

8. Orban Vance Wiggins and Eura Lee Riggs

By

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Grandad Orban Vance Wiggins (1895-1972) spent most of his youth and young married life on a farm in McLean County, Kentucky. He and Eura Lee Riggs (1898-1993) were married September 30, 1916.



L-R: Eura and Orban Wiggins, Velma, Rovene, and Eva Lee Fireline (Fairline)
In Front: Lillie Corum

Two children were born to the couple, Dorman Elmo Wiggins (1919-2000), nicknamed “Bud” and Grace Ola Wiggins (1930-2004), whom everyone called “Sis”. Dorman left the family after high school and was living in Owensboro, KY before 1940. He joined the Army in 1940.



Eura Lee and Grace Ola Wiggins

In the early 1940s, the war industries in the larger populated areas of metropolitan Evansville, Indiana and Henderson, Kentucky eventually attracted Grandad and Mamaw Wiggins to move there with Aunt Sis. Up to that point, Orban Wiggins lived the very active life of a farmer in McLean County, KY, but he also worked in law enforcement in Kentucky.

Orban's Law Enforcement and Other Security Positions

On October 7, 1934, The *Owensboro Messenger* newspaper reported in the Calhoun News section that "O. V. Wiggins of the Beech Grove Community has been appointed as deputy sheriff under J. M. Johnson and will move his family to Calhoun at an early date." (1) Grandad's stint as deputy sheriff in McLean County lasted no longer than 14 months. On December 22, 1935, the paper reported that "O. V. Wiggins, former deputy sheriff, has accepted a position as guard at Eddyville penitentiary and has moved his family to that city." (2) That explains why my father, Dorman, graduated from Eddyville High School on May 21, 1937. Eddyville is over 70 miles from Calhoun, the McLean County seat. On March 24, 1936, a news item notes that Mr. and Mrs. O. V. Wiggins and son have returned to Eddyville after a brief visit here. (There is no mention of Aunt Sis, who would have been about 5½ years old at the time.) Another visit to Calhoun occurred on 12/6/1936, and an item on 4/18/1937 states that "O. V. Wiggins, guard at Eddyville, is spending several days here this week." The Wikipedia article for the Kentucky State Penitentiary says that the correctional officer force there was always low in numbers and low-paid. (3) This fact, coupled with the harrowing experience of the 1937 flood that devastated Eddyville, apparently convinced Grandad Wiggins to return to the area that had always been his home.

On July 13, 1937 Grandad Wiggins filed his candidacy for sheriff of McLean County on the *Democratic* ticket. (4) Less than a month later he learned that he lost the election by a mere 10 votes, 874 to 864, in part because the other three losing candidates shared a total of 1,047 votes. (5) This must have been a big disappointment for Grandad. That he had been a Democrat for quite a while at this stage of his life is shown by his appointment in October 1926 as a Democratic precinct worker for the upcoming election. (6)

In my adult years, I knew Grandad only as a staunch Republican, so it was surprising to discover his deep early ties to the Democrats. My mother once told me that Grandad served as a guard at the White House in Washington, D.C., but I have never been able to verify that. Even small events in the Wigginses' lives, such as a visit of a few days to Calhoun, were mentioned in the local papers, but I found no such evidence of the White House job. On the other hand, if Grandad were a guard at the White House, the federal officials would probably have discouraged him from announcing that fact. Grandad apparently had a great affection for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Mom said he cried for 3 days when Roosevelt died in 1945. He probably would have accepted an opportunity for even a short gig at the Roosevelt White House. An attempt in 2020 to verify the White House employment through the government agency that handles White House guards was not successful.

In 1943, Grandad Wiggins held another security position in Evansville, IN as a guard at one of the local defense plants.

The association with security services continued among the Wiggins males in future generations. My father, Dorman, was in the US Air Force Security Service. Following his retirement, he became a campus policeman at the University of Minnesota. His grandson, Christopher (Dwight's son), is now a California Highway Patrolman.

