

Chapter 1 - The Beginning

The first large family to accept Gertrude Ramey's hospitality, was the six abandoned children of Albert Waugh and Magdalena Skaggs Waugh: Ralph, Darlene, Marjorie, Phyllis, Virginia and baby Ronnie.

The second child to arrive at Gertrude's door was a dark-haired teenage girl whose parents had died of natural causes. She and her other siblings had been passed around between relatives after the Depression. She was nearly a woman when she was brought to Gertrude's door by her aunt and uncle. Her mother died when she was five. Her father remarried only to succumb to a stroke soon after. The stepmother claimed no loyalty to her dead husband's children. She returned to her home in another county and left Anna Sue. She and her sisters and brothers were divided up. She had grown up in several homes landing at last with her aunt and uncle. They could not keep her any longer either. Gertrude took her in.

The third and fourth children were Peggie Burke and her sister, Bettie Burke from Johnson County. Skinny and pale, with narrow crooked lips she drew tight over her teeth, Peggie was emaciated. Bettie was in better shape, taller and older. After a few months with Gertrude, she returned to Johnson County to an uncertain fate in the home of her mother, Beatrice and her common law husband. Peggie, on the other hand, thrived in Gertrude Ramey's care for eight years. She graduated from Ashland High School in 1953 and enrolled at Marshall for their nursing program. There, her road to recovery and success hit a bump. Classes at Ashland High had not prepared her for the technical skills she needed in nursing school, and she had fallen in love with a fellow student. Distracted and without the critical support to pass her classes, she failed most of them, and dropped out to give birth to his child. Gertrude paid her way on the Greyhound bus to Lebanon, Ohio where she stayed with Violet Stevens. As soon as she revealed her dilemma, Violet advised she return to the Ramey Home where Gertrude might help her with the baby. From there, the legend of Peggie Burke is murky. Some say she returned to Gertrude Ramey, and while she was at work, Gertrude adopted her child away. Following this, Peggie may have committed suicide at the Avon Apartments on Winchester Avenue.

The fifth Ramey Home resident was Catherine Wallace, a nine year-old red haired girl rescued from an abusive father. She stayed a short time; still it was long enough to endear herself to the other children. Catherine was sent to another safe place or maybe she was sent home. Only Gertrude Ramey knows for certain where Catherine went, and where many other children found homes. Gertrude did not keep records. Catherine, like the other children, left without saying goodbye.

While countless babies and children passed through the doors of the rooms over the E L Stafford Grocery store, it was two years before the Ramey Home became an official Home for Children, as the male laborers who were being edged out by homeless children, were sent off for good.

"For a long time, we children slept in the laundry room downstairs -well away from the men," Violet Stevens.

The only documentation was that of Rev. Arden P. Keyser, Methodist minister and amateur photographer who lived with his wife, Mabel at 3025 Louisa Street, two blocks from the first Ramey Home. He developed snapshots in his dark room in the garage. The Reverend W. C. Pierce, minister for

the Catlettsburg Methodist church may have been the first major contributor to Gertrude Ramey's shelter. He provided a few extras from church donations. Soon after this, RA McCullough, Publisher of the Ashland Daily took up her banner drafting his friends and business associates to serve on his new board. At their first organizational meeting, Gertrude's safe home was named for Rev. Pierce. The name was changed to the Gertrude Ramey Home when four years later, homeless Children outgrew the upstairs quarters. President McCullough with the help of his affluent board members moved the Home to a three story red brick house on Winchester Avenue in Ashland.

Their Articles of Incorporation were filed on June 29, 1946 with Hon. Charles K. O'Connell, Secretary of State.

The Incorporators were:

Luther Meek

Kelly Harper

EE Caldwell

Floyd Hall

Curtis Wellman

W T Cox

Allan J. Collier

Robert V. Stanley
Dr. Price Sewell, Jr.

