhouses or spring boxes that have been in use for many, many years. The earth continues to bring forth the icy cold water that people have depended on for generations and with its sweet taste and lack of chemicals, the water is pure and best of all, *free*.