Other Occupations and Sources of Income

Grandad Wiggins grew tobacco on his farm. In 1928 he sold 210 pounds of burley tobacco at Calhoun for \$64.65. (7) In February 1935, his tobacco brought in only \$15.13 at the Henderson Market. (8)

Tobacco was a big business in Kentucky and elsewhere in the 1930s, and a large ad for Camel cigarettes promoting its use for health purposes was found in the Owensboro *Messenger* March 24, 1936 edition. The section was titled "High-Speed Living Taxes Digestion". It featured scenes of people smoking Camel cigarettes in rush hour New York traffic and in other places. The ad blared the benefits of smoking:

**Smoking Camels found to have
a positive beneficial effect
upon Digestion . . .
For Digestion Sake—Smoke Camels.**

Grandad Wiggins was clearly trying to move away from farming during the 1930s. After his time in police work, he seems to have returned to farming for a while, but eventually the lure of better pay in a larger metropolitan area won out. He was working at Atmospheric Nitrogen Corporation in Henderson, KY, across the Ohio River from Evansville, when he filled out his draft card in 1942. Thus, the Evansville/Henderson area served as a magnet for Grandad and Mamaw Wiggins to eventually abandon the family farm in McLean County, KY and seek a better life for themselves elsewhere.

SERGEANT VIEWS MOTHER'S WAR EFFORT



MRS. EURA WIGGINS, Dept. 67, above left, watches her son, Sergeant Norman Wiggins, and John Davidson, Assistant Superintendent of the Wing Division, examine an aircraft part. Sergeant Wiggins visited the Wing Plant, where his mother is employed, on a recent furlough.

Like scores of other American mothers, Mrs. Eura Wiggins wished to do something to aid in the war effort, for she realized that in so doing she would be helping her son, Sergeant Dorman E. Wiggins, a radio navigator in the Army Air Corps.

As a result, Mrs. Wiggins secured a job in the Wing Plant at Servel and joined the many other mothers of the Nation in producing for their sons on many fronts.

Recently Sergeant Wiggins visited the plant and saw with his own eyes the products of his mother's part in the war program.

Sergeant Wiggins entered the service before Pearl Harbor and on August 1, 1940, was sent to Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Since then the young Sergeant has covered quite a bit of territory, going to Iceland, Newfoundland, Labrador, Greenland, Canada, Bermuda Islands, Brazil, England, Scotland and Ireland.

The Wiggins family is 100 per cent behind the war effort, as Mr. Wiggins is a guard at another local war plant.

Mamaw Wiggins was one of the original “Rosie the Riveters” during World War II, and she was featured in the story in the Serval plant’s newsletter when her son, “Norman,” visited in 1943. (9) Serval, Inc. produced parts for aircraft during the war. As far as I know, Mamaw Wiggins never had a formal job after WWII.

While Mamaw worked at the Serval aircraft wing plant in Evansville, Grandad Wiggins was employed in that city as a guard at one of the local plants in 1943, and by 1945 as an assembler at the Briggs automobile body plant. In the 1950s, much of Mamaw’s and Grandad’s time was spent caring for their mentally challenged granddaughter, Sandra Kay Price, the only child born to Aunt Sis in her marriage to Marvin Price.



Sandra Kay Price and Lee Carrol Wiggins in December 1953

Briggs was acquired by Chrysler in 1953, and when Chrysler decided in 1959 to close the plant and move operations to St. Louis, Grandad and Mamaw opted to stay in Evansville at their house at 720 E. Columbia Street. Both were, or soon would be, eligible for Social Security. Grandad supplemented that income with various odd jobs, at one point doing custodial work at an Evansville Post Office. He also painted houses at times. Since the Columbia Street house was on a corner lot with a relatively large side yard, they planted big vegetable gardens to help keep down food expenses. Mamaw canned a lot of produce from the garden. We especially enjoyed her canned tomatoes.

