

The Old Kent Ranch: Little River Farming Tradition, Past and Present

Story by Margi Gomez

In the mid 1800s, the small coastal town of Little River was then called Beall's Harbor, after the three Beall [pronounced "Bell"] brothers who were among the first to settle in the area as game hunters. The area was just beginning to stir in response to the extravagant promises of the California gold rush. Three years after his marriage to Charlotte Curtis Cofren, William Henry Kent of Mount Vernon, Maine, came to California in 1850 to try his luck in its gold mines. It was a three-month voyage by ship, traveling around Cape Horn to the port of San Francisco. Finding the life in the gold fields hazardous to his health, he traveled north, working for a time as a rancher in Anderson Valley, as a mill worker, and as a logger up Big River. He purchased the approximately six hundred-acre Beall property and retreated to cabin life there, while still working in the woods and at the seasonal mills in what was then called Mendocino City.

For five years, William and Charlotte Kent exchanged beautifully written missives in which they declared their fondness and loyalty, one to the other. The letters made their way between Little River, or Kent's Landing, as it came to be known, and Vienna, Maine, where Charlotte was living with her family. Charlotte fretted all the while, as learned in this letter to William in 1853:

"My dear husband, ...it is truly a great privilege that I write...but very far greater would be my happiness to see you in person. Often do I see you in the hours of slumber but alas when I awake it is all a dream." She continues, "...I think if you are unfortunate now it is high time you leave California. If it is certain that fate is against you why not submit to it and let it go..."

She complains of poor health and sleepless nights, and considers, then quickly rejects, the notion of making the long trip around the Isthmus of Panama by steamship. "...There is nothing that will restore me to health again but for you to come home as soon as you can. You spoke in your letter about my going to California. I would gladly meet in that land but I don't think I should live to get (there) if I should start to go alone, that is to go with a stranger. I don't know anyone who is going and I don't think Wm. you would want me to go alone so I think it is best to say no more about it."

Practical concerns, of course, must also be considered. Charlotte inserts, "You spoke of sending me 300 the next mail. I shall be very glad to get it...for I have seen very dark times since your absence." She goes on, "If you come home and think to go back you will have me for your company...Never will anything but death separate us again, no never never."

Charlotte chats, "I am rejoiced to hear there is no change in you, that you look as you did when you went away, that your hair is no grayer than when you left." She then chides, "I don't want a mail to pass without getting a letter. I write you every mail and I think my letters are rather longer than yours don't you say?," adding, "Everyone laughs and glories in your spunk...If you come home this spring I shall be so happy...How far are you from San Francisco and who is this a company that takes care of your letters? Do explain yourself."

After signing off as, "Your affectionate wife, Charlotte," she adds a hefty postscript, "P.S., Mother sends her love to you (and) wants you to come home. Write often don't forget it. Write all the news about yourself. I shall write again in two weeks. Good Afternoon, Charlotte."

William's brother Daniel also writes regularly. He begins a letter, written in 1852, "I received your favor this day and right glad was I to hear from you." After complimenting William on his "New England 'go-aheaditiveness'" he opines, "Success go ahead but mind not grab so much that you cannot hold anything." Daniel wastes no time entreating William as to pity his wife, who he refers to as "a young widow in this frozen north country," and reminds William that, "Father was called away the 20 of Nov last so you see one after another of the old men are going and may you and I be enabled to fill their places," and suggests that he might come home to Maine in

order to, "...raise up some boys to fill the gaps in Maine that California has made." He waxes poetical, asking that his brother, "Hold on a minute till I punch the fire and smoke a pipe of tobacco—I have smoked and taken some cider and feel as the boy did after his father whipped him, quite refreshed." Daniel Kent continues, "If all accounts are true you have got money enough...so come home and live with your wife and not stay there cooped up in a six by nine camp darnin your own socks and washing your own shirt or is worse wearing a dirty one and working sixteen hours a day."

Letters from William to his family are more scarce, with only one letter archived at the Kelley House Museum [in Mendocino]. Opening with, "Dear Wife," William responds to a number of specific questions she has put to him, and then goes on, "...you wished to know how we live. It is well, we have plenty of fine cakes, mince & apple, & a colored man to cook them." William ends the letter, "As to the land that I took up it is not on this River, & I left it because I could do better under the present circumstances. Give my respects to brother Wife," (underlined), "... & all that enquire, yours Truly, W.W. Kent."

Charlotte arrived in San Francisco in 1857 after her own harrowing voyage. From *Saga of Little River*, compiled by Nannie Flood Escola and Julia Moungovan, and recorded in *Little River Yesteryears, 1853–1965* by Irene Mallory Macdonald, we get this account: "They took passage from New York...fraught with all the tedious vexations of a sea voyage on the rough Atlantic...they arrived at the isthmus, which they crossed on the second train of cars that ever passed over the road...On this side they embarked on the steamer *Golden Age*, arriving in San Francisco...They expected, of course, to meet their husbands...communications were not so perfect in those days as now...Just at the time the husbands expected to start to San Francisco to meet their wives, a heavy rainstorm caused all the streams to swell beyond their ordinary flood levels; and they were detained for three weeks, during which time the ladies were doing the best they could under the circumstances..."

"When they had parted at their Eastern home, Mr. Kent was dressed as an American citizen, having on a dress suit, white shirt, and all the et ceteras that go to make up the garb of an Eastern gentleman of a quarter of a century ago. But when they met how changed was his appearance! He had on a blue flannel shirt, checked pants, black cravat, and all the other articles of apparel that were usually worn by early Californians."

