Uncle Billy Slaved to Buy The Farm He Called His Own

By Arlene Edwards
Staff Reporter

ff (left) and her sister Miss Ida in the ; cabin their daddy yearned to buy and finally did.

STONY RIDGE — It took Uncle Billy Cundiff a long time to buy his farm.

He had nine children and, as one of the two surviving ones recalls, "By the time all those young'uns got fed, he didn't have anything left to sell."

But every time he dug his hoe into someone else's soil he dreamed about owning some soil of his own.

And when he heard that a Mr. Gordon from down around Rural Hall was willing to sell his log cabin at Stony Ridge and the 60 rocky acres around it for $500 he just had to try to buy it.

He didn't begin to have that kind of money. But he had something more important — a friend named Milton Cundiff.

Milton Cundiff was the son of Kit Cundiff, the man who had bought Billy's mother to help farm his river bottom plantation at Siloam back in 1860.

He and Billy had been exactly the same age — 10 years old — at the time.

And, since Billy was too young to be a productive slave, he was allowed to spend his days playing with Milton. By the time the Civil War ended, the two boys "felt like they were brothers."

Consequently, "after the surrender," Billy chose to remain on the Cundiff land, to farm, to marry and to produce his nine children.

He and Milton were 47 years old when the Stony Ridge farm was put up for sale.

Milton had, by that time, started the Siloam Academy and was well on his way to becoming the superintendent of Surry County's school.

So, when he "stood" with Billy to buy the farm, Mr. Gordon knew his money was guaranteed.

The story of this friendship was told recently by Billy Cundiff's two surviving children — Misses Ida and Isabell Cundiff of Mount Airy.

The tiny sisters, who are so much alike that people sometimes call them "Ida-Isabell" to eliminate confusion, have agreed to sell what remains of the farm to the state as an addition to Pilot Mountain State Park.

The property would be combined with several other parcels to form a 200-acre campground and rest and recreation area for people hiking or riding horseback along the long, skinny corridor of land connecting the mountain and Yadkin River sections of the park.

The Cundiff cabin is considered a bonus, a sort of built-in interpretive center for a way of life that has all but disappeared.

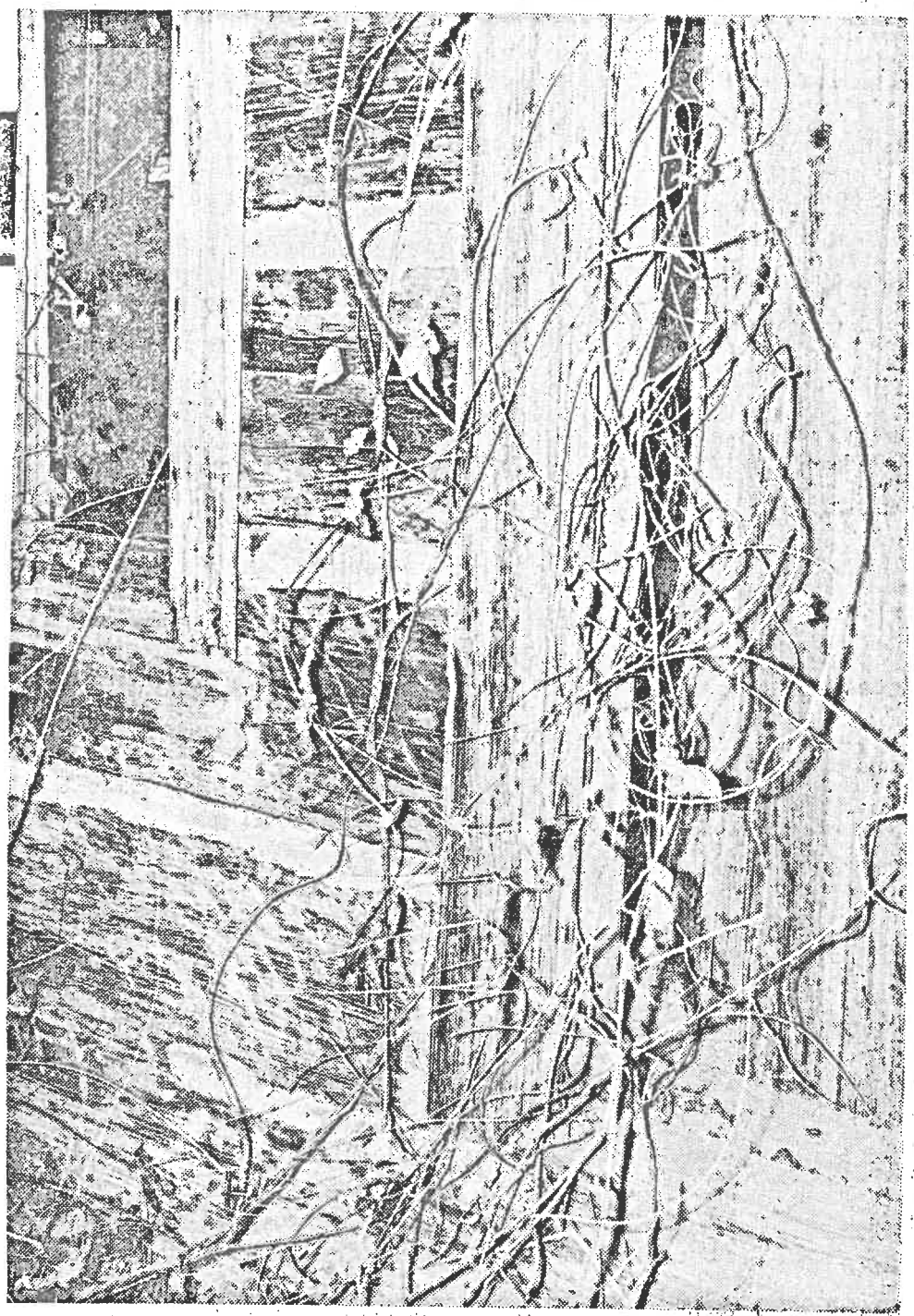
Ida, Isabell and their sister Dora were the only children still at home when their father and his straight-haired part-Indian wife, the former Jane Sawyer, moved into the cabin.

And they moved away after a very few years to earn $1.50 a week doing domestic work in Mount Airy.

But their memories are vivid of those piles of rock their father and his mule had to plow out of the fields before they could tend them, of the eggs they had to sell for sugar and coffee, of the miles they had to walk to school and to church, of the way their father could read the Bible but couldn't read the newspaper.

The memories came flooding back when they walked around inside the cabin for the first time in more than 15 years.

The porch has rotted away. A floorboard or two is missing. And the once-colorful wallpaper now hangs in yellowed strings.



Creeping vines make an interesting pattern against the old logs of cabin, once the nucleus of Billy Cundiff's 60-acre farm.

But — thanks to a new tin-roof that Cundiff put on the cabin just before he died 41 years ago—most of the hand-hewed logs that form the walls are as sturdy as they were in 1907 when he bought the cabin.

His daughters have managed to keep the farm together — while buying a place of their own in Mount Airy — by renting its tobacco allotment to raise the money for taxes.

And, even now they hate to see it go out of their family.

"Our daddy," they explained, "worked so-o-o hard there."