My wife, Mia, and I were always impressed with Mamaw Wiggins’s intelligence and interest in life. When she visited us in Bloomington, IN after our boys were born, we were glad to see that she had such a keen interest in world affairs. As was true for many people who lived through the depression, Grandad and Mamaw were always frugal. Mia used to laugh at how Mamaw would save the coffee grounds when we visited and re-use them the next day.

Residences and Other Real Estate Property Rented or Owned

It is not clear that the Wiggins family moved to Calhoun in 1934, as noted in the announcement of the deputy sheriff position, but they certainly lived in Eddyville during all of 1936 and at least part of 1937. By the time of the 1940 Census, Grandad and Mamaw Wiggins were living back on the farm in McLean

County with Ada (Huckleberry) Riggs (Mamaw's mother) and Aunt Sis. My father, Dorman, was by then on his own and living in Owensboro, KY.

At some point, Grandad himself must have been contemplating a move to Owensboro. He owned a double lot in what was then called Country Club Estates near Legion Park in Owensboro, and he placed an ad to sell the property in March 1943. (10)

A note in *The Owensboro Messenger* on August 13, 1942 mentions that the Wigginses were living in Henderson, KY, and the 1943 real estate sales ad includes the further information that they lived on postal Route 3. Apparently, the family moved to Evansville, IN shortly thereafter, living originally at 2501-A North Evans Street. The decision to sell their farm is confirmed by an ad on November 5, 1943: "FOR SALE—GOOD FARM, 135 ACRES". (11) The ad notes that a 4-acre tobacco base is included. The location of the farm is given as 7 miles west of Calhoun, ½ mile south of Kentucky road No. 136. The price was \$4,000.

When they moved to Evansville, they first lived at 2501-A North Evans, then at 719 E. Oregon Street by July 21, 1944. (12) The Oregon Street house would eventually be occupied by Aunt Sis and her second husband, Billy DeJarnett. By that time, the Wigginses had moved to a new house on Columbia Street and were renting out their Oregon Street house.

Education and Public Service

Although the 1940 Census indicates that Orban Wiggins completed only the 8th grade of school, his intelligence and breadth of knowledge made quite an impression on my maternal great-grandfather, George Washington Dennis, who was one generation older than Orban. Grandad Dennis once said of him, "Mr. Wiggins is the smartest man I've ever met." He always called him "Mr. Wiggins," never by his first name, and I took that to be a sign of the high respect he had for Grandad Wiggins.

A letter from Aunt Sis in 1984 contained an interesting comment about how Grandad viewed education:

Your grandfather would certainly have been proud of him [*i.e., my older son, Alan*] and Tommy [*my younger son*]. He always admired your learning abilities. Guess he got tired of Bud [*Dorman*] and me being only average (C) students. He thought education was something to really be proud of and always wanted to learn all he could. Uncle Amos had a degree to teach, but never used it for very long. Had Dad been able to go to college, I'm sure he would have used his to much better advantage. Of course, back then only one child was afforded the luxury of finishing high school and going on to college. As Dad always said, he was just born too late!

Grandad found other ways to show his enthusiasm for education. In July 1932 he was elected to serve as a trustee in the school for Beech Grove, KY. (13) On 8/27/1933 he was listed among a group of high and elementary school principals of McLean County called to a meeting of the district committee for "Interpreting the Work of the Schools to the People." (14)

Letters to the Editor

One can gain an appreciation for Grandad's powers of expression through letters he wrote to newspapers. A massive flood inundated areas along the Ohio River and its tributaries in 1937. Grandad

wrote a long graphic description of the flood's impact on the Cumberland River area around Eddyville. He says, "The warden at the prison allowed the guards to use the state truck and sent trusty prisoners with it and helped to move merchandise and furniture for anyone in need of help." . . . "By January 24 water had entered every business house in town, but one, including the bank and post office."