The intrepid group spent the night at a hotel in Petaluma frequented by travelers such as themselves, then by carriage to Cloverdale, the cost for which was twenty dollars. From Cloverdale to Mendocino was by "Indian pony," on the only trail through Anderson Valley to the coast.

It is not clear where the couple lived for the next few years. In 1857 William bought title to the coast property from the Beall brothers, and he began to build the stately home that still sits along Highway 1 in Little River that many current coast residents think of as the Spring Ranch farmhouse. William and Charlotte had two sons, Everett William and Warren Nathaniel, whose own families continued to farm and raise their children on the Kent homestead.

William and Charlotte Kent are credited with planting the first eucalyptus trees on the coast. The large stand still lines Highway 1, just north of Little River, creating a landmark which has been well loved by coastal residents and visitors throughout the years. The Kents were also among the first to begin the practice of planting cypress trees in hedgerows on the coast, pruning them for use as windbreaks.

As an educated man with experience in both mining and logging, William's privileged upbringing and business acumen served him in good stead, both in his investment and with his farming enterprise. According to the *Mendocino Beacon* of the time, his was the only dairy farm for more than 120 miles. Eventually he raised beef cattle as well, feeding the lumbering camps as well as the growing town of Mendocino.

According to the U.S. census of 1860, in that year he owned forty-five dairy cows, which produced a thousand pounds of butter, and an additional head of cattle for other purposes. By 1870 he also owned 150 sheep and 18 pigs. Within years of settling on the old Beall property, the 1870 census lists Kent's occupation as butcher, and he continued to consolidate that business, buying, processing, and selling both beef and mutton to mills and local residents. It is believed that he eventually kept a butchery shop along Main Street in Mendocino, at the

bottom of Kasten Street, across from what is now Out of This World [a telescope and science toy shop in Mendocino]. Census reports also show that at this time, the farm was harvesting 200 bushels of potatoes and 400 apple and peach trees that provided 260 bushels of fruit, and was producing 200 tons of hay.

Many colorful reminiscences by Charlotte and William's granddaughter, Ruth Hood, are on file at the Kelley House Museum [located on Albion Street in Mendocino]. In this account from the Mendocino Beacon of the time, Ruth remembers her childhood:

"...On Sundays, all the young people in the summertime would collect at the beach. We'd play cards or just talk and really enjoy ourselves because the old gray mare was our only form of transportation and you couldn't go very far. Sometimes we'd go out to the woods and have a picnic or go berrying...Life on the ranch was hard work. I was the oldest girl in the family. I had to do most of the work. I'd get up at 5 o'clock every morning and cook breakfast for a bunch. We had a dairy ranch, so these big milk things had to be washed. You had to rinse them out and lift them. I think one empty weighs ten or fifteen pounds. Boy that was work. You'd wash them and turn them upside down to dry."

In 1941, the Kents sold their Little River ranch to Hollywood movie stars Harry and Ilona Ueberroth, who used the stage names Alan Curtis and Ilona Massey. The two were well known for such movies as *New Wine*, *Going Fast*, and *Heliotrope*. Although a Mendocino Beacon article about the sale speaks of planned improvements to buildings and to the dairy herd, the couple is believed to have used the house mainly as a retreat. Within three years, in 1944, the ranch was sold to Virgil and Elvira Chiado of Lodi who became friends with Sidney and Clora Spring, a local Mendocino farming couple. According to Sid's daughter-in-law Gypsy Spring, Sid used to help Virgil with his sheep. Virgil's wife Elvira was a paraplegic, and her husband sold the property cheaply to the Springs with the understanding that they would care for Elvira until she died. They took care of her for over twenty years. Sid Spring was one of the first professional sheep shearers on the coast, and would travel from farm to farm on shearing jobs. Sid and Clora had four children: Alan, Carol, Dale, and Glen. The four children, including Alan's wife Beth and Glen's wife Gypsy, lived and worked on the ranch.

The Springs ran a self-sufficient operation on the Kent homestead for three decades, keeping up to two hundred sheep, and selling the wool to a carpet cooperative, as well as selling sheep for sale. Alan is an avid recycler and ace mechanic, and kept many of the old farm implements in use. They also kept sows for sale, and a small number of milk cows. They raised sugar beets as feed for the pigs, and hay for sale and as livestock feed. As populations in the area grew and changed, eventually the decision was made by the Springs to cease the raising of animals because of constant problems with predation by packs of domestic dogs, despite their many efforts to protect their sheep, including sleeping out in the fields with them. They always maintained a large produce garden, kept chickens, quail, and pigeons. Sid kept bees in numerous other properties along the coast, as well.

In 1996, Sid sold a large chunk of the property to the west of the highway to Bob Raymond, who later sold it to California State Parks. In his later years, Sid and his former wife Clora sold the rest of the oceanside acreage to the California Coastal Conservancy, which was placed in a trust for State Parks. Sid's daughter, Carol Spring Witte, inherited the old farmhouse, and sold it to Derek Webb, who is making much needed improvements while renting the house out as a vacation rental.

All of Sid's beloved sheep are now gone, but Gypsy and Glen Spring, and Beth and Alan Spring, still live and work on the forty-acre parcel in back of the "Big House." The Spring family still continues the farming tradition, with Gypsy and Glen focusing on high-quality garlic and strawberries, with Beth and Alan growing their delightful homegrown lettuce for lucky coast residents as well as a variety of other produce available at area farmers markets. Meanwhile, travelers going north along the Coast Highway continue to enjoy the whimsical scarecrow, made of welded shovel heads, that welcomes them to the Mendocino Coast, and the sweeping headlands to the west that will be accessible to visitors and locals for many more decades to come.

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