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*from* Mildred Walker: A Biography/Memoir

Ripley Hugo

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Novelist Mildred Walker wrote nine of her thirteen books while living on a ranch outside of Great Falls, Montana. She is perhaps best known for Winter Wheat (1944), acclaimed by author James Welch as “a classic novel of the American West.” An excerpt from If a Lion Could Talk (1970) is anthologized in The Last Best Place (Falcon Press, 1988). Walker died of natural causes on May 27 of this year. The following chapters are part of a biography/memoir written by Walker’s daughter, poet Ripley Hugo, to be published by University of Nebraska Press in late 1999.

Introduction
I first became aware that my mother was a writer one summer afternoon when I was about eight years old. My brother and I, with neighborhood friends, careened around our backyard waging a water fight. To escape a stream of water from the garden hose, I scrambled up the side of the house to an unscreened window and leapt down into the cool darkness of the room. I landed with bare, wet, muddy feet on five clean piles of typewritten paper carefully stacked on the floor. I heard my mother’s agonized and furious exclamation. Horrified as I was at what I had ruined, I understood that she had a world completely separate from the world she lived in with us.

When people exclaim to me about the privilege of growing up with my mother, the writer, I think of how my brothers and I grew up more keenly aware of a mother who insisted on her role (in the thirties, forties, and early fifties) of a doctor’s wife in a Montana town of about 25,000 people; a mother whose merriment or pleasure in shared moments seemed reserved for an occasion; a mother who insisted on decorum, performance of correctness in front of those outside the family; a mother who dressed and held herself exactly as other children’s mothers we knew, giving afternoon teas, selling tickets for the Junior League, conducting dinner parties at which we could overhear her enter-
taining guests with vivid, humorous descriptions of our latest escapades. A mother who was not easy to live up to.

It is my mother the novelist whom I have been asked to write about. But to have known her all those early years of my life not as a writer but as a mother with definite ideas for her children has brought back many glimpses of her that I didn’t know I had. And those glimpses do not form any steady narrative. Instead, those moments come back to me in a scatter of images, complete with colors, sounds, emotions. I think they are still with me because I clung to them as moments which taught me who she was. Particularly, the ways in which I could interest her in my immediate desperations or delights.

One beautiful afternoon last spring, I listened from my upstairs window to my nephew singing as he worked in the backyard. It was a comforting sound that brought back to me snatches of a lullaby Mother used to sing to us. She crooned it as we were protesting going to sleep, the only song I remember her singing. Humming the melody to myself, I had all the words back in my head by the end of that afternoon:

_Baby’s boat’s a silver moon,_
_Sailing through the sky,_
_Sailing o’er a sea of dreams_
_While the clouds roll by._

_Sail, baby, sail_
_Out across the sea._
_Only don’t forget to sail_
_Back again to me._

I remembered the last two lines first, and with them came the long-ago comfort they’d given me: “Only don’t forget to sail/Back again to me.” I remembered how sharp my relief had been in the darkened room, knowing that although she set me sailing, Mother still wanted me back. It is the strongest memory I have of her nurturing us.

I must have been at least five or six years old at the time. Did I care so sharply about the song’s wish to have me “sail back” because I already felt that I was a disappointingly naughty little girl? Very likely! But I wonder now if it had something to do
with rarely seeing her during the day. When we clamored into her room where she worked at her desk, she would settle a crisis sternly, or tell us she was busy, then send us off to play. I could have been not only a naughty child, but also a child jealous of whatever was more absorbing to her than my brother and me.

Whatever feeling of rejection we children may have harbored, it would have been brief. We thought that was the way mothers were, busy doing mysterious things of their own. Our days were mostly monitored by the different women who lived with us and took care of the household. In the evenings when my father was home, we were all together—until our too early bedtime. We often listened to my father tell stories by a fireplace made of odd-sized bricks that jutted in and out from each other. When we would ask for just one more story, and my father would finally agree, it was:

\[
\begin{align*}
&I'll \ tell \ you \ a \ story \\
&\quad \text{About Minny Morrie} \\
&\quad \text{And now my story's begun.} \\
&I'll \ tell \ you \ another \\
&\quad \text{About his brother} \\
&\quad \text{And now my story is done.}
\end{align*}
\]

As we were hustled off, whining our disappointment, we didn't know what lucky children we were, but we felt very secure.

