

The Shadow of Warren Harding

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# the shadow of warren harding

BY FRANCIS RUSSELL

**N**ot until the spring of 1964, forty-one years after Warren Gamaliel Harding's death, were his papers at last made public. Four expectant Harding biographers were at the door of the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus on that day. When I arrived six weeks later, the four were already installed in a niche just beyond the library balcony that I labelled Harding Alley. The name stuck.

All four biographers looked on my belated entry into the Harding sweepstakes as a kind of intrusion, unaware of the cache of Harding love letters that I had uncovered the preceding October. These love letters that Harding had written over two decades to his neighbor and mistress, Carrie Phillips, I knew were enough to knock the other biographers out of their niche.

Leading the field was the Englishman, Andrew Sinclair, who as one of D.W. Brogan's protégés, had already turned to the America of the twenties, having written a book on Prohibition. Clever, quick, and superficial, he belonged to the xerox-and-run school and was quietly contemptuous of his pedestrian rivals. A few weeks after I arrived, he left with a trunkful of photocopies, maintaining that the Xerox Corporation had made it possible for a researcher to gather up in hours what would formerly have taken weeks or months. At four each afternoon his wife, a dark and handsome French woman with a purring voice and an accent that barely surmounted the barrier of English, came to take him to tea. By late June the Sinclairs had taken flight to California where some months later he finished his life of Harding. Short, on the

dull side, it was adequate for the time he had given it and was the first standard biography of Harding to appear, the only one published in time for the 1965 Harding centennial. In spite of Sinclair's superficiality and his dubious conclusion that the lethargic Harding had plotted over the years to become president, he received a centennial award from the Harding Memorial Society.

If Sinclair strode lightly through the Harding underbrush, Randolph Downes, a professor of history at the University of Toledo, plodded along with leaden feet. Previously known as the author of the definitive history of Lake Shore, Ohio, in three volumes, he had spent the next fifteen years on his planned magnum opus, *The Rise and Fall of Warren Harding*, the Rise being in the first volume, the Fall in the second. A frail bent man, old beyond his years (Downes was in his sixties then), he had watery blue eyes, a fluff of white hair and a lisp brought about by false teeth.

Most conspicuous, seething with confidence, was an assistant professor from Brooklyn College, Dean Albertson, who operated with the efficiency of an IBM machine and the relentlessness of the fighter-pilot that he had been in World War II. He had already written a biography of Claude A. Wickard, Roosevelt's secretary of agriculture, a project that had resulted in a feud with the Wickards and a suit against Wickard by Albertson for a half-million dollars. Later he had assisted Allan Nevins in the Columbia University oral history project. I used to marvel as I watched him work. He went through files of documents as if he were a threshing machine, winnowing out what he needed, making eight copies of every notation and arranging them in a complicated cross-reference filing system.

Only the bristle of his crew-cut visible, he looked every inch the fighter-pilot as he bent over the typewriter, his fingers striking the keys in staccato succession as if he were firing bursts from a machine gun. He had managed to establish such friendly relations with Harding's nephew, Dr. George Harding, that the doctor often took him out driving in his air-conditioned Cadillac on humid summer week-ends. It was all the more odd, as privately Albertson, along with Downes, had no use for Harding, his own political views being akin to those of Henry Wallace. When I once asked him why he bothered to write about Harding, he replied portentously in the idiom of Everest: "Because he was there."

If Albertson and Downes detested Harding, Prof. Dale E. Cottrill, chairman of the Department of Rhetoric, Fine Arts, and Humanities at Michigan's Macomb County College, worshipped him. Mesmerized by Harding's oratory, Professor Cottrill had turned from biography to tracking down Harding's unpublished speeches of which he had already discovered over a thousand and hoped to uncover several thousand more. As yet to put in an appearance was Edwin K. Gross of Buffalo, New York, a former press agent who as a self-appointed defender of Harding was preparing a hundredth-birthday memorial biography, *Vindication for Mr. Normalcy*, that he described in advance as "a good book to crowd the dirty books off the shelves."

Since Harding's death his papers had had an ambiguous history. In the weeks after his funeral, his widow had carefully burned over half his private papers. That most of his public papers survived was due to a number of files having been mislaid in the White House basement. They were only discovered when Coolidge was president. In her will Mrs. Harding had left her husband's papers, public and private, to the recently formed Harding Memorial Association in whose closed custody they remained in spite of periodic urgings by editors and requests from the Library of Congress. The president of the Memorial Association, Dr. Carl Sawyer—the son of Harding's diminutive White House physician—had in a quarter of a century come to consider the association as his fief, and he sat on the Harding papers like a brooding hen. Finally in 1963, after three years of patient negotiation, Kenneth Duckett, the Ohio Historical Society's curator of documents, succeeded in persuading Sawyer to deed the papers to the Historical Society.

