The Silvea cabin
Eric Silvea
Annie Kidd Wilhelm Bowen
Still House Road
By Sarah Clayton

"I was born right here in this cabin. All eight of us were," says 85-year-old Annie Kidd Wilhelm Clark Bowen of the 16 by 20 foot, early 19th century log house on Still House Road. The old wooden shingles on the roof are matted with moss, the front porch sagging with age. No other house mars the view. And, if you're quiet, you hear the creek sing.

"The outhouse was back by the chicken coop," says Annie, next to the youngest Wilhelm child, and a slender, neat woman of calm demeanor. "We had pots in the house. Chamber pots. No electricity. Oil lamps. We'd carry them, you know, from one room to another. If we'd finished in the kitchen and come into the living room, then we'd usually bring a lamp. Saturday was the day you trimmed the wicks and filled 'em."

"It was country work," says Annie. "I mean, it was work, but I enjoyed it. I didn't feel like I worked all the time. We went to church. We went to school. We had chores. That's the way it was. We didn't know any different."

Annie is leaning against the chinked logs, taking it all in, and I wonder what she's seeing from the past that's been stored up in her head. To me it's just an out-of-central-casting, quaint log cabin. I often rode my horse by in my teens. I've seen many such cabins in my years in Rockbridge County but many have rotted away, or the logs repurposed into other log structures—bigger cabins, barns, even an outhouse.

The Silvea place is still in good shape, though on edge. The side lawn by the rock wall is a river of yellow daffodils. “You just can’t believe how is was when you think back,” continues Annie. “All the things we have now. It’s better. Back then you just made do.”

Annie’s grandfather, James W. Wilhelm (1852-1930) of German origin (Michael H. Wilhelm Sr., her great-great-great grandfather, was born in Germany in 1756 and died in Indiana in 1846), bought the place from the Morris family in the early 20th century. It’s just up the road from Higgins Hollow. Annie’s paternal great-grandmother, Susannah, was a Higgins. Her grandmother was Laura Entsminger, and her maternal great-grandmother, Margaret Carter, was a Morris. These families intertwine throughout the history of Rockbridge County. The cabin dates to 1801, according to family lore, so has been in one branch or other of the Silvea family for most of its life.

Annie’s nephew, Eric Lawton Silvea, has joined us on the porch. “If your family’s been here for 200 years,” he says with a laugh, “ you’re related to everybody.”

The lone cabin sits in a three-mile-long, narrow valley that parallels the eastern length of Little House Mountain, its prominent view from Lexington. Most of the road has never been paved. In my teen years, one of my great forays of freedom was riding my horse, Leprechaun, through the valley on my way to Goshen Pass, 15 miles away where my horse and I both learned to swim.

There were few houses along the road then, and I trotted along in a world that recalled, in its untrammeled isolation, the early 1700s, when the first European settlers to the area began farming the fields along the foot of the mountain.

If she was outside, I'd wave to Annie's older sister, Mary Wilhelm Silvea, who, with her husband, George Pendleton Silvea, moved into the cabin after the rest of the family relocated to town in 1946. Mrs. Silvea, as I knew her, helped my mother in our house, the early 19th century Madison Dunlap house overlooking Rt. 60 about three miles from the Silvea cabin.

Mary and George raised their two children, Billy and Elizabeth, as Mary and Annie had been raised—outdoor plumbing and water hauled from the spring, though they eventually put in a coal furnace and electricity. When Billy inherited the property, he had a well drilled, and dug out a basement.

"I remember seeing old Mr. Bennington, Charles Bennington, coming over the top of that hill," says Eric, pointing towards the last rise across the creek before the land becomes mountain, "walk down through the field and climb over the fence there. Most of the time he'd have his bib overalls on and no shirt. He lived in a shack up on the mountain above Timmy's [Timmy Smith}. Had a CB radio and talked to the truckers. Gettin' into arguments with them too." Eric laughs. "Dad said Charles would work all day for a six pack of beer. They dug out a basement here by hand with shovels and a wheelbarrow. For two people to dig that much dirt was huge."

Mary Silvea, Eric's grandmother, helped my mother in the house once a week throughout my childhood. Every Thursday, out she'd come, and work away like a calm, silent machine. I remember the great respect the two women had for each other; they were both hard

workers. Years later, Mrs. Silvea's daughter, Elizabeth, who worked at Virginia Military Institute, kept candy in her office for visits from my youngest son, Edward.

"My grandmother would tell us stories about the families she worked for," says Eric. "Nothing bad. Just stories. It was like regular TV for us, those stories." There was never a television at the cabin, but Eric remembers being told about a radio. Mary and George moved into town in the 1970's, leaving the cabin to stand guard over the family's vegetable garden.

"The family called coming out here, 'going to the country,'" says Eric, who inherited the cabin from his father, Billy. "Sometimes it'd just be me and my grandmother, sprinkling Sevin dust to keep the bugs off the plants, or weeding. We'd fill up bushel baskets with whatever was ripe. I don't think anyone today knows what a real bushel is. It's made of wood. I can remember coming out of here with the car trunk loaded with vegetables."

