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Letter from Alabama

The Inspiring True Story of Strangers Who Saved a Child and Changed a Family Forever

By David L. Workman

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Why This Story Is Written

This is the story of a little boy and an infant girl abandoned, and of a family and complete strangers who acted to save them both.

It's the story of human failure, and human triumph. Forgiveness and redemption.

This story is written as a testament to, and a prayer of thanks for, good and decent people everywhere who stand up for a child when they don't have to—when they have nothing to gain and perhaps much to lose.

It's a tribute to those who see the potential in a young person and give that person a chance to be the best that he or she can be. They are the heroes for whom this story is now committed to writing.

David L. Workman
Olympia, Washington
United States of America
February 2015

1—The Day that Will Change Everything

March 23, 1950, seems very normal in north-central Ohio's Richland, Ashland and Holmes counties. The Mansfield News–Journal, one of the major sources of timely news for this region, will record temperatures in the 30s in the morning, and edging upwards at noon.

Numerous people will see their names in the paper, as patients at General Hospital and People's Hospital. Death has claimed several people in the area—some from natural causes and two in a car-truck collision in nearby Galion. Six babies were born yesterday at General Hospital.

“Twelve O'Clock High” is showing at the Madison Theater; “Tornado Range” and “Chicago Deadline” are at the Park Theater; “I Stole a Million” and “The Secret Garden” are at the Ritz.

Tonight, the Free and Accepted Masons Lodge is meeting, as are the Catholic Order of Foresters, the Order of Owls, the Knights of Pythias, the Mansfield Model Airplane Club, and the 37th Division Association of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

So it goes in this city of 43,500 people, which is the seat of government for Richland County and a major go-to place for shopping and other services, among the small towns in the surrounding countryside. Including Loudonville.

In the village of Loudonville, 21 miles to the southeast of Mansfield on State Route 39, Hortense Laswell is a 43-year-old mother of four who grew up in this country and recently moved back with three of her four sons and her new husband George. This morning, she tells 17-year-old son Gene and 13-year-old Jack that she will be driving today to Mount Vernon to bake cookies with Aunt Grace.

This, too, is quite normal, although momentous.

In Hortense's family, Grace Berry Koppert occupies a very special place in the family. She will always be known as Aunt Grace, although on a standard family tree drawing, she would show up as a cousin. For much of Hortense's childhood and adolescence, Grace was the closest person Hortense had to a mother.

Their bond was established soon after Hortense's mother, Della (or Delphina), died tragically on Nov. 10, 1906.

Della Spreng had married Frederick Huffman in 1898 in Loudonville. Della and Fred were a young couple living on one of the Huffman family farms in Washington Township, Holmes County, just outside Loudonville. On the farms and in nearby towns and townships lived members of their extended families, who were immigrants or descendants of immigrants from the Alsace region of France.

In 1906, Della was pregnant, and as her due date approached, there was growing excitement among the Alsatian-American families in the Loudonville area. Della's and Fred's child would add another life to the extended group of cousins, aunts and uncles in this part of Ohio.

In October 1906, the doctor was called to the Huffman farm to help deliver Della's child. In these times in rural communities across America, it was common for doctors to visit and care for their patients at home.

Exactly what happened that day is not officially recorded, but the story will still be remembered a century later in Della's and Fred's family. As the story has been passed down, the doctor was compromised by alcohol, and he delivered a little girl whose name

would be Hortense Huffman. What the doctor did not realize, according to the family memory, is that Hortense was a twin—as was her father Fred.

The doctor failed to deliver Hortense's twin, who remained in the womb. When the dreadful error was discovered, it was too late. The second baby girl was dead, and Della was dangerously ill from blood poisoning.

The little body of Hortense's twin sister was buried in the orchard on Fred Huffman's hillside farm.

Three weeks later, on November 9, 1906, tragedy struck again. The Loudonville newspaper reported: "The community was greatly shocked last Saturday morning to hear of the death of Mrs. Fred Huffman. She had passed through a serious illness and was gaining strength and while the physicians could not yet hold out much hope, the family was much encouraged and looking for her recovery. Friday evening, she expressed a wish to sit up a little while, which wish was granted. She was soon afterwards seized with a chill and sank rapidly, her young life coming to a close on earth at 7:15 o'clock Saturday morning and her soul returning to her savior."

The obituary continued: "To the motherless babe, needing so much the mother's care, to the grief stricken husband and to the large circle of relatives and friends in this hour of bereavement is extended the sympathy of the community. God above can offer satisfying consolation. May his peaceful benediction be upon you."

Suddenly, Fred had become a young father solely responsible for an infant daughter; in his grief, he would have to find a way to go on without his young wife, Della.