As I grew older, I worried about those women of our daytime lives who lived in a room in the basement of the house and were never invited to join our evenings. (It didn't occur to me that they may have craved their privacy by the time evening came.) But somehow I knew Mother was convinced that people lived on different social levels, so whatever I wondered as a child wasn't relevant. I didn't or couldn't articulate to Mother how bothered me. These women were my friends in the kitchen, though, where I was sent to learn domesticity. Later, I understood that that was how Mother worked it out in order to write steadily.

By the time my brother George and I were six and seven years old, Mother planned special outings with us. Summers, the three of us alone at our family cabin for a few days, Mother would take us firmly in hand (at least I felt that resolve in her), sandwiches
prepared, to hike up on a nearby ridge—an expedition. Because she was with us, I know that we were eager to go, hot and tired though we would finally be when we found a rock in the shade to munch our peanut butter and jellies. Mostly, though, I remember her admonitions “not to fuss” and “not to dawdle.” What mother goes on adventures with her small children without admonitions? Presumably, we learned this way. But when I, in my mid-thirties, took my own children on such hikes, I could still remember how I had resented those chidings—as if Mother were not one of us, not also curious about a beetle hiding under a stone.

Those afternoons, I felt Mother’s interest in finishing these moments with children in order to get back to her writing. “Did you resent her for that?” a friend once asked me. No, because we understood that to be the relationship one had with a mother. When we had returned to the cabin, my brother and I would disappear to our own pursuits, but still, we knew our outing had been something she wanted to do.

While we were children, we did not know her to have longings or questions about life. Our own attempts to ask questions about why summer didn’t last or why someone died were dismissed, kindly but firmly, giving me, at least, the impression that it was our obligation to be happily engaged in our own activities. We never asked about her writing because copies of her newly published novels were never out on a table to look at, not until late into our high school years. By that time, I think, we had assumed that we were somehow not eligible to ask. It was a strangeness that has taken my brothers’ and my lifetimes to understand.

But we did know that she wrote books: at dinner parties Mother enjoyed telling stories about herself being a writer. She told the story of being accosted at a cocktail party by a large woman with a large voice, who was also hard-of-hearing.

“And you are a writer!” the woman exclaimed. “I know about your books. How do you do it? With a husband and three children!”

Mother replied, “I just go about it using rump power.”
The woman shrieked delightedly, “My dear, you do? On rum?”
Then Mother would laugh and say, “I left her, and the whole room, probably, thinking I kept myself soused on rum in order
to write.” Her listeners loved the story, and concluded, I think, that it said something about readers in Great Falls, Montana.

What I did resent, growing up, and what took my first thirty-five years to outgrow, was not my writing mother but my social mother. Shopping trips with her were the worst, especially to Great Falls’ only department store, The Paris. Her verbal scorn for the clerk who didn’t carry the right brand of stockings made me burn with eleven-year-old hangdog shame. (And I resented, with silent rebellion as I grew older, her put-down of people who were “not the right sort.” They seemed perfectly good people to me.) Her characterization of me in “ready-to-wear” affected me in a different way: “What do you have that my little girl could wear? She is no Shirley Temple.” I had not yet acquired irony; I only felt sadly lacking when my gawky, tomboy self was seen as difficult to fit. Neither did I have any way of realizing that Mother was making her status felt.

While I understood that I was “a difficult child” in my mother’s eyes, I had no such feeling about that with my father. For him it wasn’t my lack of moral fibre that caused me to set the dinner table incorrectly or to knock over a full glass of milk. When I, about eight years old, complained about the injustice of a curling iron, he took me for a good short haircut, like my brother’s. I only remember my mother’s displeasure when she saw the haircut, but a good number of years later, she told me with wry amusement that my father had left me on the front porch with a box of chocolates to atone for his deed. Unlike our mother, Dad was mirthful about social strictures, at least around my brothers and me.

Dad could turn a well-appointed, sedate family dinner table into an uproarious fest with a well-timed plot. When, one after another, we three children would be in trouble—for elbows on the table, napkins on the floor, or slouching—Dad would surreptitiously half-fill his teaspoon with water, and still looking at Mother, flip it at one of my brothers. He met the giggles and hoots that followed with exaggerated innocence, ignoring Mother’s outraged protests. The solemnity of a polite supper suddenly evaporated, to our great relief.

