

Chiseled in Stone

Long-time Mount Airy Granite Cutter Enjoys Work

By Andy Matthews
Special to The Surry Times

When it comes to cutting stone, no one holds a chisel to Clyde Kirkman.

Since 1955, Kirkman has blasted through thousands of rocks at the N.C. Granite Corp., carving himself a niche along the way.

"There's more easier jobs than this," Kirkman said, adjusting his goggles. "You gotta like doing it, I reckon. I couldn't do anything else."

For the past 37 1/2 years, Kirkman has patiently cut stone inside a shed just below the world's largest open-face rock quarry. Along the way, he's developed a reputation as a

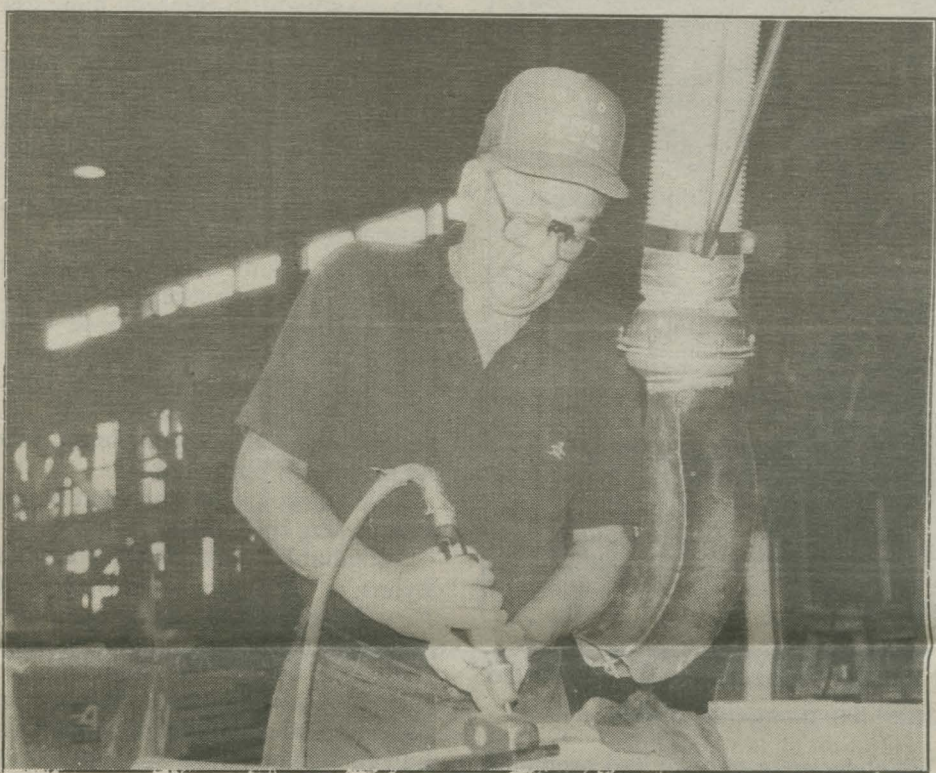
After a couple of breaks and a 30-minute lunch with the boys on the production line, he leaves for home at 3:30 p.m.

Doesn't Kirkman ever get tired of the same old routine?

"The work's still pretty hard, especially when it's humid. That takes a lot of out of you," Kirkman said. "Sometimes I wish I had something easier, but I like it here. You can look at a pretty rock and feel like you've done something."

Though Kirkman said that he can't imagine working anywhere else, his father, who retired from the granite company in 1943, warned his son that he might not like the work.

Kirkman acknowledged that the early years were difficult. Those were



TIMES PHOTO BY ANDY MATTHEWS

Clyde Kirkman at work at N.C. Granite Corp.

conscientious employee devoted to his work, family and the community.

A modest man, Kirkman, 63, doesn't place too much emphasis on his contributions to the company.

"I'm just a stonecutter," he said, grabbing a pneumatic drill and pounding a rough outline across another stone.

But Herbert Faw, a foreman at the granite company, painted a different picture of Kirkman's work, pointing to his special skills developed over three decades on the job.

"He's probably the best stonecutter we have," Faw said. "He can do stuff that he learned 30 years ago.... Those kind of people just aren't there today. Whenever I have an apprentice boy, I always let him work beside Clyde."