At times such as these, there can be strength and solace in numbers; and so it was among the Alsatian-American families in the Loudonville-Nashville area of Ohio at the beginning of the 20th century.

Among the network of relatives, Fred would find exactly the right nanny for his new child, Hortense. Grace Berry is 21 years old at the time, and for the next 16 years, she is the person who will help Fred bring up and nurture Hortense.

Grace—"Aunt Grace" as she will forever afterward be known in Hortense's family—will become a surrogate mother to the child. Ironically, Grace will never give birth to children of her own, even after marrying Bill Koppert.

Although Hortense's father eventually finds a new wife during Hortense's teen years, Aunt Grace will always retain her special place in the hearts of Hortense and her family.

As a child, Hortense is baptized into the Christian faith at Trinity Evangelical Church in Loudonville, where Huffmans and Heffelfingers and many other related families fill the pews on Sunday morning.

Each of her children will be baptized here as well.

Hortense will grow up loved and encouraged and watched over by countless grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends. Not to mention Fred Huffman and Grace Berry Koppert.

In 1997, Loudonville High School classmate Harold Obrecht will recall Hortense as a good student and a friendly person who was easy to talk to, well-liked and respected at school. Both of them will graduate among the 33-member Class of 1924. In such a small class, the students get to know each other very well during four years together in high school.

At age 18, soon after graduating, Hortense marries a tall, slender, good-looking fellow who is the son and grandson of respected businessmen in Loudonville. His name is Ralph O. Workman.

Ralph's father is a successful local merchant. Ralph's paternal grandfather William Workman, by now deceased, was a farmer and a minister in the local Dunkard—or Brethren—Church. His maternal grandfather David Stacher, also deceased, was a farmer and businessman who co-founded Loudonville's first bank.

Ralph is descended from one of the original founders of Loudonville—James Loudon Priest. He and his mother Viola are descended from Melchior Stacher who emigrated from Germany to Pennsylvania in the American colonies in 1732. Ralph is descended from Workmans who migrated from the Netherlands in 1647 to a colony that was then named New Amsterdam, and later New York.

His Grandfather and Grandmother Stacher were the ones who built a prosperous farm on the gentle hill on East Main Street at the edge of Loudonville in about 1880. The graceful farmhouse, the two-story barn, and assorted outbuildings will become an integral part of the life story and life experience of Ralph's and Hortense's children and grandchildren. Yet Ralph and Hortense themselves never live at the farm together.

When Ralph and Hortense marry in 1924, a wedding gift from Ralph's parents—Harry and Viola Workman—is a new home that is built for them in town, within an easy stroll of schools and church and Loudonville's downtown shops. The newlyweds' house is directly across the street from Harry and Viola.

Over the next dozen years, Hortense and Ralph create a household and a business. First come Ralph Jr. in 1926, then Gene in 1933 and Jack in 1936.

Ralph Sr. and his father start a dairy, bottling and delivering Guernsey milk products, and the two oldest boys will remember Hortense washing the milk bottles in the kitchen sink in the early days of the enterprise.

In time, business is good enough that summer vacations become viable for Ralph Sr., Hortense and the three boys. Ralph Jr. and Gene will remember a winter trip to Florida with their mom and dad. Unfortunately, as it will turn out, the vacations often will be times of separation rather than togetherness. Hortense will take Junior, Gene and Jack to Michigan in an effort to escape the little-understood environmental factors that trigger Junior's severe childhood asthma attacks. On at least one occasion, in 1938, Ralph Sr. will make a trip to Florida with friends.ⁱ

And then, about 1940, it ends. On Ralph Sr.'s business trips to Cleveland, he meets a vivacious woman named Marie and falls in love—a love that will last the rest of his life. He announces his intention to divorce Hortense—something that, in small Ohio towns before World War II, is far from common.

Gene will later say, "I grew up in a broken home long before there were broken homes."ⁱⁱ

One of Ralph Sr.'s treasured possessions will be a 1940 photo of himself and Marie at a bar in Havana, Cuba. They're a very attractive couple. Unfortunately for Hortense and the three boys, the four of them are on their own from here on.

In Loudonville, the divorce of Ralph Sr. and Hortense comes as a jolt that will be remembered around town, and in the extended families, for decades to come.

The breakup, coming as the clouds of war are forming over Europe and the Pacific, will leave Hortense in a terrible predicament. In addition to the emotional roller-coaster that she surely endures, she also has to confront the reality of providing

for her sons with whatever support she can get from Ralph Sr., which isn't always forthcoming.

Even for a high school graduate, Loudonville in the early 1940s isn't a magnet for family-wage jobs for women. With help from Aunt Grace, Hortense—mother of three sons—takes the bus to and from Wooster for classes at Wooster Business College. There, she will acquire the knowledge and keypunch skills for the early era of data processing—a revolution that will arrive in full force long after her death.