But I remember these contrasts between what my mother insisted upon and what my father deliciously undermined in our
childhood as only the beginning. As we grew older, we clung to
his examples of acceptable behavior rather than Mother's. From
Mother we received edicts, and rebelled against them, most of
the time, silently. She felt it was her place to teach us manners, of
course, but they often seemed arbitrary, and sometimes unbear-
able.

Again the contrast: I never saw my father condescend to an-
other human being, or speak disparagingly of that person after-
wards. Instead, there were explanations, sometimes commiserations,
offered calmly to us. With him we came to understand the
complexities of human life as opposed to what seemed the rig-
idly black-and-white pronouncements of my mother. But that
was my social, not my writing mother.

During Mother's secretly prolific years of writing, (secret as
far as we children were concerned), she had steady encourage-
ment from my father. He read her manuscripts first, before they
were sent off to her former teacher in Michigan and then to her
editor at Harcourt, Brace and Company. The only times I heard
my parents' voices raised in sustained argument were in discus-
sions about a character or scene, coming from behind their closed
door. In the twenty-eight years of their marriage before my father's
death, she published ten of her twelve adult novels.

In writing this memoir of my mother, I am keenly aware of
the two lives that she has always lived: the one, essential to her
sense of well-being; the other, essential to the strength and ex-
citement of her writing. She kept the dimensions of her life as a
wife and mother separate from the more daring dimensions of
her life as a writer. I have come to believe that she took few risks,
asked few questions of her life as a doctor's wife because she
could do that brilliantly and safely in her life as a writer. I think
that dichotomy has a part in the strangeness my brothers and I
felt—that we were not included in her writing life because we
fulfilled a role in her non-writing life. Picture her three adult,
mixed children obtaining copies of her novels from second-
hand bookstores, when we could find them.

Chapter One: Grafton, Vermont
An early photograph shows Mother as a wiry, determined child
of nine years with a very direct gaze, large brown eyes, and rich
brown hair in ringlets, held back by a ribbon. I see her curled up
at one end of a log swing in the barn loft of a modest, old Ver­
mont house, writing with a pencil on a pad of paper. “I knew I
was going to be a writer all of my life,” she has told us. In Ver­
mont, the barn and the woodshed are joined to the house, but
even now the loft is a place to be separate from the bustlings in
the house, a separation she coveted as a child.

Perhaps I can imagine her there so vividly because I have
known that loft since my own childhood. The long log swing is
suspended above the raised platform of the floor, warmly lighted
on sunny afternoons by a ten-foot-high small-paned window that
brings the green leaves of trees inside, their shadows moving on
the rafters and walls. In the darker corners of the loft there are
still large chests, some filled with quilts and some with docu­
ments, letters, old family photographs.

An open staircase to the side of the loft leads down to the
barn floor. Mother used to sit halfway down the stairs, where she
could look into the stall of the family’s buggy horse, Tony, a
sorrel gelding with a white blaze. She talked to him about impor­
tant things from there, she said, and sometimes she went back
up to the raised platform and addressed him in orations.

On the west side of the barn runs a branch of the Saxtons
River, the sound of the water over large brown stones reaching
up into the loft. The family calls it the brook because it is shallow
in summer and easy to wade across. Across the brook lies a hay
meadow, and beyond it the road coming from the village crosses
the larger branch of the Saxtons River through a covered bridge.
From there the road climbs slowly up through tall hardwood and
fir trees and patches of cool green maidenhair fern. A low, nar­
row window in the loft looks out to the covered bridge.

On the east side of the barn lies the main road—in Mother’s
childhood and ours, a dusty quiet road, lined on each side by tall
white shuttered houses and people occasionally walking by, some­
times waving to a greeting from the loft. Later, that road would
play a part in three of Mother’s novels set in the village of Grafton.

Mother, her older sister Margaret, and their parents first be­
gan to summer in Vermont in 1906, when Mother was one year
old. Their home was in Philadelphia, where her father was a Bap­
tist minister, but Mother was a fretful baby in the Philadelphia
heat and this determined her parents to travel to Vermont each summer. Reverend Walker and his wife, Harriet, both had family nearby. Harriet had grown to young girlhood in the valley of Brookline, Vermont, just twenty miles from Grafton. And the Reverend’s father had been born on the Walker homestead along the Saxtons River, one mile downstream from Grafton. Two of the Reverend’s uncles had homes along the dusty village Main Street where, by 1916, my mother’s parents bought a permanent summer home: the modest Vermont house with the barn attached and the loft above, the house they had been renting for several years. It is the house Mother retired to, the house that is now a second home to my youngest brother and his family.

