

THE GAZETTE TRIBUNE  
PUBLISHED WEEKLY  
BY W. L. DOUGLAS  
KOKOMO, IND., MONDAY EVENING, OCTOBER 14, 1889

**HOVER FOR THE HOMELESS.**  
New England's Little Wanderers Monday  
Homeless bright children across a theme  
in time.

Mr. S. A. Cooper, Secy. of the  
Home for Little Wanderers, Boston  
New. Mrs. C. H. Miner, Matron for  
the same. Miss Alice Channing  
of the nursing department, and  
Miss B. H. Cummings, manage-  
ry agent, arrived in this city  
Saturday bringing along with them  
twenty-four of the Home's children.  
These little ones range in age from  
the babies less than two years old to  
bright boys and girls as old as sev-

the discharge of such duties. Revs.  
Cummings and Cooper, though com-  
ing to attend to their own duties  
what appeared to them, are yet  
coming to assist and help in responsi-  
bility for all these. Mrs. Miner has been  
the Home's Matron for many  
years and it would be hard to imagine  
with her that another had an well  
adapted to the work, while Miss  
Alice Channing, of the nursing de-  
partment of the Home, is unques-  
tioned.

After a brief religious service the  
work of separating these babies, it  
was an affecting scene as the little  
children parted companionably and  
were scattered to the care that had  
taken them in child-like affection, the  
parents, the friends and looking on  
crowd.

**The White House.**  
CONTINUED



# LITTLE WANDERERS.

**Twenty Beautiful Children now in the City to be Provided With Homes.**  
Rev. S. S. Cummings, of the New England Home for Little Wanderers, will have these little ones at the M. E. Church Monday at 9 o'clock. See them and select one to gladden your home.

...which in the highest possi-  
ble degree to our humanity. When  
the twenty-four little ones find  
the church they were safely lodged in  
a multitude of people most friendly  
welcomed toward them.

...addressed looked  
sympathizingly on deeply touched by  
the affecting scene.

Home- have been obtained for the  
following:

- Mary G. Ring, two years old, with J. C. and Mrs. Blackledge.
- Jennie C. Steele, six years old, with H. H. and Mrs. Stewart.
- Arthur Steele, (brother) four years old, with Miles R. and Mrs. McBeth.
- Chas. J. Steele, another brother two years old, with John and Mrs.

Local newspapers provided emotionally powerful details about the "Orphan Train" and its offerings. The notice at top was published in the Oct. 12, 1889 issue of the *Kokomo Daily Gazette Tribune*, heralding the train's arrival. Mary Ring's adoption was in the newspaper's Oct. 14 issue, left and above.



Mary Geary Ring about the time she was adopted when the "Orphan Train" came to Kokomo, Indiana.

## A Home for the Homeless

By Ginny Hingst, HCHS Publication Committee Member

**M**ary (Blacklidge) Wagner at age 90 was bedridden with a broken hip and had suffered a series of strokes when she asked a strange question: "Why didn't my mother love me?"

Daughter Martha McKay knew her mother had led a charmed life, growing up in Kokomo, Indiana, the only child of wealthy and prominent lawyer and business man James Courtland Blacklidge and wife Addie. Martha understandably chalked the comment up to delirium.

But then came the phone call. The caller was seeking information on a relative who had traveled West on an "Orphan Train" and claimed Mary was also on the train. The caller was put in touch with Martha, who was in disbelief until the caller mentioned she had documentation. By then, Mary had been moved to Hoosier Village in Ft. Wayne to be near Martha, making it easy for her to ask her mother in person: "Were you adopted?" She replied, "I'm glad you know."

When Mary died on Jan. 21, 1981, Martha's search for her mother's biological family began in earnest. The caller had supplied the key words "Orphan Train" and "Home for Little Wanderers," which sent Martha to Boston and eventually to Walpole, Massachusetts.



Mary Wagner was recognized in the *Indianapolis Star* in 1944 as a school board member awarding diplomas for seniors called to duty in World War II. Mary was James Courtland ("JC") and Addie (Jemison) Blacklidge's only child.

A retired high school history teacher, Martha gathered the facts by visiting cemeteries, libraries and courthouses. It helped that in 1980, adoption records began opening up all across the country.

Here is what Martha discovered:

Mary (Blacklidge) Wagner's roots trace back to the Geary family of County Cork, Ireland. Her grandparents (Martha's great-grandparents) Thomas Francis and Catherine Geary emigrated to America in 1849, settling in Walpole, Massachusetts. There they gave birth to eight children, with Mary's mother (Mary Frances) being the oldest, born on March 2, 1857. She went to work young, most likely as a servant girl and had a son out of wedlock, William Geary, who would be raised by Mary Frances' mother. Mary (Ring Geary and later Blacklidge) was born on November 22, 1887,

with some question as to who her father was. (However, according to family historians Kent and Marcia Blacklidge of Kokomo, the Orphan Train Complex in Concordia, Kansas, lists Mary's father as Michael Ring).