Hortense emerges with a certificate qualifying her to operate International Business Machines punch card machines.

Now, the question is where can she put her business machine skills to work? Not Loudonville. Not Mansfield or Ashland or Wooster. Not even Cleveland.

In 1942 or the beginning of 1943, when Hortense is 36 years old, America's massive War Production buildup calls the new graduate-divorcee-mother to Dayton, Ohio—home of three military airfields.

When Hortense moves to Dayton with Gene and Jack, the fateful day of March 23, 1950, is still unimaginably far in the future. When that day comes, an entire family will be forever changed.

First, however, there is an entire World War to live through, and to win. The small-town girl from an Alsatian enclave in Ohio will do her part to help win the most massive and destructive war in the history of the world. She will meet people who will change her life.

And somewhere in Dayton, Hortense will make a friend or an acquaintance who will one day read a letter from Alabama. This letter, and its effect, will be little short of a miracle in the lives of Hortense's loved ones.

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The brothers—Ralph Jr., Jack and Gene—early 1940s

2—The Boy from Mount Vernon

No one who is alive in the second decade of the 21st century knows whether George Shelton Laswell saw irony in how his life would change on that March day in 1950 when Hortense sent her middle two sons, Gene and Jack, off to school in Loudonville and drove down Route 3 through the rolling hills and forests and farms to Mount Vernon, Ohio, to bake cookies.

George had come into this world in June 1913, in Mount Vernon, Kentucky, the seat of government for the Bluegrass State's Rockcastle County.

Mount Vernon, Ohio, is the county seat of the Buckeye State's Knox County. In a very important way, this is where his life will change forever.

Both Mount Vernons are picturesque hubs for rural areas in their respective regions. Both are named for the Virginia plantation home of America's first president.

Both towns abide in the east-central, hilly regions of their states. Both reflect some of America's small-town values and experience.

Like Hortense, George sprang from rural roots. All of Hortense's Alsatian great-grandparents immigrated to Ohio from villages in the Vosges / Rhine region of France in the 1820s and 1830s. That was a time when thousands of desperate Alsatians fled the economic destruction growing out of the Napoleonic Wars.

George's roots in America extend back to early colonial days. One of his ancestors was very possibly the immigrant William Lasswell, who left England to settle land that he purchased in colonial New Jersey in 1664. In the next century, an "s" would be lost from the family name.

George's ancestors—Laswells, Clarks, Abneys and others—were also among the earliest white settlers of Kentucky, traveling by foot and horseback, and later by wagon, over the pioneers' Wilderness Road in the final two decades of the 1700s and the years soon after 1800. It is likely that some of them knew the legendary frontiersman, Daniel Boone, and his family. Some of them fought in the American War for Independence.

Whereas Hortense is the only surviving child of the late Fred and Della Huffman, George is one of 15 children of physician and farmer William David Laswell, who reared his family in Lincoln County, Kentucky, in a settlement known as Kings Mountain.

Like Loudonville, Ohio, Kings Mountain was, at one time, a bustling little railroad town. It was a stop on the Southern Railway, where a tunnel bored through one of the hills.

George's father was known as Dr. Laswell, a country physician and surgeon who received his medical degree in Louisville in 1904. Dr. Laswell also owned substantial farming operations and an early local telephone system. Judging from the written accounts of the time, Dr. Laswell was a well-regarded and prosperous member of the Lincoln County community.

The Laswell home in Kings Mountain was large for a little town, and also served as the office for his medical practice. Dr. Laswell's children and grandchildren would later describe the house as full of people.

If George grew up in a respected and prosperous family, he also has known his share of loss and hardship, starting soon after birth, when his mother died a horrible death, the details of which would become known to Hortense's family much later. Then, when George was 15, his stepmother died in childbirth.

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In the World War II and postwar years of the 1940s and 1950s, the factories and the humming economy of Ohio's manufacturing cities and towns attract and employ lots of young men and women and families from south of the Ohio River.

Unlike many of these people seeking a better life and a family income, George isn't drawn to factories or unionized jobs.

Throughout his adult life, he seems to gravitate to delivery jobs and landscaping / nursery work. That is, when he has work . . .

Sometime between 1945 and 1948, George lands in Dayton, where he meets a sweet, hard-working, well-educated older woman with three sons. Her name is Hortense Workman.

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Hortense



George with nephew Glenn Laswell, 1947

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Notes

ⁱ Hortense mentioned this in a 1938 letter to her cousin, Irma Monroe, in Fort Recovery, Ohio.

ⁱⁱ Wooster, Ohio, Daily Record, March 24, 1997, article by Eileen Keller