Taking a roundabout route, he managed to drive Mamaw and Aunt Sis back to Beech Grove, at times driving in water that went over the running boards of his car. He returned to Eddyville the next day, but had to abandon his car and walk the final two miles along a railroad track. His account included this story of how a chicken survived the flood waters:

One of the freaks of the flood I saw was a white hen, marooned in an Elm bush. She stayed there five days and nights, with water from two feet deep at first, to 10 feet, climbing up from one small limb to another, as the water rose. On the evening of the fifth day a colored man in a small boat came to her rescue. The prisoners here got a great thrill out of watching her, out of the shop windows, and speculating on how long she could live in that bush without food. (15)

Twenty-two years after that account, Grandad took to his typewriter again to write an impassioned letter to the editor of the *Evansville Press*. In 1959, a debate was raging in Evansville about whether to construct a flood wall along the Ohio River. Grandad convincingly dismissed that idea and proposed an alternative of a park along Dress Plaza, an option that he felt ". . . would add great beauty and much value to the city as a whole." Some of his words do sound harsh, however:

Now it is only reasonable to expect a lot of people to say, "What if we have another flood in a few years?" I say, "So what?" It would only hasten the day when the city can purchase the needed property at a more reasonable price.

He points out the many flood control projects that were undertaken in the years since 1937 and speculates that another flood of that magnitude was unlikely. "Let us work with nature and not against it so far as we can. Man-made devices have their weaknesses, the same as man himself is weak." (16)

Anyone who has visited the beautiful area of Evansville along the Ohio River knows that Grandad was right to counsel not dissecting the area with a flood wall.

Grandad's transformation to a Republican is evident in a letter to the editor he wrote in 1969 about Ted Kennedy's tragic automobile accident in which his young female companion and campaign strategist, Mary Jo Kopechne, drowned at Chappaquidick Island in Massachusetts. Grandad was replying to an earlier letter from a person who asked what would have been the reaction if she had been driving the car and survived, but Senator Kennedy drowned. Grandad answered, "I suspect Mary Jo would have suffered a far more severe penalty than having her driver's license revoked and given a suspended sentence." (17)

Here are some other activities described in local papers that show Grandad's predilection to undertake public service roles:

- May 1927: Grandad and 2 others were appointed to appraise 2.93 acres of land owned by D. W. Glover that was to be taken for the right of way for the Island-Sacramento Road.
- Fall 1933: He was on the general committee in charge of the Fourth Annual Agriculture and School Fair in McLean County.

- March 1934: He was chair of the Calhoun Community Magisterial District Committee of Tobacco Growers.
- In 1935 and in 1942 he was summoned to serve on the Petit Jury of the McLean County Circuit Court.
- In 1956, Grandad and Mamaw were a host family for students who visited Evansville from Belgium and France during the time of the Republican National Convention.

Religion

The Wigginses attended Evansville's Bethany Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), where Mamaw was an active participant in the Priscilla Society, often leading the devotional part of their meetings. Grandad sang in the choir. I remember that he had a deep voice, so he sang bass in the church choir. Grandad and Mamaw took me with them to a Sunday church service during one of my infrequent visits to Evansville. When it came time for the communion, which is a weekly occurrence in the Christian Church, Grandad handed me the platter containing the wine glasses, and I passed it on to the person sitting next to me. After the service, he asked me why I hadn't partaken, and I explained that such things weren't for children in the Baptist Church I had been raised in.

Other Reminiscences

Grandad was apparently no slouch on the guitar, although I never recall hearing him play it. I do remember the deep grooves on the frets of his guitar, indicating that fingernails had contacted the wood many, many times over the years. My father, Dorman, also played guitar. Found among his property when he died was a record of him playing the "Twelfth Street Rag" on a Gibson Steel guitar. Dorman made the recording while he was a sergeant in the Air Force's 3rd Radio Squadron Mobile. Although he sounds more than a little tipsy in the dialog heard on the tape, the performance is impressive.