Katherine Hill

Mrs. Clyde Sparks

Mrs. Henry A. Haskell

Miss Florence Kramer

Mable Greene

Mrs. Julia Ford

Miss Lillian Eastham

Rebecca Patton

Mrs. J A Tauber

Mrs. E W Bruns

Mrs. Vida C. Burke

Gertrude Ramey

Robert A McCullough

Mrs. Hassel C. Ferrell Allan J. Collier recalled his service on the Board with Gertrude Ramey:

"I was impressed with her dedication. At our Board meetings, she wore a faded cotton dress, which she subsequently wore to each meeting. We offered a salary and an expense stipend to brighten her appearance, but she refused. She also declined to hire an assistant, or to take a vacation or even take time off."

"Our purpose was simple. We raised funds to pay for housing, food and care for homeless children. It was simplistic, perhaps but we were very satisfied with our work. We saw immediate results. Later on, there were changes on the Board as the Home grew into an institution. More and more children moved in with complex needs. After that, I did not enjoy the bureaucracy at all, and found a way to leave the Board."

In fall of 2006 Allan J. Collier former owner of Collier & Kilgore Funeral Home was the only living former member of the original Ramey Home Board.

When the faded picture of eight children was handed to me, only five of the children had names scribbled across the photo and two of those were incorrect as I discovered. "Whatever happened to these children?" I asked.

Dating the photo was a challenge. Were they still alive? Armed with mostly inaccurate information, I began a search for the photographer, and for the children in the photograph. In the old photo taken circa 1944, two little boys who were marked simply as: Frank and Philip- remain unidentified. The photographer was Rev. Arden P. Keyser.

Three of the little girls wore white bonnets. "Why?" I asked. "It's hot weather; they are dressed in sun suits?" She replied, "Their hair was full of lice when they were brought in, and we cut it. They are the Waugh sisters. For this photo, Miss Ramey brought out three little white bonnets." None of the children smiled at Rev. Keyser's camera.

I placed the photo over my desk. For two years, these children were seldom out of my thoughts until at last a professional researcher provided the final clues to find them. Of course, the Waugh children were not lost, only unknown to me.

I am grateful to my cousin, James F. Fannin for his help. In November, 2005, after I interviewed him and we toured the three story red brick on McCullough Drive at Summit, James was anxious to corroborate stories of his life at the Ramey Home. He asked his friends to back up his stories. As word circulated about my project, other children sent word to me. Do you want to talk with me? James says you are writing a story about Gertrude Ramey. I lived in the Ramey Home, and I knew Miss Ramey, and I know James."

I explained I wanted to document the lives of my Fannin cousins, but his friends told their stories anyway-but first with tawdry details of abuse, loneliness and despair. There were good stories of friendships and kindness, too. Their memories were vivid. Who cooked, who cleaned. What happened on weekends and most clear were their Christmas memories. The kinds of food they ate, their toys and clothes, and who was in charge. Nearly all of the children I spoke to remembered Miss Ramey as kind and thoughtful; how she sometimes disappeared into her room for days with a headache. It was during those lapses that bad things happened to the children left in care of staff.

Many of the children wanted to tell me how they came to live at the Ramey Home. They wanted a voice; to speak to somebody, or to ask me to find a missing sibling. Often it was a question about who their parents were. "Gertrude sent my brother away, and I still don't know where he is," one woman told me. Another woman asked, "Why did my mother come back and take my little brother home, but she never came for me?" In 2004, I was invited to the Ramey Home Reunion Picnic at Armco Park. On a list of contacts, a former child resident pointed to a name and advised, "Don't call her, she is old, and bizarre."

I worked my way through the list. "I must try," I urged myself on as I called Violet.

"I am the first Ramey Home child," she said.

She was cautious though; right away she baited me, "I won't tell you anything about my life, so don't ask. I'll show you pictures of my wedding. You might like that," she offered.

"Agreed," I smiled, "Can we talk about what you remember? About Gertrude and the start of the Ramey Home?"

"We worked all the time," she said. "Before school, Anna Sue and I washed baby bottles and filled them with milk." At noon, we hurried home for lunch to help some more. After school, we cooked and washed dishes and took care of those babies, and this was while the men still lived there. One morning I found a little dead baby."

She continued, "Mrs. Childers was the cook, and her little boy lived there too."

"May I ask, what was his name?" "I don't remember," she dismissed my question. I wrote details as she spoke.

