

B05: Willburn family history as it relates to the NFERW

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the Willburn family information that is relevant to this study. This overview is NOT a history of the Willburn family—only a summary of the information, references, and other historical data collected by the author over the last 35 years.

The Willburn family is one of the most prominent families living in southwestern Trinity County. Refer to the *People and Places* section for individual entries for Willburn family members residing within the NFERW. Numerous entries by the Willburns can be found in the Homestead and Indian Allotment sections. Also, the Appendixes include a number of interviews with members of the Willburn family.

Background

After the Asbills and Jim Neafus spent the winter of 1854/55 in Hettenshaw Valley, the first settlers arrived in 1856 or 1857 when Captain James St. Clair Willburn and his brother Hiram David Willburn settled in Hettenshaw Valley (Robb 1978: 11).

[Note that Jim Willburn was sometimes referred to as "Grizzly Jim" Willburn (see below for how he got this nickname). Some current family members prefer that this name not be used.]

Originally Zenia was called Poison Camp and several miners from the Weaverville mining region traveled to the area and camped near a spring (with larkspur that killed several of their animals—hence the name Poison Camp). The men included James Howe, Green French, Commodore Peabody, Abe Rogers, and George Burgess; a manuscript containing the Burgess family history indicates that Steve Fleming and Jim Willburn were also with this group. If that was the case, it is likely that these men visited the area sometime in the year 1856 or 1857 and explains how Willburn, Fleming, and Howe ended up in Hettenshaw Valley at this early date. Some information suggests that Howe was already living there when the Willburns arrived. The 1860 tax roll shows Howe owning property in Hettenshaw, but he is not listed on the 1880 census.

[See Keter 1990: 5-6 for more on the Hettenshaw Valley region in the 1860s.]

When the Asbills returned to the valley in 1857, they found it occupied by the Willburns who were living with Indian women. Several Indians were also working for them. Like the Asbills, the Willburns planned to sell deer hides to Kingsley's trading post (Carranco and Beard 1981: 173). William Kent (1926: 84) mentions in a memoir of the Yolla Bolly region that it was common for "deer-slaying hide hunters" to have Indian women living with them who did the tanning with deer brains and smoke.

The old homestead was located near an historic barn built in about the 1930s (see Lee

Stapp interview A6: I#448) that was still standing in the early 1990s (I recorded this site and there are photos and a drawing of the barn in the site record). The location is at the southern end of Hettenshaw valley--just to the north of the watershed divide between the North Fork and Van Duzen. The barn straddled the divide with the south slope of the roof draining into the NFER and the north draining into the Van Duzen.

According to Robb (1981: 361) a tragedy occurred (no date was given) in nearby Refuge Valley when Jim and Hiram Willburn's father Edward (Robb uses the name "Ned") Willburn and Hiram Willburn's wife burned to death when their cabin caught fire (see below).

The following section (from Keter 1993: 19-20) presents a rather romantic view of the life of the residents living in the back woods of southern Trinity County. It is condensed from the original and was written by a reporter working for the *Daily Evening Bulletin* (October 27, 1871) after visiting Hettenshaw Valley.

Ketten Chow [Hettenshaw] Valley

...this valley is about four miles long north to south, by a mile in width of a good soil, full of rich grass, nourishing many cattle and horses, a little wheat, no fruit at all, a sufficiency of vegetables and roasting ears, and is subject to three or four feet of snow, and occasional terrible north winds...

There are four families in it, all Texans, and all related, farming, together with others four miles distant on Mad River, quite a family colony. They live here in a large rude luxury of meat, milk, venison, not wheat bread, and strong coffee, thirty miles from a post office, forty from priest or doctor, greatly happy and healthy. Visited this year by the census-taker for the first time, and by the tax-gatherer for the second time....

Up about Ketten Chow for a number of days I ate venison all the while. A man goes out and shoots a fine buck, hangs it up on his porch, head downward, and cuts it away, slice after slice, clear up, and it keeps good to the last. J. Willburn recently carried a thousand deer-skins over to Red Bluff--the product of his year's hunt and that of a few Indians, whom he supplies with guns and ammunition. He has been known to take twenty-two hundred, as a years harvest.

According to Irene Willburn Stapp (A6 I#316) her great-grandfather, James [St.] Claiborne Wilburn, was a Caucasian from Texas who was stationed at Fort Rascal (see entry--this Fort probably never existed but Willburn was in the Mountaineer Battalion. See also Keter 1990). When the Indian Wars were over he returned to Texas. For services rendered (during the war with Mexico) he was granted 400+ acres of public domain lands.. He picked the acreage in Hettenshaw Valley. This grant was awarded in 1883 (see Lowden's 1894 map A2: 05 and Base Map). When James returned to Hettenshaw Valley he met, and later married, Irene's great-grandmother.

Some information indicated that she was a full-blooded Wintu from the Hyampom area.