In my pre-school years, I would sometimes spend time with my grandparents in Evansville. They were very fond of my mother and told her after her divorce from Dorman that they would always consider her their daughter-in-law. I recall that one of my little friends in their neighborhood was a kid named Barney, who had a playhouse and a small goldfish pond in his back yard. Others of my earlier memories of Evansville were very pleasant, including when my cousin, Judy Riggs, visited at the same time.

Trips to the Mesker Park Zoo in Evansville were sometimes included during my visits to Evansville. The monkey ship, a replica of an old sailing ship surrounded by a moat, was a favorite. On one of the later visits to the zoo with Grandad, he told me how amused he was to see a lady's bewilderment at the size of a rhinoceros penis during one of his visits without me.

An aspect of Grandad's past that I never discussed with anyone was his affair with a cousin. Mom told me about this, and I always suspected it might have been Chloe Wiggins (1907-1995), daughter of Terry Wiggins, with whom he had the affair. In the 1980s, we became acquainted with Chloe in Owensboro after my boys were born. She was a well-educated, free-thinking woman who led an adventuresome life. Chloe had 3 husbands, unusual for her generation. I never had the nerve to ask Chloe if what Mom said about Grandad's affair was true.



(Altha) Chloe Wiggins (Haynes) (Blanchard) Brasher around 1985

Grandad once told my mother about Dorman's many romantic partners in Owensboro before they were married, during the time when Dorman was employed as a cab driver by the Red Cab company. While visiting Owensboro around 1938, Grandad apparently stayed in Dorman's apartment for several days. He told mom that it was like a revolving door there, with many young ladies knocking on Dorman's door one right after another. I lost the picture of my father with one of his lady friends from the time during WWII when he was stationed in Canada after he and Mom were married.

Grandad Wiggins was an authoritarian parent, and when he issued commands, he expected his children to obey, even long after they were grown. That seemed not to sit well at times with his strong-willed daughter Grace, but I can't be sure how my father reacted to such "edicts." One clue is that Dorman left home as soon as he graduated from high school and never again lived with Grandad and Mamaw Wiggins. An incident Mom told me about almost ended our relationship with Grandad and Mamaw. I must have acted up in some way during a visit to their house, and Grandad Wiggins slapped me across the face. Mom let him know in no uncertain terms that if he ever touched me again, that would be the last he ever saw of me.

Another incident I recall was when I had been summoned to Evansville because my father and his family were expected to visit. On the planned day of their arrival, they didn't show up. I overheard Grandad

talking on the phone with my dad late that evening, and the result of that heated conversation was the prompt arrival of Dorman, Gerry, and their two sons, Dwight and Lee, the next day.

Grandad didn't seem to like black people, but there was one he felt was an exception. I recall him telling me that the singer Nat King Cole was a credit to his race and an example for others to follow.

I've apparently lost a letter that Grandad sent me when I was in college at IU after I made the decision to switch majors in 1965/66 (my senior year) from chemistry to Russian. In the early 1960s, science majors at Indiana University were required to take two years of a foreign language, either German or Russian. The panic experienced in the country over the USSR's launch of the Sputnik satellite and other achievements in their space program undoubtedly influenced IU and other US academic institutions to include Russian as an option for the language requirement. It was later realized that the Russians were far behind us in all other areas of science, especially chemistry. I hadn't taken either language by the time I was a junior, so I decided to take Russian. I was interested in Russia, and I found it easy to learn the language, even with its unfamiliar Cyrillic alphabet. IU was home to the US Air Force Language School at the time, and there were many Russians living in Bloomington who were associated with the program. At one time we had about 75 Russian families here and even a Russian bookstore and a Russian restaurant. (17) There was also an intensive path to study Russian that allowed me to take the second, third, and fourth year of study all in one calendar year. I had already completed enough chemistry courses at the end of my junior year for the BA requirement, so I decided to gamble by taking the intensive courses and applying to grad school at IU in the Slavic Languages and Literature Department. When Grandad Wiggins learned of this, he was very concerned. Evidently, he thought I was becoming a "pinko" communist sympathizer because the letter I referred to urged me to reconsider my decision, emphasizing how strongly he felt about it with a statement that "Birds of a feather flock together!" In fact, almost all of the Russians in Bloomington had fled communism. (18)