At her cozy cottage in Flatwoods, she brought out a faded photograph, "These are the first children to come to the Ramey Home." Violet stood in the back of the group, tall and lovely with red hair and a smile. "That's Peggie Burke. She was about eight when she came. She was so skinny and sad. The first thing Gertrudy did was to make her a pretty red dress."

Violet turned to me, "Can you find my friend, Peggie Burke? I heard she committed suicide at the Avon Apartments after Gertrude gave her baby away? but maybe not. I'd love to see her again." Violet continued, "These three little girls are the Waugh sisters, Darlene, Phyllis and Marjorie."

In front were two little boys she identified as Frank and Philip, three. "They are Waugh brothers." Later in my search, I found that was not the case.

"Violet, do you know what happened to the Waugh children?" "No," she said, "About the time they came, I was sent away to Aiken Hall at Olive Hill. I didn't like it at all at Aiken Hall. Every weekend, I'd hop on the train and ride home. At last Gertrudy sent me over to Hazel Green Academy in Wolfe County. I called her Gertrudy," she smiled. "It was isolated. I liked it there, and stayed there. That's where I met my husband. He was a student too, but not from the Ramey Home."

With no last names to trace, I researched for two years before Eugene Damron, who also grew up at the Ramey Home, in 2007, identified the two little boys as Eddie Sullivan and Frank Rowe.

I posted the photo online asking for information about the six Waugh children, and Peggie Burke. I searched birth and school records. I did find the Albert and Magdalena Waugh family listed in the Ashland City Directory for 1943; but after that they disappeared. I found no further records of the Waugh children until 2005, and I want to tell you about them first.

My search for the children in the photograph, took me into three Kentucky counties, including libraries, court houses, and census records. But it was on an adoption website that I met a professional researcher. I explained how my unexpected mission to find the children in the old photograph had become a personal one. She provided the name of Ronald Waugh in Hawaii. Ronald was a baby when his siblings were rescued at Avondale. One phone call to Ronald unlocked the lives of the six elusive Waugh children. Their mother, Magdalena and her new husband, Forrest Roberts had moved them to Baltimore, Maryland in 1946.

My second call was to Darlene Waugh, living in North Carolina in the final stages of lung cancer. Before she died in 2006, Darlene moved back to Ashland where she and Violet Stevens were reunited at the hospice center. Ralph, their elder brother who was not in the photograph, was anxious to tell his story, and urged his siblings to tell their stories. His sisters, the three girls in white bonnets, Marjorie, Phyllis and Darlene were easy to talk to. Virginia, 'Peanut' as she is called was not in the photograph either. All four Waugh girls consented to an interview. Since neither Ralph or his baby brother Ronald were in the old photograph of 1944, that left the two little boys, Frank and Philip in the picture. Eugene believes they are Eddie and Frank. Violet thinks they are Eddie Sullivan and Philip Daniels. I search for Peggie Burke every day.

1944 Avondale in Ashland Kentucky

For several months these six amazing Waugh children survived the Avondale slums virtually on their own. They lived in the front one-half of the lower floor of the abandoned John B. Mullins grocery store, on the Midland Trail. The tall plate glass windows of the store-front gave view to motorists by day; by night head lights passed over the sleeping forms piled on the one bed. Jeff Tackett and Arnold Abrams, itinerant single men occupied the other rooms. John B. Mullins, owner of the old building lived four doors away in his own home.

Ralph Waugh nine, was elder of the six in 1943. Skinny and raggedy like his sisters, he found cookies in a garbage can, and cut grass to earn money for milk for his baby brother, Ronnie. He bought bologna and bread at Tabet's. He locked the flimsy door at night, and listened for his mother, in case she came home and couldn't get in. While he looked for work, and food at the garbage cans, his sisters Darlene and Marjorie carried water in from Long Run Branch to drink and nursed Phyllis and Ronnie, when they whimpered. Sometimes neighbors brought in a little food, but he never knew when that would be. Ralph hoped their mother might come home, and sometimes she did with a stranger in tow, and almost always she brought a little food for them. Just before that food ran out, and after the man disappeared, their mother, Magdalena followed. If she stayed gone too long, their grandfather Skaggs hunted her down in a beer joint in Ironton. For a few days then, in a sincere attempt, she became their mother again. Without warning, though, at last filled with frustration and lust, she'd slip away, hitchhike across the Ohio river bridge to become lost in the dark, where men bought her drinks and gave her money, and knew nothing of her six children living in a storefront on 13th street. Ralph watched her closely.

