

The Waugh Children

Introduction

Ask any child, "How did you come to live at the Ramey home?"

She may answer, "I had no place else to go."



*Figure 1-Top Center - Violet Stevens
Middle (L to R) - Peggy Burke, Marjorie Waugh, Darlene Waugh
Bottom (L to R) Phyllis Waugh, Eddie Sullivan and Frank Rowe*

Much has been said about Gertrude Ramey and her children's home. She was praised by her staff, respected by her Board of Directors, and by county and state officials. She was loved by the children whose lives she shaped.

She was famous for several reasons: she was personally frugal and self-sacrificing and determined to give safe haven to frightened children. For five decades she was inspired and dedicated, for which she received accolades from two presidents and a personal note from Eleanor Roosevelt who invited her to the White House. She was featured in the Reader's Digest. Cowboy Bob and his puppet, Howdy Doody filmed a television show from the Ramey Home in Ashland, Kentucky. Variously she

was called, the 'Queen of Ashland,' and State Police Detective B J Van Hoose named her the 'Mother Theresa of eastern Kentucky.'

Stories differ as to how her Children's Home began, even her own versions of how she got into the business of caring for homeless children, but the story you will read here is the one told by the first child to find safe haven with Gertrude Ramey. She was fourteen when her Uncle bought a ticket, put her on the Greyhound bus with instructions to get off at the Court House in Catlettsburg; go in and tell her story to the first person she saw.

The creation of the Ramey Children's Home in 1943, speaks more to its location in Catlettsburg, Kentucky than to its advertising. Gertrude Ramey, a young businesswoman on her own in 1940, sold narrow cots with two meals a day to male laborers. Up the back stairs over the E L Stafford grocery store, the roughnecks scrambled for their hot evening meal, and a bath.

Gertrude's plan to rent the second floor of the large building to board single ladies was changed. Instead, day laborers from the oil refineries and barges, hats in hand answered her ad. Business burgeoned. Her sparse rooms boasted a full complement of grateful male boarders. Gertrude, herself unmarried soon discovered men tenants had fewer demands and required less attention than women boarders. And they went home to their families on weekends.

Across the street, in the Boyd County Court House, Social Worker, Sue Braun's welfare office fit into a windowless basement room where on a daily basis, she and America Holbrook sat on opposite sides of a

double sided-oak desk, with one black Underwood typewriter between them. They brushed past each on their way to the single file cabinet. A black bakelite telephone was their only other piece of equipment. The front door stood open to catch the breeze.

Telephone calls were infrequent because few local residents had telephones. Often times, Sue arrived at office to find a scribbled note pushed under the door or a Court Order. She took a few minutes to find the address on the map pinned to the wall, and to refresh and update their resource lists for safe homes. They were not called orphanages, but provided places where children could stay until parents were sober again, or where a child might be lodged for a few days. Usually either Sue or America waited in the tiny office while the other drove out with a Sheriff's deputy to investigate complaints. For Gertrude Ramey, it all began on March 8, of 1943, still early spring. It was Sue's day to stay in the office. She was glad because of the chill in the morning mist. She patted her long brown hair braids into place looped across the top of her head and set to her paper work.

The heavy black door to her office eased open. A girl crept in and stood in the narrow opening. She was tall, but her shoulders rounded and drooped. Skinny with wiry red hair cropped uneven, she stared at her feet; ready to topple.

Sue moved to embrace the girl's bony frame, to guide her to a chair. The girl shivered. Sue was puzzled; Judge Rose had not called to alert her of another ward. Sue held her as between sobs, the girl told her story: Captivity in a cellar, scars left by scalding water, blue bruises and cuts marked her arms, and skeins of her red tangled hair were missing.

She told her story. Her uncle had put her on the bus in Ashland, paid the driver for her ticket, and told her to get off when she saw the Court House in Catlettsburg. Go in and tell your story to the first person you see, and ask for help; and she did. So, there was no court order of explanation, no details on her background or charges against the abuser, only a sympathetic, kind relative who wanted to save the red haired girl, from her own parents as it turned out.

This was a tough case. Should Sue wait for America to return? America was older and more experienced, and she was the Supervisor, but Sue did not expect America for hours. This girl was shivering. She needed help now. Sue seized the phone. Gertrude Ramey's boarding house might have a place for the girl, and a hot meal too. Would Gertrude take the girl for a few days until Judge Rose was notified for a stipend? Besides, Sue offered, this girl was fourteen, old enough to cook and clean. Sue offered, "She's as tall as I am." Gertrude agreed for the girl to come.

Sue C. Braun was not tall, and she was efficient. Like the style of her long brown hair, braided and arranged on the top of her head, she was adept at matching needs of the children with resources in the Catlettsburg community.

Nine months earlier in 1943, Sue graduated from Western State Teachers College in Bowling Green. At twenty-one she was the first of her German family settled in Hopkins County, to earn a formal education. Sue adjusted her bright red sweater, took the girl by the hand and led her across Louisa Street to meet Gertrude Ramey.

This is a true story about the first children who formed the original Ramey Children's home, their points of view, and the plethora of secret histories that made up their lives.