I think Mother chose Vermont as her cultural background early in her life. From her stories it was clear that the three summer months in Vermont were far more important to her than the nine months in Pennsylvania. Almost all of the stories she told us were of Grafton and its townspeople. It is true that we walked the roads and paths with her and looked out the windows of the Grafton house at people passing as we never did in Philadelphia. But she chose Vermont as her touchstone rather than Philadelphia because when the family was in Vermont, she knew her parents as part of its history. Many of their stories became hers. And equally important, I have come to think, she saw her parents in Vermont as more interesting than they were in the restricted world of parsonage boundaries and religious obligations.

The old Sidney Holmes house, which the Walkers bought in 1916, was sold fully furnished, complete with a valuable library. The family story goes that the house was bought with Grandmother Walker’s wedding fees, those monies offered the minister by a grateful groom and duly passed on to the minister’s wife, as was the custom. Always with awe, Mother told how her father found a first edition of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the inherited library. Mother formed a lifelong interest in the Holmes family connections to an earlier Vermont and, during a summer visit to Grafton years later, she found letters of a correspondence in the library that would become an important part of her historical novel *The Quarry*.

Mother’s stories made her childhood in the early 1900’s vivid to us. Each summer the Walker family took passage from Phila-
delphia and sailed up the coast as far as Brattleboro, Vermont, then rode a train inland to Saxtons River, Vermont, where they stopped at a local stable, hitched up Tony to their buggy, and drove the last twelve miles to Grafton.

On one of their return trips by the same route, their ship sprang a leak in the night. Mother told us of being wakened in the dark and advised to be ready to go down in the lifeboats. Her mother sat calmly before a mirror, piling her collection of jewelry on the top of her head in the coils of her hair, pinning it firmly, then covering it with her hat. Her father insisted that the family sit down to a breakfast of oatmeal and bow their heads for grace in the midst of the excitement of the other passengers crowding to the rail out on deck. "We were the only family eating breakfast in the dark dining room," Mother would remember in a tone of both dismay and respect. She was allowed to carry her pet rooster from the summer in a cardboard box. A sailor who helped her down the rope ladder was careful to keep the cardboard box from swinging out over the water.

Most of the photographs, too, like the stones, show Mother in Grafton. As a toddler she is usually with her protective sister Margaret, seven years older, both little girls dressed in white many-petticoated dresses, perhaps just having come from church services. There are photographs of large family picnics, a tablecloth on a long table spread with oval platters of fried chicken, gleaming ears of corn, heaping bowls of salads, tall white pitchers. Usually, a croquet game is going on in the background. Later on, the little girl, Mildred, stands with a playmate, frowning into the summer sun. Once, she is beside a cart hitched to a large, shaggy dog.

Mother often said that her sister was proud of taking care of her, making up games to play together and purposefully instructing her in how to behave. When they washed dishes out on the back porch overlooking the brook, Mother remembered, her sister named the knives as fathers, the forks as mothers, and the spoons as children. We were told this matter-of-factly as if anyone could see the sense of it. And this same older sister made up games to keep Mother amused in church—folding a handkerchief into a small white mouse to run up her sleeve or under her wide belt, or widening her eyes at something that wasn’t there on
Mother’s Sunday dress. These antics made Mother smile whenever she told them to us.

She liked telling us of her rebellious moments, too. One summer evening her mother got out the pots and pans and her father brought in brimming baskets of peaches. The narrow kitchen was already hot from the stoked-up wood stove. Mother said she did not want to help peel the sticky peaches. Her father looked at her sternly, “Well then, you cannot stay down here and have fun with us. You will have to spend the evening in your room.” Mother wandered off upstairs to her room, feeling shut out, listening to her sister laughing and talking with her mother and father as they worked away.

As they grew older, Mother came to feel that her sister had a separate, much more interesting and dramatic life than her own in the Grafton summers. One afternoon, Aunt Peg came home from the local swimming hole in tears because one of her friends had lifted her skirts so high in front of the young men that her ankles showed. Mother remembered her sister’s shame. This would have been about 1916. Mother showed us photos, pointing out our young aunt with tight curly hair and a warm smile, merriment in her brown eyes. Mother described her with the envy of a younger sister who felt herself to be “plain” and “scrawny” by comparison. But photos don’t bear that out; they show Mother as an equally pretty child, her expression perhaps a little pensive.