The cartons of documents arrived in Columbus, ironically enough, the same week that I uncovered the Phillips letters. Sawyer, fearful of a hijack by "those Teapot Dome people," had insisted on transportation by a moving van with a five-man crew preceded by a police escort. When the procession reached Columbus and the boxes were at last carried into the sanctuary of the Historical Society, Duckett, to his chagrin, discovered that Sawyer had withheld the two most important files in the collection, those containing Harding's personal, political, and business correspondence from 1895 to 1914, and from 1915 to 1920.

During the few autumn days I spent in Marion in 1963, I

poked about, trying to absorb the town's atmosphere, to get the feel of those open streets not greatly altered since Harding's time. Walking under the sifting maples along the leaf-strewn sidewalk from Harding's house with its wen-like porch to the old *Marion Star* building, watching the square lighted windows and the blueish reflection from television screens, I tried to imagine myself into that young man of some seventy years before. Four times a day he followed that path to and from his office, the sterling small-town citizen that a capricious destiny would make the least of our presidents. I felt the poignancy of his life as I followed his footsteps past the angular houses, the garish yellow brick Baptist church he had attended, along the renovated but still recognizable Main Street. Unlike my fellow biographers I had come to like my affable editor with his handsome empty features. If only he could have married a warm-hearted, sensual if somewhat blowsy woman instead of the withered harridan he ironically called the Duchess, he might have lived a contented life as a small-town editor and politician with a horde of children to console him in the old age he might then have attained. Yes, I liked the kindly Harding.

In any town there is an inner group that controls and directs the local political and economic life. I was fortunate to have an introduction to Marion's inner group through the head of the Fulfillment Corporation, a company that took care of mailing and billing for national magazines, among them *American Heritage* to which I had been for some time a contributor. To determine the most central state for sending out mail, the Fulfillment Corporation consulted an IBM computer and received the answer ОНЮ. What was then required was a small city with an overabundance of female high school graduates. Consulted again, the IBM oracle pronounced the name MARION. Before coming to Marion I had been struck by a paragraph in William Allen White's *Masks in a Pageant*. On hand for the opening of Harding's 1920 Front Porch Campaign, he noticed one starkly undecorated building among the red, white, and blue bunting-trimmed stores and offices of Main Street. When he asked why, he "heard one of those stories about a primrose detour from Main Street" that the Duchess had chosen to ignore. I wondered then and since who had been Harding's partner down the primrose path.

The day after my arrival the Fulfillment president took me to the country club to have lunch with half a dozen of Marion's

leading younger citizens—bankers, lawyers, real estate operators, businessmen. In the course of the lunch I mentioned White's primrose aside and asked who the woman was. "Oh," they said almost in chorus, "that was Carrie Phillips. Everyone knows that!" And apparently everyone in Marion's in-group did know, took it for granted as part of the town's long-consolidated gossip.

As we were leaving, a youngish man wearing a Rotary pin with a diamond set in the center stopped me. "If you're interested in Carrie Phillips," he said, "and you have a few minutes I can take you to one of our lawyers, Don Williamson, who has some letters Harding wrote her. I've never seen them but he told me about them. When she got so old she couldn't look after herself, the probate judge here, Eddie Ruzzo, appointed Don her guardian and he came across them in her things. We can take a run there now. I'm pretty sure he'll let you see them."

Williamson, a solid good-natured man in his forties, had an old-fashioned office near the courthouse in an old-fashioned building masked by a modernistic grill. He was quite open about the letters. "I've had them eight years now," he admitted. "I don't know what to do with them. I haven't even read them, just glanced at them, but my wife has. She was thinking of using them to write a novel. But if the Hardings or the Memorial Association got hold of them they'd go up in smoke. That's what I've been afraid of. After all, they were written by a president. That makes them history no matter how you look at it."

Carrie Phillips had turned her husband out of the house some time before he died in 1939. He then lived in a back room of the once-elegant but now seedy Marion Hotel, a pathetic figure wandering up and down Main Street buttonholing old acquaintances. In the years after his death Carrie lived in isolation, running short of money and growing increasingly eccentric. By 1956 she was penniless and senile, and Judge Ruzzo appointed Williamson her guardian. "I had to put her in a nursing home," Williamson told me. "The state old-age assistance paid for it. But I wanted to see if she had any assets. There was a rumor Harding had given her a lot of diamonds. I started to look for them. That house—you just wouldn't believe it. She had about a dozen unhousebroken German shepherds that had been running about there. Dog dung everywhere, and the urine had rotted the floorboards and soaked through the ceilings until the plaster gave way. It took my wife and

me a couple of weeks just to begin to clear the place up. I thought the diamonds might be in a locked closet upstairs, but when I pried open the door all I found were the letters. Since then I've just been sitting on them. If you want I'll let you have a look."

