

The old time spring house

By Bill Parman

An institution of many depression era hill country homes in the Kentucky Appalachians was the spring house. It was the source of fresh buckets of mountain spring water for the house and it provided a primitive form of refrigeration for milk and butter. It was a shelter or shed made of stone, logs or planks. It covered and protected the cold water spring basin against blowing leaves and dirt as well as roving livestock. We considered the water to be ice cold. Nobody measured its temperature in Fahrenheit, but it was cold enough to make teeth hurt and cause toes on a bare foot to turn blue. Spring water usually had satisfying taste. It was not unusual for someone ill with a fever who could not eat or drink to ask a friend to fetch him a jar of fresh water from one of those spring houses. Like as not, when the sick person drank it they could keep it down. It likely had no medicinal value, but the spring house gave a cool, fresh water image in the memory that probably helped.

The spring house's stream side was a closable door or gate with a sliding latch or a wooden button which rotated on a nail to lock or unlock the gate. It welcomed the people who came for water, and turned away cattle, dogs, pigs and hopefully some wild varmints. The basin of the spring was fashioned to provide space for cooling milk and butter, and there was a pool of clear water for dipping water into buckets for household use. It was common to find a gourd hanging on the front of the house for the dipping and drinking at the spring. People old and young stood at the spring house and quenched their thirst and talked much as they do today at the water cooler. It was not customary to allow anyone to lie down and drink directly out of the spring basin or to wash their

hands or face in the basin. The bottom of the basin was normally smooth rock which was periodically cleaned of all leaves and silt which might accumulate. This caused the basin to be temporarily murky but it would quickly return to crystal clear as fresh water flowed in from the orifice. Covered pails of fresh milk would be sitting in the cold water to a depth of four or five inches and the butter crock might have to have a rock on top to keep it from floating.

Pollution was a concern in those days. In the dog days of August, some springs failed to flow sufficiently to

keep the water fresh. Then there was the occasional case where some small animal like a mouse, snake or rabbit might crawl up inside the water source out of sight and die, contaminating the water but not necessarily being detectable. Someone found that a school of tiny minnows from the creek would die in the spring basin but they would die or at least become listless if the water became polluted. They were used as watch dogs on the water source. The human water carriers were instructed to be sure the minnows were swimming in a lively fashion when they took water. Of course, when city cousins came visiting, the country kids liked to show them the spring house and offer them a drink from the gourd. The cup or gourd offered would always contain one of the small minnows swimming briskly around its perimeter. Δ