[Update 2017

James Willburn's wife Mary was from the head of Cottonwood Creek near what is today the Harrison Gulch Ranger Station and is buried in the S.R.F.M. (Solid Rock Foundation Ministry) Cemetery in Hettenshaw (personal communication John Elgin, Tribal Archaeologist and Tribal Historian for the Lassic Band of Wylacki-Wintoon Family Group, Inc.) John is the grandson of Lee and Irene Willburn Stapp.]

Irene Stapp (A4) wrote that

“James Joseph Powell’s wife was a full-blooded Indian, my great-grandmother, Ellen. Apparently they were captured. It was her and Lucy Young and maybe another one, but I don’t know that for sure. Lucy said she and Ellen were sisters. And you asked her, “Well, how old were you when the white men captured them?” and she would say, “We same age, about 14.” Well I don’t think there were many twins, I think maybe they were first cousins because if they were the same age, about 14, they would have been twins, and I don’t think there were very many twins. We’ve always just assumed they were probably cousins.

Irene (A6 I#444) also indicated Hiram (Hi) went back to Texas twice. On one of these trips, he returned with two of their former slaves (freedmen). They were referred by locals as "Nigger Dick" and "Nigger Doc." One of them Dick worked for Alice Jeans Hutchens and her husband who ran the Ruth Hotel. Both are buried in the Hettenshaw cemetery. See also the Richard Willburn entry. Irene also remembered being told that Rose, a black woman, was also brought into the country by the Wilburns as a child (see Rose Russ entry). The black men were her uncles and at the time she was a baby. The men worked at chores around the homestead. They lived in the bunk house. At that time all the unmarried men (even the sons) would sleep there but everyone ate in the house.

James S. and Hiram Willburn

Jim Willburn's full name was James St. Clair Willburn. He was a veteran of the Mexican War from Texas, well-known for his encounter with a grizzly bear in October, 1857, on what is now called Grizzly Mountain (NF03). His brother, Hiram David, called both Hi David and Dave, left Hettenshaw Valley in the 1870's for Forth Worth, Texas, with a string of raw mules (they were known as "Willburn Mules"), breaking them along the way. He stayed in Texas for seven years before returning. He does not show up on the 1880 census (A3).

Proof of the Willburn's early settlement in Hettenshaw was given at the coroner's inquest at the Littlefield murder trial in Weaverville in 1895. Two brothers, H. D. and James S. (Jr.), the sons of Jim Willburn (Sr.--is used to differentiate him from his son of the same name)

testified at the trial that they were "born in Het-ten Valley", and were 28 and 34 respectively, making their birth dates 1867 and 1861.

Jim Wilburn (Sr.) died in 1904.

Photographs

The following photos were found at the TCHS. There a number of photos of members of the extended Willburn family in the archives.

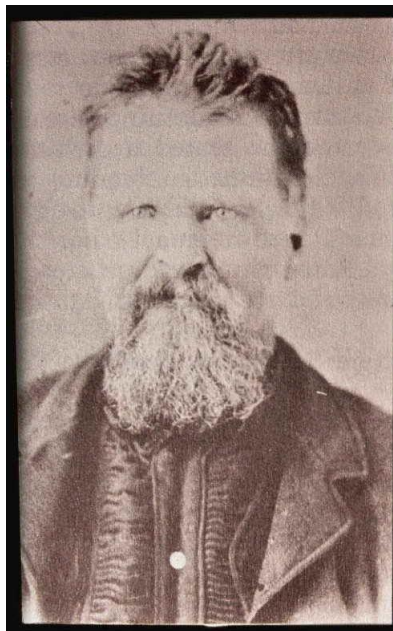


Hiram Son of James (Sr.) and Nancy Willburn with children and grandchildren.
(No date)



Willburn family picnic at Bridgeville. Capt. James (Grizzly Jim) Willburn at far upper left with white beard. Note his left hand, twisted from his encounter with the bear. He also had scars on arms, chest and head where hair never grew.

(No Date.)



Jim Willburn (Sr.)
(No date: TCHS)

Census Data

The census records for Hettenshaw Valley and Long Ridge that were used in this study for the years 1880 to 1940 can be found in Appendix 2. There was no data available for the 1890 census. See also the individual homestead and Indian allotment entries for census data on members of the extended Willburn family.

Note on Edward Willburn found in TCHS archives

Born March 10, 1804 Kentucky/Died December 28, 1886, Trinity County.

Edward Willburn died Hettenshaw Valley De, 28,1885; native of Kentucky, aged about 82 yr; burned to death; house in ashes; lived 3/4 mile from son H. D. Willburn; known as "Grandpa Willburn"; bur. Hettenshaw Valley Cem. Dec.31, 1885. (*Trinity Journal*, Jan.9, 1886)" Spouse: Nancy Overton Willburn (1811- 1889)

Members of the extended Willburn family still live in Hettenshaw Valley. They have a large collection of photos and genealogical data as well as information the history of this area.

Kinship chart: The following kinship chart is incomplete and should not be considered definitive. It was developed by the author to try and keep the numerous members of the Willburn family in chronological context. As noted above, descendants of the Willburn family have extensive genealogical data on their family history.