My brothers and I know two of the larger white houses with green shutters and generous porches for their importance to Mother’s Grafton summers. One stands against the village green, the other at the fork of Main Street, both with wrought iron balconies above their main doors. On each of these balconies Mother and her sister and village friends had declaimed passages from *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Mother was pleased that several times she had taken Mercutio’s role, and another memorable time been Romeo to her sister’s Juliet. Not so many years ago, when she gestured to the balconies and retold the story for her grandchildren, we felt again her deep sense of belonging to the life of Vermont.

The story that equally thrilled and frightened us occurred on a summer day when Mother and her sister were still little girls.
Their mother was driving them back home from a day’s outing in the buggy. As they came along the dusty road nearing their house, the horse shied at some movement. In an instant he was a runaway. He veered off the road onto the wide green lawns of the large houses set back from the road, and Grandma Walker hauled back on the reins, commanding the little girls to get down on the floor of the buggy and hold on tight. She brought the horse down to a walk finally, and guided him back to the barn while the neighbors watched from their porches. “We were terrified,” Mother said, “but it was exciting!” As an afterthought, she commented, “Every one said Mother was a good hand with a horse.”

As Mother told these stories about her mother, I often sensed an attitude that accorded her mother the accomplishment of keeping house but not much more, not anything particularly admirable or instructive. When I was older, she told me that her mother could always reduce the amount of ingredients called for in a recipe. “Making do,” Mother commented. She suggested that this was commendable when the household was pinched for money, but that she thought it, otherwise, without merit. Mother felt that, yes, it kept things going but it was not an effort that she herself cared to make. It annoyed her that “shorting” recipe ingredients (1½ cups sugar when 2 were required; ¼ teaspoon nutmeg when ¼ was called for) should be a matter of pride.

What Mother really scorned was her mother’s wish to retire to Vermont and raise chickens. “ Chickens!” Mother would say when she mentioned this. “How awful that would be.” I did wonder about Mother’s distaste because, after all, our family out in Montana raised chickens. Still, they were not Mother’s enterprise. (We children cared for the chickens and the woman who kept house for Mother prepared them for the freezer.)

I knew my grandmother as someone who sewed “best” dresses for me, and as someone who wrote me right back when I sent her a painstaking thank-you letter. Once, when my maternal grandparents visited us at our family cabin in Montana, Grandma took us into the thicket nearby to gather smooth stones and dug a hole to line a “dry well” for keeping vegetables cool. My brother and I were entranced. And when she whipped up scrambled eggs
on the kerosene stove, she did it with a flourish I have never forgotten.

Why have I remembered all these years the little stories of Mother's, characterizing my Grandmother Walker? I wanted to know about her because I was only eight years old when she died, but whenever I recall the stories, I feel the implicit criticism in Mother's tone of voice. Now, I imagine that Mother preferred not to think of herself as having a mother with such uninteresting ambitions as "making do" or "raising chickens." Is it simply that she wanted her mother to be a different person—as I, in my callow youth, wanted my mother to be, for different reasons?

Mother's stories about her father, in contrast, were always told with pride. Each vignette of him from her childhood emphasized how carefully, even exactly, he coached her in important skills. There was the day when Mother had proudly accompanied him in the family buggy to visit an old friend of his who lived at some distance from Grafton. Coming home, they were caught in a hailstorm and took shelter in a covered bridge. For the duration of the storm, Grandfather Walker taught Mother her multiples of eight. She always remembered the day happily, the snugness of sitting under the raised bonnet of the buggy. For Mother it was an example of his excellent influence on her, her approval that he never let an opportunity for instruction be wasted. (I remember thinking that might have been a waste of a good storm.)

She admired his resourcefulness, too, his "Yankee inventiveness." Rolling up his sleeves, he chopped enough stove wood for a week at a time, repaired leaks and rebuilt stairs. He always approached tasks with exuberant energy, she said approvingly. We experienced once, in our childhood, his thunderous preaching once from the high pulpit of the Baptist Church in Great Falls. The two arcs of his white and bushy mustache moved up and down, quivering with vehemence, as his face turned from red to purple.