When Mary was 2, mother and daughter moved to Boston where Mary Frances found work as a servant and also met and married George E. Hunt, who worked as a gardener. When Mary Frances became pregnant with his child, she gathered up little Mary and took her to the Baldwin Place Home for Little Wanderers in Boston. Family members speculate that George was not interested in raising a child that was not his own.

Two weeks later, Mary and 23 other children were on an Orphan Train headed for Kokomo, Indiana. Back in Massachusetts, the Hunts would have five children of their own, and Mary



The old Blacklidge home on West Mulberry Street today is the site of the First Congregational Church. Mary's daughter Martha McKay, at right in photo, found and met her "half-cousin" Louise Geary Hinchey, daughter of Mary's half-brother.

Frances would die of pulmonary disease in 1903 at age 45.

Martha also discovered the details about William Francis Geary, the half-brother of Mary. William was raised by his grandmother, left school at age 12 and went to work as a machine tender at the Bird and Sons Paper Mill. He eventually worked his way up to plant superintendent.

William, also known as "Tap," played semi-pro baseball from 1900 to 1913 and was a long-time manager of the paper mill baseball team. He married, had three daughters and died in 1957. Martha was able to track down and befriend one of William's daughters, Louise Nora (Geary) Hinchey. When the two met in Walpole, Massachusetts, they marveled at the family resemblance they shared. Their friendship blossomed over the years as they

began meeting in Naples, Florida.

When Martha McKay died in 2019, niece Mary Elizabeth ("Liz") McFadzean inherited the research. Liz is the daughter of James Courtland Wagner (Mary and husband Eldo Wagner's firstborn) and wife Lola. A writer herself, Liz determined to find the story behind the facts of her grandmother's Orphan Train ride, prompting her to travel from her home in La Canada, California, to the Howard County Historical Society to see what she might find out. There she met with Randy Smith, assistant curator.

Randy began searching through newspaper archives using words such as "orphan" or "Blacklidge." The searches were coming up empty and Liz was thinking her trip was in vain when Randy said, "I don't give up too easily."

Then Liz recalled the phrase "Home for

Little Wanderers," and, bingo, up popped five accounts in the *Kokomo Daily Gazette Tribune* beginning with the Orphan Train's arrival on Saturday, Oct. 12, 1889. "When I looked over, Liz was crying happy tears," recalled Randy. "Her story is in my top two of helping people get the answers they are looking for."

The writeup on Oct. 14 chronicled the activities of the 24 children after their arrival in Kokomo. On Sunday, Orphan Train officials, Rev. Cooper and Cummings who accompanied the little ones, preached at four different churches with the children, in the reporter's words, supplying "the music in their sweetly charming way."

On Monday at 9 a.m. at the Methodist Church, the process of families selecting the children began. Mary, the youngest at 2 years old, likely was selected first as the reporter lists her name at the top. That J.C. and Addie Blacklidge were given the first choice is plausible as they were sponsors of the project.

The reporter offered this description of the children's reactions to being selected: "Their eyes silvered with tears as they separated to enter the attachments of their new homes, and hundreds looked sympathizingly on, deeply touched by the affecting scene." Yet the reporter mentions that eight children were not chosen.

On Oct. 15, the news story appeared that two boys aged 9 and 13, who had been placed in Peru, were returned and again needed homes. The number of children needing homes was reported as six. On Oct. 16, the writer issued a plea for those not selected: "Young as they are, these little wanderers feel the humiliation, though it is no fault of their own." On Oct. 18, a long article appeared advising the parents as to how to raise their new charges.

"I wept when I saw these accounts of what happened to them each day," Liz recalled.

Mary's immediate family knew the story starting at this point, which Liz compiled in "Two Family Trees," a two-set photo book based on Aunt Martha's research.

**M**ary Ring (Blacklidge) Wagner grew up in Kokomo, Indiana, the only child of James Courtland Blacklidge and his wife, Addie. Not only was Mary adored, she had every advantage as her father, "J.C.," was a prominent lawyer. The family lived in a grand home at what was then 101 W. Mulberry St., the site today of the First Congregational Church, (in "modern" numbering, 505 W. Mulberry St). Mary attended school in Kokomo and sang in the First Congregational Church choir. When it was discovered that she was a musical talent, Mary studied voice for a year at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. She later attended Rockford College in Illinois.