Their father, Albert Waugh, an itinerant construction worker abandoned Magdalena and his five children in 1943 one month before Ronnie was born. He'd abandoned his first family too. It wasn't too difficult then, for him to drop out of sight a second time. In spring of 1943, he did just that. He slipped off before Magdalena's labor pains began, leaving his second family of five little children and his young pregnant wife. Magdalena was alone when Ronnie was born June, 1943 in their little house in Westwood.

Magdalena, their mother was a spirited, dark and lovely robust girl of fifteen, when Waugh, a man twice her age, seduced her. He was broad shouldered and tall, with a set jaw. Nobody can say how they met, but it was told she often wandered downtown from Donta Road, and there she first saw him in an Ashland cafe. Magdalena at first was hopeful about her travel prospects with Albert. He was a great story teller. Before long, he fell short of fulfilling her needs once he began to know what they were. She liked the excitement and bright lights, but she was pregnant and felt sick. She wanted to go out and he locked in the house and nailed shut the windows while he went to work. Albert found work farther away and except for short visits from his construction sites, in Georgia back to Westwood, he contributed little to help her with their babies. At last, in spring of 1943, she saw the last of him and the meager financial support he provided, and even that stopped altogether. In nine years, she'd produced six children for him but it wasn't enough to hold him. He simply didn't come back.

In summer 1944, nine months after Albert Waugh abandoned his wife and children authorities came for the Waugh children. It may be that Magdalena herself called to report her indigent children, and before they arrived, she handed Ronnie to the Walker family on Wheatley Road in the Mossy Bottom. Whatever the case, five of the six Waugh children were scooped up in an old storefront building in the Avondale slum, and taken to the Ramey Home in Catlettsburg. They were Ralph 9, Darlene 7, Marjorie 5, Virginia 4, and Phyllis 3. The infant, Ronnie lived with the Walker family until he was four. Lost to memory is just how Ronnie became their ward. Perhaps Gertrude placed him there. It was also said that Magdalena gave her baby to the Walkers earlier.

The Waugh children comprise some of the first ten children who found their way to the Ramey Home in summer of 1944, and who for whatever reason known only to the adults who were responsible for them, had no place else to go.

At the Ramey Home, Darlene, Marjorie and Phyllis found safe haven from starvation and dangers of the street. They wore clean clothing and rode the bus to school. It was a place where they were children again. Ralph and Virginia have different stories to tell about their lives in foster care, because Gertrude sent them to Worthington to board at the Fields home; from which they eventually ran away. For all of them though, 1944 was a pivotal year. Gertrude Ramey too, was forced to consider her prospects, because she was to decide whether to go on boarding men, or to take up the cause for homeless children.

"You can't do both," the Judge admonished her.

In 1946, Ronnie having lived with the Walker family in Mossy Bottom of Westwood, was nearly four years old, when he was reunited with his mother, Magdalena and his siblings.

During this same time, Ralph and Virginia endured life with the Fields family in the Melrose addition of Worthington, a small railroad town south of Ashland. For them, their mother, who had mysteriously disappeared for two years, reappeared to rescue them. But, had she? The Waugh girls living at the

Ramey Home asked, resisted, pulled back. Why were they being moved again? Did their mother want them after all? Not likely, nine year old Darlene reasoned. It was summer of 1946, nearly two years since they'd seen Magdalena Waugh. Darlene, Marjorie and Phyllis liked living with Gertrude Ramey.

But, their mother, Magdalena had formed an alliance with one of her men friends; Forrest Roberts from Montgomery County. A former soldier, who'd never married, Forrest cooked at the Hub cafe in downtown Ashland. He'd marry her, he posited if she gathered up her six children. This condition to her new marriage, the children soon discovered would alter their lives again. Their indigent mother and her second husband proposed a depraved plan that wrested them from their new-found security at the Ramey Home, into one of helplessness at his hands. Magdalena wanted to marry Forrest, and she did not see through his plan. To keep him, she agreed to gather her six children to live with them.