After Grandfather Walker's death, Mother used to tell us the story of his heroism. Walking down a Philadelphia street, he saw a department store on fire. Just as he drew closer, a man ran out with his clothes in flames. Grandfather tripped him and rolled him in his winter overcoat. As he bent over the man, glass from
the large window above him blew outward from the heat of the
fire, and fell, slicing off the end of Grandfather’s nose. “With­
out a thought,” Mother would say grandly, “he found his nose
and walked down the street to a nearby doctor’s office to have it
sewn back on.” She explained that this was the cause of his nose
turning purple whenever he was “exercised.”

Walks through the village with him were a pleasure to her.
Whenever they stopped to visit with his friends or acquaintan­
tces, she was aware of his eloquence; he had faith in his ability to
settle any dispute, she would say in the awed tone of a little girl.
She told us when we were grown, almost inadvertently, and with
shy pride, that her father called her “Peter.” He had wanted her
to be a boy, she said matter-of-factly. He explained to her that
Peter was his favorite name because Peter was one of the finest
of the apostles, as well as a fisherman. I sensed that being “Pe­
ter” assured my mother that she had a special role to fulfill for
her father, perhaps of succeeding in a way that a girl would not
be expected to, a way that set her apart from her sister. When I
asked once how long Grandfather had called her “Peter,” she
answered that it was until she went away to college, she thought.

Grandfather was a fine fisherman, bringing home a string of
fish whenever he went off to the narrow, shallow streams of
dark brown water that ran down the steep hills to join the branches
of the Saxtons River. Once, Mother showed us the smooth gray
rock behind the Walker homestead where Grandfather had sur­
prised a mink with a large brown trout wriggling in its mouth.
Tapped lightly on his head by the end of the fishing rod, the
mink dropped the trout, and Grandfather caught it in his free
hand.

Mother always enjoyed telling of her father’s fishing prowess,
but she herself was not interested in trekking off to fish with
him. Aunt Peg was the child who followed him and learned to be
as adept at fishing as he. What absorbed Mother most about her
father was his intellectual life, she made clear.

In her later years, Mother said that her father was the greatest
influence on her writing. It wasn’t that he discussed her early
novels with her; his influence went back to her earlier years, when
he inspired her to succeed in whatever she attempted. She was
very “firm” about this—a word she often used with a slight com-
pression of her mouth, meaning there was no doubt. I imagine that her mother wanted that for her, too, but it may not have been with the same emphasis on ambition.

Perhaps Mother remembered those particular stories from her childhood because they helped her define her understanding of her parents. And perhaps the stories I have told my children about my parents stayed in my mind for the same reason. Stories I’ve told them about my father are certainly as different from those I’ve told about my mother as Mother’s were. What I know now as an adult is that my stories about my parents are not as much about them as they are about me—my reactions to them. And perhaps her stories about her parents worked in the same way.

I was startled to discover, when I first looked up their family histories, that Mother’s parents had very similar backgrounds. It must not have been of interest to Mother to tell us. Both of Mother’s parents were descended from families who had emigrated to the Massachusetts Colony in the 1630’s, on her father’s side from Scotland, and on her Mother’s side from England. The only mention Mother made of this was that Grandma Walker, at one time, had been gathering the information necessary to qualify for membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution. It seemed to Mother a rather uninteresting pursuit.

Grandma Walker was born Harriet Merrifield in Newfane, Vermont, in 1865. Moments after Harriet’s birth, the new mother asked the reason for the church bells tolling, and was told that they rang for the death of President Lincoln. Harriet’s father’s people had left the Massachusetts Colony and settled permanently in the Brookline Valley in Vermont by the mid 1700’s. Local people in Newfane still point out “Merrifield’s Meadow,” where they say young men were trained as soldiers for the Revolutionary Army.

Harriet Merrifield, as a child, attended a round brick schoolhouse which still stands at a fork in the main road through the valley. The story told in the local historical museum’s leaflet is that the first schoolmaster, a Scot, wanted the schoolhouse to be round rather than square, with carefully spaced windows; in his earlier life he had been a highwayman and wished to see who was
coming from all directions. The advantage for the children in the school was that there were no corners for the winter winds to shriek around.

Harriet Merrifield’s description of her Grandfather Merrifield always made Mother shudder—he was a grim, upright man who ran his finger underneath the rim of each child’s breakfast plate to see that there were no hidden pork rinds. But another story that Harriet told to Mother was of a more playful grandfather at his own family table. A suitor, favored by one of his daughters, had come to dinner. He was not the usual young minister coming to call, and the head of the table asked an unusual blessing:

Dear God of Love
Look down from above
And see how times have mended.
We now have strawberry shortcake
Where mush and milk were intended.