Eric's cousin, Timmy Smith, lives in the next hollow over and had a big garden, too. "Everything that came out of this garden and everything that came out of that garden was divided up into what each segment of the family needed. I can remember sitting on the front porch of Timmy's place, all of us—my aunt, my uncle, Timmy, Granny Hostetter, Timmy's brothers--snapping beans and throwing them in the same pile. Then we'd divide it up."

"In the winter, we'd go hunting," says Eric. "A lot of people think hunting is 'we gotta' kill something….gotta' get the buck with the big horns'. It never was like that for us. If you got a deer, you were happy because you had it to eat for the winter, but it was really more about getting out in the woods and being with family. I still come out and hunt some. I use a crossbow now. Seems more fair."

"Once a year, in the Spring, we'd all gather at Timmy's place," says Eric, "which was Granny Hostetter's at the time, and we'd walk all the way up to Student Rock on the mountain. Six or 10 of us. Straight up the mountain. Hanging onto trees. It was tough. It was an all-day hike."

A bird calls out.

"Pigeon?" I ask.

"A 'rain dove,' my grandpaw called it," says Annie.

We all listen to the soft cooing. Time has, indeed, slowed up. I have no idea how long we've been here, and don't bother to look at my watch.

"Timmy had a potato patch above his house," says Eric. "And blackberries. We'd go up there and pick blackberries. My grandmother would make homemade blackberry wine. I don't remember anyone drinking it; I never really saw any drinking in the house. But she gave me a sip. I remember a real strong blackberry taste."

In my ride on Leprechaun down the valley with its steep, wooded hills on both sides, the mountain kept poking its head above the trees, then disappearing, and popping up again, in a way that felt almost intimate, as if it was toying with me as I rode along, a child playing peek-a-boo. I'd start looking for it to appear at certain bends in the road. By the time I emerged from the valley, just before Rt. 60, I could look back and see the twin peaks of both mountains in full view, majestic, indifferent and remote. I rode on.

“My mother,” says Annie, “was a seamstress in town, at the cleaners. She made my clothes. You know those seed sacks with the colored pictures? She made all my little skirts and dresses from them. She’d stay all week with my married sister, then one of my sisters would bring her out on Friday night. We all went to church. Ebenezer ARP. Daddy never did learn to drive so we walked [three miles roundtrip]. “And everyone came back here for lunch. With wives and husbands. Children. We’d walk up the road, go to my other grandparents. We’d get in the yard. Play ball. My mother cooked the meal with my older sisters. One of them took her back to town when they left.”

“Daddy (Henry Gardner Wilhelm 1889-1970)) looked after us during the week,” says Annie. “Daddy would help the farmers around here. He was a good man. He called me ‘baby’ up till I got married. You never heard him yell, cuss or anything like that.”

He also walked the mile to the school bus with her every morning. “We went to school in the snow,” she remembers. “Very seldom did they call school back then. Now they do at the drop of a hat. We just had Oxfords, we called ‘em, to wear. Lace ups. We wore those things out like you wouldn’t believe.”

Mr. Wilhelm, a Rockbridge County native, quit school in the fourth grade; his daughter, Mary Silvea, in the fifth. Grandson Billy went two years to Dabney Lancaster Community College, and his great grandson, Eric, attended James Madison University. This is a common thread around the mountain, each generation standing on the shoulders of the previous one, ever expanding their options.

The Silveas arrived in Rockbridge County by way of Selby Marsh, Maryland, named after one Captain Edward Selby or Silbie, an Englishman given a land grant of 490 acres there in 1652. Eric's four-times great grandfather, Edward Silvey, was born in 1781 in Prince Edward County in south central Virginia before moving to Rockbridge County by way of Charlotte County (1820) and Botetourt County (1840). He died in Rockbridge in 1856 and was buried in a "farm cemetery," which Eric thinks must be the small graveyard near Glasgow.

"It didn't look like this when we grew up," says Annie, taking stock of the overgrown fields back of the house and the mostly tree-covered valley. "You could see all the way to the woods. And all the way up to the curve of the road." The view is now blocked by large cedar trees.

"My grandparents' house was up there," says Annie, pointing up the hill behind the cabin. "And the milk cow,"

It's been a while since Annie's been out at the home place and is obviously enjoying the visit. "We had a spring over there [across the road] by the big sycamore. And a big milk box down in the spring. I had to go over in the morning and get the butter and milk for breakfast. I'd freeze my butt in the winter. We had a woodstove in the kitchen. Woodstove in the living room. One in the dining room. Left the door open for the heat to get upstairs. But it got cold."

The upstairs of the cabin was a single, communal bedroom for all eight children, although by the time Annie was born in 1927, two of her brothers had already left home. On the main floor are two rooms—a living room and a bedroom. Off the back used to be an added on, lean-to kitchen.

"People made comforts back then," says Annie. "Now they call 'em quilts. With matting. We'd piece them together. Like if you made a dress and have pieces left over. You take and put them together. My parents helped. My sisters helped."

