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Joyce McCormick, 78, and Charles McCormick, 89, spend time at the Smart-McCormick House near Florence in northern Williamson County. The house, thought to be one of the oldest in the county, was built in the 1850s by Charles McCormick's relative Bryce Miller Smart with local limestone.

Generations of local family have guarded, cherished 1850s house

By Bob Banta, Austin American Statesman. Friday April 5, 2008.

FLORENCE — Maggie Smart McCormick used to say, "Children, even if you have to eat dirt and go naked, don't ever sell this land." They didn't.

Today, the Smart-McCormick House in northern Williamson County stands solidly on the 4-foot-thick limestone foundation laid by Bryce Miller Smart in 1853.

Surrounded by nearly 1,100 acres of rolling countryside and shaded by huge oak trees, it is still a home to the family, including its patriarch, Charles McCormick, 89, who heeded his great-grandmother's plea.

McCormick lives in Georgetown with his wife, Joyce, 78, after a 40-year career as an Austin home builder and heavy equipment sales dealer. But McCormick says his heart rests with the farm that has been in the family for more than 150 years.

"We raised everything here from cotton and oats to corn and hay," McCormick said last week as he sat in the living room of the old homestead near Florence. "Every morning, my brother and I got up at 6 a.m. and milked the cows. Then, we'd eat a breakfast of sausage, eggs and biscuits with honey and head off for a mile-and-a-half walk to school."

However cold or hot that walk to and from school might have been, their home was always a comfort.

Completed just a few years before the start of the Civil War, the homes 18 inch thick limestone walls provided ample insulation. Doors and windows were placed to catch the slightest breeze from every angle. The oak plank floor is so thick that even today, it barely creaks.

Although the interior walls were stuccoed years ago, the original reddish-brown wood molding still frames doorways and windows. A few pieces of furniture still survive, including the carved, 5-foot-tall "hall rack" near the front door, where men of the family hung their sweat-stained Stetsons.

A 2-foot-long wooden telephone is still affixed to a wall next to the fireplace in the kitchen. "We put the phone in around World War I," said McCormick, who remembers using the device as a child. "It was called a whoop-and-holler phone because you had to talk loud. You had about six homes on one phone line. One short and two long rings meant a call to our family. For another family, it could be two long rings and a short." Miss Ella, whose surname McCormick has forgotten, operated the switchboard that the phone company had set up in her home. "You'd get on the line and tell her who you wanted to call, and she'd hook you up and ring," McCormick said. "And when the connection was made, she'd say, 'OK, you can talk now.'"

Daily life on the farm linked his boyhood to the history of the Old West, McCormick said. The Chisholm Trail ran through Central Texas from 1867 through 1884, generally along a route from San Antonio through Waco and Fort Worth, ending at various points in Kansas. Texas ranchers hired cowboys to drive herds of cattle along the trail to buyers in Kansas who sold them for beef. The drives proved a blessing to the farm.

"As those herds were being driven north, the cows would often give birth to calves on the Chisholm Trail," McCormick said, recalling lore handed down from his parents and grandparents. "The calves born on the trail were too little to keep up on the drive north, so my grandmother Maggie would go over to where those calves were being left behind and bring them home to raise on bottles. That's how our family started its own herd."

Maggie Smart was instrumental in saving the family ranch. After she inherited the farm and married Philip McCormick, the couple mortgaged the farm to buy 5,000 sheep. In the 1870s, Philip took the sheep to unfenced grasslands near Del Rio to graze. One day he was found dead, and the sheep were gone.

"They estimated he'd been dead several weeks, so we never were sure what happened," Charles McCormick said. "What we do know is that it left Maggie on the farm with a mortgage to pay off."

Maggie gathered eggs and made butter. "She would get up at 2 a.m. on Friday and load the eggs and butter onto a buggy pulled by a horse and drive 25 miles into Georgetown and sell them to the merchants who sold them to customers on Saturday," McCormick said. "By about 1900, she had paid off the mortgage."

Karen R. Thompson, author of "Historical Williamson County, Texas, a Pictorial History 1848-2000," said: "If the Smart-McCormick House is not the oldest home in Williamson County, it's got to be at least among the top five."

In 1975, several rooms were added to the house, originally a five-room structure. Today, the property is divided among family members. Livestock roam the pastures.

The McCormicks and another descendant,

Maude Allen, and her husband, Danny, live in the house. It is not open to the public.

"We just have too much work to do out here to have visitors," Maude Allen said.