Whenever Mother repeated this story, she seemed to enjoy the slyness of the comment—that the daughter had betrayed her preference for her caller by her choice of menu.

On the invitation of a brother already settled in Illinois, Harriet’s father moved his family west to Mendota, Illinois, in 1880 to join his brothers in the Western Cottage Organ Company, which built melodeons and, later, pianos. (The Merrifield brothers had apparently been apprenticed, earlier, to the large melodeon and piano company located in Brattleboro, Vermont.) In the years following the Civil War, many families left for “the West” as economic conditions worsened in New England. According to Mother, those who moved west at that time showed “gumption,” and those who stayed in New England lacked it, a notion she pursued in her novel The Quarry.

Harriet Merrifield was fifteen when her family moved to Mendota, Illinois. A year later, her mother died in childbirth, and Harriet took on the care of her five younger brothers and sisters. When her father married again four years later, Harriet was free to go on to college. It was a matter of pride to Mother that her Grandfather Merrifield ensured that each of his children was given the opportunity to attend a college or to have means to start in a chosen line of work. At Dennison College in Ohio,
Harriet studied to be a teacher and sang in the college choir. A young seminary student, Walter M. Walker, who attended a performance by the Dennison College choir, met Harriet there and later courted her.

Although Walter Walker was born and raised in Wyoming, Illinois, his father had been born on the Walker Homestead in Vermont. Samuel Walker, who settled the Walker Homestead in the early 1800's, was descended from the Walkers of the Old Plymouth Colony of Massachusetts. A record of the Plymouth Colony written in 1635 includes among its residents a widow Walker who had emigrated with her six sons from Glencoe, Scotland.

Walter's father, Orville Walker, married a Sarah Milliken from a nearby village and, in 1852, moved west to Wyoming, Illinois. As Mother told us, her Grandfather Walker must have been the only one of that generation of Walker sons who had "the gumption" to move West. Two of her great-uncles who stayed built houses in Grafton—along the same main street where Mother's parents would purchase their summer home in 1916.

Elgin, Illinois, became the permanent home for Walter Walker's parents, where they were successful farmers. They were described in a family history as believing in community responsibility and having become staunch supporters of the Baptist religion. Walter and one of his nine brothers went to a seminary school near Chicago, living in a boarding house run by his older sister. The sister devoted herself to making her brothers' education possible in this way. When Walter graduated from the seminary, he obtained a Baptist ministry in Illinois, and kept in touch with Harriet Merrifield by letter.

After her graduation from college, Harriet's father instructed her to return to Vermont to keep house for her bachelor brother, who was running the Merrifield farm. But she also began teaching at nearby Leland and Gray Seminary in Townshend, Vermont. Her father had been a student at Leland and Gray, and while there, had delivered an oration on "The Advantage of Female Companionship." Her grandfather had helped found the Seminary in 1834. But in 1890, Harriet left her obligations in Vermont to marry the Reverend Walter Walker in Elgin, Illinois.

There is a photograph of her newly married parents that de-
lighted Mother. They stand on the deck of a ship about to depart for Europe for their wedding trip. Her mother wears a stylish dress of the 1890's: thin stripes on a dark background, a full skirt and leg-of-mutton sleeves. She is smiling beneath a pertly brimmed hat. Her father holds a straw hat in one hand, erect and smiling at his bride. He wears a suit complete with vest and cravat. “Aren’t they handsome!” Mother would say to us.

Grandmother Walker was twenty-five when she married, but Mother was wistful that she was not born until her mother was forty years old—no longer a young woman. Still, it was important to Mother that her father had honored his young wife’s wish not to bear children immediately after their marriage. Their first child, Margaret, was born in 1898 in Elgin, Illinois. At some time after that, her father took a parish in Philadelphia, where their second daughter, Mildred, was born in 1905.

By the time Mother was one year old, the family had reestablished their family ties with Vermont; from 1906 on, the Walker family would summer in Grafton. Now my youngest brother’s family arrange to be there for most holidays and for family reunions. His eldest daughter chose to be married in the Grafton Church in the spring of 1996. In the village, the Grafton house is still called “the Walker Place.”