Faw, 62, and Kirkman grew up together, spending a lot of those formative years trout fishing.

But that was some 40 years ago, and Faw said that he and Kirkman rarely have time to fish these days, except for an occasional trip to the coast. Instead, they both spend their weekdays in the granite shed, turning huge boulders of rock into monuments and tombstones.

"He's just a hard worker," Faw said of Kirkman. "He produces a lot. And when you give him something, you know it's going to get done, and it's going to be right.... You never have to worry about him goofing off."

Every weekday begins the same for Kirkman, who lives on Belton Road with his wife, Wanda. He gets up around 5 a.m., reads the morning newspaper and then grabs his brown lunch bag, arriving at work by 7 a.m.

the days before sophisticated cutting machines. Instead, Kirkman said there was some intense, and sometimes painful, manual labor.

"You did a lot of stuff by hand, just with a hammer and chisel," he said. "It kept your hands torn up. Now, the rocks generally go under the saw before they come to us."

Today, Kirkman simply follows a diagram, which he places over every stone. Depending on the size of the stone, he can work two hours or two weeks before he's finished. And he admits that the work, even now, can sometimes get tedious.

"Sometimes when you look at a rock for so long, things just seem to run together," Kirkman said. "When that happens, I just lay down my tools, walk away and come back and look at it again a second time."

"You gotta be careful. You can work two or three days on a job, and if you're not careful, all of that's gone. All of that's thrown away. And you're talking a lot of money."

Kirkman said that he's concerned that more are not taking up his trade. When he cut his first stone in 1955, there were 10 to 12 cutters on the floor. Now there are about six. "There's more easier jobs than this."

Just the same, Kirkman said that he doesn't plan to quit anytime soon. He's grown accustomed to the routine and the fellowship with co-workers.

"If you don't like your job, you're not going to be any good at it," Kirkman said. "Most every day, I look forward to coming to work.... It really don't seem like I've been here that long. But 37 1/2 years. That's a lot of rocks." □



KIRKMAN

Mrs. Bessie Midkiff Kirkman, 91, of 266 Belton Road, Mount Airy, widow of Charlie L. Kirkman, passed away Saturday, Aug. 23, 2003, at her home. Mrs. Kirkman was born in Surry County Oct. 26, 1911, to the late Jim and Martha "Sis" Jones Midkiff. She retired from Renfro Corp. after 30 years of service. Mrs. Kirkman was a member of Friendly Tabernacle where she and her husband helped to establish the church and was one of its first members 52 years ago. Survivors include a daughter and son-in-law, Lilla Belle and Mack Spencer of Toast; four sons and daughters-in-law, Clyde and Wanda Kirkman and Steve and Linda Kirkman of Mount Airy, Fred and Nita Kirkman of Anderson, S.C., and Charles and Sue Kirkman of Clemmons; 15 grandchildren; 18 great-grandchildren; 13 great-great-grandchildren; and a special friend, Tony Williams of Mount Airy. In addition to her husband and parents, Mrs. Kirkman was preceded in death by a daughter, Beulah Inman; a son, Harley Kirkman; two sisters, Ada Maynard and Constance Midkiff; and three brothers, Frank "Doc" Midkiff, Walter "Jerry" Midkiff and Ben Midkiff. The family would like to express its appreciation to Libby Marion and the staff of Hospice of Surry County, Dr. Jan Kriska and staff of Blue Ridge Cardiology and Sandy Bush, a private caregiver, for their loving care and support during Mrs. Kirkman's illness. The funeral service at 11 a.m. Monday, Aug. 25, 2003, in Friendly Tabernacle Church will be conducted by the Rev. Dud Spencer and the Rev. Roby Wilcox. Burial will follow in Midkiff Cemetery. The family will receive friends Sunday from 7 to 9 p.m. at Moody Funeral Home of Mount Airy, where her body will remain until carried to the church to lie in state 30 minutes before the funeral service. Flowers will be accepted or memorials may be made to the Friendly Tabernacle Church Building Fund, McBride Road, Mount Airy, NC 27030 or to Hospice of Surry County, 1326 N. Main St., Mount Airy, NC 27030.