"We had hogs, chickens, guineas, turkeys," says Annie. "We sold turkeys. People'd come out here to get 'em. Grew everything—beans, potatoes, squash, tomatoes, corn. Stored the canned goods upstairs. There was no basement back then."

Which is odd for a Rockbridge County home. There's a smell to these old basements that can take me back to childhood in a single sniff. A musty, cloying mixture of damp earth and limestone. One whiff and I'm back amongst the long, crude shelves covered in quart jars of canned food, their colors—tomato and beet red, bean and pickle green, and corn yellow—richly display like old masters' paintings in the dim light of these semi-underground or completely buried rooms.

Some of those jars will have been there for years, and are covered in a thick crust of dust, creating an aura of intrigue and terror for a young child told to get a quart of beans for supper. Blacksnakes seek the cool of these rooms in the summer and their relative warmth in winter. I'd always stop on the bottom step and peer around before going any farther. I imagined snakes dropping on my head. They never did, though it didn't reassure me to see a freshly sloughed off snake skin draped over a beam or nail. Over my many years of living in 200-year-old Rockbridge County homes, I have had blacksnakes show up on the stairs, in the kitchen, and even in my bedroom. But that's another story.

“My aunt always said this place was loaded with copperheads,” says Eric. “But the only snakes I’ve ever seen here were blacksnakes.”

Eric also remembers his father telling him of a game he and his sister played called ‘going to Hollywood’. “They’d race each other around on their stick horses,” says Eric, “calling out they were ‘going to Hollywood.’ They had special landmarks in the field on their way. Hollywood was all the way to the end of the field.”

Eric moved away from Rockbridge County when he was seven. His parents divorced and his mother moved to Lynchburg, though returned to visit every two weeks. “On the way back to Lynchburg,” he says, “I would start the two-week countdown till I could come back. Doesn’t matter where you go. When you see that mountain, you know you’re home. I always felt this was the place for me.”

We move inside as the day is clouding up and blowing cold, and rearrange ourselves on various chairs and benches amongst the storage. I pour out cups of tea from my Thermos. The light through the dirty windows turns the chaos within—old gardening tools, several saws, a a couple of rocking chairs, a real, wooden bushel basket, bits of chain, a table that’s become the dumping ground for things saved “just in case”—into a rich panoply of diffuse light and saturated color. Even the shadows have texture. I feel like a ghost.

“Don’t get me wrong,” says Eric, once we’re all settled. The rain is thrumming on the roof. “Lynchburg was a great place to grow up as a child. Compared to here, it’s a big city. Not like New York, but I feel I got kind of an advantage because I know what’s different out there.

I'm what you call a hybrid 'cause I grew up in the lifestyle of the mountains, you know, but I also grew up part time in the city. I have something to compare life here to. And this is better. A slower life. As a child, I just wanted to get back but didn't really know why."

After college, Eric returned to Lexington and found work wherever he could in Rockbridge County. At the Blue Bird school bus factory in Buena Vista; the Natural Bridge Learning Center for delinquent boys; and, finally, at the Rockbridge Regional Jail, from which he retired in 2019.

"Family and the way of life brought me back here," he says. "'Bout the time I got out of school, my uncle got sick. Once again, you kick in to help the family. I took my uncle to the doctors and stuff like that. I think you have an obligation to look after family. I guess my family's always looked after each other, so it's automatic for me. My aunt and uncle took care of my grandmother till she died. Family took care of me when I was an infant."

Eric and his wife, Kim, looked after her father for seven years at the end of his life in their elegant suburban home outside Lexington. And are now doing the same for her mother.

We take a breather, and pull out of the old world for a refill of tea. Eric looks around the cabin and laughs. "What goes through your mind when you think of eight children living in this house? Like a pile of mice or groundhogs. Like a navy ship where everybody's sleeping on top of one another."

It's something I think about every time I drive by this idyllic cabin on my way to town via the recycling center in Kerr's Creek. But just can't imagine.

“I guess they only needed one hook a piece to hang their clothes on, “ says Eric. “Sunday best was the only nice set of clothes anybody had. Only time they wore them was to church, weddings or funerals. Probably had one or two sets of work clothes. Wearing one while the other one is being washed.”

“You’d think most people would see a place like this and do everything they could to get out of here. Get somewhere else. None of my family who ever lived here expressed to me they couldn’t wait to get out. I never heard any negative stories about this place.”

Eric and his father have, from time to time, made efforts to renovate the cabin but his dad’s passing, and lack of time, job and his own family’s needs have stalled the dream. His sisters and wife have no interest in the old building.

“I still come out here and mow. When I was a kid, I guess 9 or 10, I use to push-mow the whole six or seven acres. Gas-powered but you had to push it. Granny would push till she got tired then I’d push till I got tired. It just never seemed like work to me.”

“After I finish mowing now, I sit on the porch and listen to the birds or the creek. The cows mooing. Then I get the phone call from my wife. “Are you coming home?”

Eric laughs. “I always say, ‘I’m just finishing up’. Then I sit there another 30 or 40 minutes.”

In 2019, Eric sold the cabin to a couple from Virginia Beach, the first time the house has been out of the family in over 200 years ago. Annie died 23 Dec. 2020.