In 1912, the family of three embarked on an adventure, unusual at the time, of traveling the world. The six-month tour took them to Java, China, Egypt, India, Italy and France. According to family research, Mary sang the Rosary at the Taj Mahal and was even lobbied

to pursue a career on stage by a Broadway producer on board ship.

Mary declined because, prior to their trip, she had met and become engaged to Eldo Wagner, "a handsome young man" recently graduated from Wabash College who had come to Kokomo to work in residential real estate development. The two married in 1913 and had three children (Jim, born Jan. 22, 1918; William B., born May 23, 1924; and

*"When I looked over, Liz (McFadzean) was crying happy tears. Her story is in my top two of helping people get the answers they are looking for."*

**RANDY SMITH**  
Assistant Curator  
Howard County Museum

**LIZ McFADZEAN**





Martha, born Dec. 2, 1928). The family made their home in Indianapolis, where Mary was active in church and volunteer groups and where she and Eldo enjoyed a "rich circle of friends."

Mary's mother Addie died in 1914, and when J.C. suffered a stroke in 1920, Mary moved back to Kokomo to care for him. He died in 1921. "When her parents died, her association with Kokomo was gone," Liz said.

**A**lthough the Depression was hard on the Wagners, they not only survived but eventually thrived. Mary and Eldo's sons returned safely from service in World War II. Eldo died on May 27, 1947, but Mary lived to see each of their three children marry and took great joy in her seven grandchildren until her death in 1981.

Along the way, there were clues that Mary had been adopted. In an article dated June 1912 (reprinted in the *Kokomo Perspective* on July 6, 1994), reporter Annmarie Campbell wrote about the Blacklidge family's return from their world tour. In the last paragraph, she mentioned that Mary had been "rescued from the throes of homelessness when she arrived in Kokomo as a two-year-old waif." Liz's mother Lola recalled that one of Mary's friends once fumed "Mary thinks she is so high and mighty, but she is just adopted."

Nonetheless, Mary's adoption was news to her children and grandchildren until shortly before her death in 1981, begging the question why the secrecy. Likely over the years Mary caught wind of the stigma reflected in her mother's friend's comment. A similar sentiment is expressed in Blacklidge family letters. According to Liz, being adopted was a taboo subject: "You just didn't bring that up," she noted.

There were more clues. Mary poured herself into service on the board of the Suemma Cole-

man Home, originally known as the Florence Crittenden Home for Unwed Mothers, in Indianapolis. Liz notes that in 37 years of service, Mary represented the home in court for every single adoption case during that time. Also, Mary served as president of the PTA at her children's schools, an experience that led to her successfully running for the Indianapolis School Board in 1943.

In 1947, Mary spoke and handed out diplomas at every high school graduation ceremony in Indianapolis with one exception, that being daughter Martha's graduation from Shortridge High School. As Eldo had recently died, Mary was not confident she could keep her composure in front of Martha's friends.

The first time Mary issued diplomas was January 1944, which earned her a writeup in the *Indianapolis Star* (Jan. 23, 1944). The graduation ceremony was early that year due to the many graduates who would leave for service in World War II. The *Star* writer Lotys Benning Stewart dialed in on Mary's passion for quality schools and teachers. The key, Mary stated, was parental involvement. "I am frequently asked to make talks at PTA meetings, and this is always my topic, for no matter what the schools do, the parents have to do their part too."

In retrospect, the family sees Mary's service as a "telling indication of the impact of her own birth history." Liz describes the revelation of her grandmother's adoption this way: "The clouds parted, and we realized where my grandmother's passion came from."

As Liz dug into the topic of the 80-year history of Orphan Trains, she quickly discovered that not all of the riders had positive experiences but noted her grandmother Mary's story is a beautiful one. Of her great grandmother Mary Frances who relinquished her daughter to the orphanage, Liz commented, "What a gift she gave to my grandmother. I see it as divine intervention."

## About the Orphan Train

Attend the churches to-morrow  
and hear the little wanderers sing.

**T**hat there were such things as orphan trains in America was news to Mary (Blacklidge) Wagner's family.

It was to many others as well. Historian and author Christina Baker Kline calls this chapter of American history "strange and little known." Nonetheless, from 1849 to 1929, the trains did run, transporting approximately 250,000 homeless children from the East Coast to the Midwest.

Kline wrote a historical novel, *Orphan Train*, based on her research, which includes written testimonials of the riders gathered at the New York Public Library, in addition to verbal testimonies at rider reunions in New York and Minnesota.

"In talking to them and reading their oral histories, I found that they tended not to dwell on the considerable hardships they'd faced," writes Kline. "Instead, they focused on how grateful they were for their children and grandchildren and communities – for lives that wouldn't have been possible if they hadn't been on those trains."