Despite this disagreement, we still maintained our affection for each other, and I am glad that I kept close contact with Grandad Wiggins throughout his life. I will always have a great deal of respect for him. He died during my first year of employment as a Slavic librarian at the University of Illinois in 1972. I wish he could have witnessed my return to chemistry as Head of the IU Chemistry Library in 1976 and the receipt of my PhD in Information Science in 1985.



1985 PhD Graduation

L-R: L E Jackson, Tip Grace, David Grace, Margaret Grace,
Dorman Wiggins, Gary Wiggins, Nell Crowley, Juanita Jackson

Lingering Questions

Grandad Wiggins occasionally used a word to express frustration, exasperation, or discontent with some events or occurrences that I have never heard anyone else say. It was “Thunderation!” A Google search on that word turns up a roller coaster ride at Silver Dollar City in Branson, MO, but also defines it as a mild oath, an exclamation of surprise, agitation, or petulance. Perhaps “thunderation” was a word commonly used in Oxfordshire, and it got passed down in our family from our original English ancestor, Thomas Wiggins.

I’ve also wondered where Grandad’s first and middle names, Orban Vance, came from. While there is a Vance family far back on the Howard side of the Wiggins family tree, there are no Orbans. Orban is found as a Hungarian last name, such as the present prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban. I was surprised to find in a recent search on Ancestry not one, but two people in late 19th-century Kentucky whose full names were Orban Vance. Other than the fact that one of them was at times a visitor to the McLean County town of Cleopatra, I see no connection between these two Orban Vances and our family. I have no idea why Grandad’s parents named him that.

NOTES

1. *The Owensboro Messenger*, October 7, 1934, p. 3.
2. *The Owensboro Messenger*, December 22, 1935, p. 24.
3. Kentucky State Penitentiary. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky_State_Penitentiary (accessed, 6/30/2018)
4. *The Owensboro Messenger*, July 13, 1937, p. 2.
5. *The Owensboro Messenger*, August 8, 1937, p. 7.
6. *The Owensboro Messenger*, October 10, 1926, p. 20.
7. *The Owensboro Messenger*, December 22, 1928, p. 3.
8. *Evansville Courier and Press*, February 22, 1935, ?.
9. “Sergeant views mother’s war effort.” *Servel Inklings* v. 10 no. 13 (July 2, 1943), p. 4.

10. *The Owensboro Messenger*, March 25, 1943, p. 9.
11. *Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer*, November 5, 1943, p. 7.
12. *Evansville Courier and Press*, July 21, 1944, p. 26.
13. *Evansville Courier and Press*, July 8, 1932, p. 7 and July 29, 1932, p. 9.
14. *Evansville Courier and Press*, August 27, 1933, p. 5.
15. O. V. Wiggins. "Flood Letters." *Messenger-Inquirer* (Owensboro, KY), February 19, 1937, p. 2
16. O. V. Wiggins. "Still Time for Realism." *The Evansville Press*, December 30, 1959, p. 10.
17. Orban V. Wiggins. "Orban Wiggins considers 'reversal' in Ted's tragedy." *The Evansville Press*, August 12, 1969, p. 10.
18. Wiggins, Gary. "Russians in Bloomington in the 1960s." For the full version, see: [http://library.constantcontact.com/download/get/file/1101479691890-17/Russians_full_final_REEI_2_4_2011\(1\).pdf](http://library.constantcontact.com/download/get/file/1101479691890-17/Russians_full_final_REEI_2_4_2011(1).pdf)
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