There were numerous reasons for the glut of homeless children at the time, one strong possibility being the Irish Potato Famine (1845-1852). The founder of the Orphan Train, a Methodist minister named Charles Loring Brace, recognized the lack of welfare options and reasoned that the

abandoned and orphaned children would benefit from midwestern Christian family values and, at the same time, help the plight of poverty-stricken farmers.

Kline points out that at the time, there was no welfare, no child labor laws and no foster care. The plan was conceived in all good intention, but many of the riders were taken in by ruthless people intent on acquiring free labor.

According to Kline, the riders' experiences came to light as their children and grandchildren, an estimated 2 million, began asking questions. In all, Mary Blacklidge Wagner has 33 living descendants – six grandchildren, 10 great-grandchildren and 17 great-great-grandchildren – spread out over seven states. Family historians Martha McKay and Liz McFadzean have always shared their research and stories for the benefit of all of them. "It is their legacy as well," Liz noted.

### More about Orphan Trains:

*Orphan Train: a Novel* by Christina Baker Kline, published in 2013 by HarperCollins

National Orphan Train Complex (Concordia, Kansas), ([orphantraindepot.org](http://orphantraindepot.org))

See the little wanderers at the M.  
E. church Monday morning at 9  
o'clock and help secure homes for  
them.

News selections from the *Kokomo Daily Gazette Tribune*, Oct. 12, 1889.

## Blacklidge Contributions to Kokomo; Mary's Family

The Blacklidge family has been instrumental in the growth of Kokomo, and evidence of their influence remains today. James Courtland and William E. were brothers, the sons of Richard Manwaring Blacklidge and Lucinda Hays.

James came to Kokomo in August 1875, the year he graduated from Indiana University law school. His younger brother William had passed the bar exam in 1867, and the two formed Blacklidge & Blacklidge, the largest law firm in Kokomo at the time of William's retirement in 1890.

According to Kent Blacklidge, former publisher of the *Kokomo Tribune* and William E.'s great-grandson, William donated the land upon which the current downtown library is located. His name can be seen on a bronze plaque just inside the library. William also was one of three businessmen who purchased in 1891 what remains Kokomo Opalescent Glass. In all, four generations of Blacklidges were involved in the leadership of KOG – William, son Kent H. II, grandson Richard and great-grandson Kent II. The latter served on the board from 1975 to 2009.

According to the descendants of James Courtland, he was influential in many business interests including the Frances Hotel and the Courtland Hotel. He was the first member of the City Council to advocate the installation of a water works system. Upon his death, the Kokomo paper stated: "There was perhaps no more widely acquainted man in Howard County than J.C. Blacklidge."

The Blacklidge family connected to another important family when William's son Kent H. Blacklidge married Bernice Kautz, one of four daughters of John Arthur Kautz, on Jan. 7, 1909. John Kautz was the owner of the *Kokomo Tribune* until his death in 1938. In 1919, Kautz built the Tribune building at the corner of Mulberry and Union Streets, now transformed into apartments.

He also gifted the land that would be Kautz Field, which for decades served as the Kokomo High School football field. Kautz's grandson Richard Blacklidge joined the Tribune management in 1936, becoming general manager in 1938 and the publisher in 1956. The former *Kokomo Tribune* owner retired in 1978 after more than 40 years in the publication of Kokomo's longest running daily newspaper. He died in 1993. Richard's son Kent, who joined the newspaper staff in 1961 and later served as its publisher until its sale in 1982, has carried on the family tradition of community service.

He and his wife Marcia contributed vital information regarding Mary Blacklidge and her history.

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### Mary (Ring Blacklidge) Wagner's Descendants:

*(Based on the text. Just a portion of the Blacklidge family genealogy.)*

James Courtland (JC) Blacklidge ... married Addie (Jemison) Blacklidge. **[Mary's parents]**

*Their daughter* Mary married Eldo Wagner. Mary and Eldo had three children:

*Son* James Courtland (had daughter Liz, married to Dave McFadzean\*).

*Son* William B.

*And daughter* Martha McKay.

Among Mary Wagner's three children (all deceased) she had seven grandchildren (six are living, including Liz); 10 great grandchildren (all living); and 17 great-great-grandchildren (all living).

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William E. Blacklidge ... married Amanda Jane (Hackleman) Blacklidge. **[Mary's uncle and aunt]**

*Their son* Kent H. married Bernice (Kautz) Blacklidge (daughter of John Arthur Kautz) ... *their son* Richard H married Marian E. (Reinertsen) Blacklidge ... *and their son* Kent H. II married Marcia (Fountain) Blacklidge.

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#### \* Family Fun Fact

Liz's husband Dave McFadzean is one of three creators of the television show Home Improvement (1991). According to imdb.com, he is also known for Bernie (2011) and Where the Heart Is (2000).