"When?" I asked him.

"Oh, any night this week."

"Well," I said, trying to keep my voice matter-of-fact, "How about tonight?"

"Sure," he said, "That's as good a time as any. About eight."

We met in Williamson's kitchen, he, I, and his wife, sitting round a table with a quart bottle of Coca Cola and some glasses in the middle. Next to the bottle was a cardboard box bulging with letters, some in their envelopes, some not, the pages in disarray. I recognized Harding's writing at once. The first envelope I picked up contained a letter of over forty pages, scrawled in pencil on scratch-pad paper, the writing so large that a dozen pages would scarcely have filled a typewritten page. But even before I read I realized that it proved Nan Britton's story.

Nan had written of her later liaison with Harding in perfervid "True Confessions" prose. Harding's brother George had always maintained that Nan's *The President's Daughter* was a ghost-written fraud concocted to make money by blackening the dead president's name. But Nan had related that her lover had written her forty- and fifty-page letters in pencil on scratch-pad paper. I had never thought Harding capable of writing a forty-page love letter. Yet here was the proof from a source Nan was completely unaware of—an equally long letter in pencil on scratch-pad paper. Later I discovered a letter that Harding had sent to Carrie from the Witherill Hotel at Plattsburgh on 17 August 1918. According to *The President's Daughter*, he had spent that week-end there with Nan.

I did not get a chance to read much that evening. Williamson kept talking to me, almost as if he were testing me, as if he wanted to hold me off. But the glimpses that I had made me realize that these letters were a charge of dynamite. And now the time was coming for the explosion. Something had to happen. I wanted to go through the letters carefully by myself. Williamson said I could see them next morning in his back office. They were on the desk when I arrived at nine. Williamson shut the door and left me.

There I was alone with Harding's letters, as if I were alone with

the past. I found several pictures of Carrie, a plumpish art-nouveau woman whose charm still managed to break through the barrier of obsolete styles. Certainly she must have been a fleshly antidote to Harding's withered Duchess. There were several of her letters among the hundred or so that he had written her. Some were bitter, some desperate. She kept begging him to divorce his wife and marry her, and when he equivocated she taunted him with mention of her other lovers.

Whether she would have been happy with Harding is doubtful, for Marion would always have been too small to contain her. Originally she had been a school teacher in rustic Bucyrus, half the size of Marion. Too handsome, too intelligent for such a backwater and her class of gawky children, she had escaped by marrying Jim Phillips, a partner in Marion's thriving Uhler-Phillips store. Jim was a bustling little man, a head shorter than his wife, and few thought she had married him for love. He bought her a spacious house on Marion's Gospel Hill. A year after her marriage she had a daughter. Five years later, in 1902, she had a son, named after his father. The boy died in 1904, a loss she would never get over. Her affair with Harding began the following year, perhaps in an attempt to forget the lost boy.

Through the letters I began to piece out the development of the affair. The Hardings and the Phillipses often used to visit each other. In 1905 Harding had sent the ailing Jim to the Battle Creek sanatorium. His Duchess was then only slowly recovering from an operation in which she had lost one kidney. Harding, dropping in on the Phillips house one afternoon, found Carrie alone, somehow found his way to her bedroom. A marvelous coincidence, he wrote afterward, the most dearly recalled moment of his existence.

In 1909 the Phillipses and the Hardings went abroad together, Harding and Carrie still managing to keep their affair secret. She was nevertheless troubled, as can be seen in the fragments of her letters. Sometimes on shipboard when Jim and the Duchess were asleep, the other two would sneak on deck for a quick embrace in the shadow of the lifeboats. But often in such moments when Carrie felt her body yield, she would suddenly push her lover away, as if his embrace were a threat to her integrity. He, the direct and importunate male, could never understand.

Just when the Duchess found out is uncertain, but at one point she intercepted a letter from Carrie to Harding, and a confronta-



tion followed in a lawyer's office. Harding's wife refused to let him go, however erring, and Harding could not bring himself to leave. Carrie in her anger upbraided him, called him names, yet a few weeks later was again arranging a rendezvous.

Frustrated by her life in Marion and by the vacillating Harding, Carrie in 1911 left with her daughter to spend a year in Germany. She found rooms in the Pension Polchow in West Berlin. She took German lessons. In the imperial capital she expanded. Having afternoon tea at the Café Görtner or Kranzler's or the Café des Westens, watching the expanse of Unter den Linden where guards officers strutted past in their smart blue uniforms, she could scarcely bother to remember Marion.

She did remember Harding. The following year she sailed across the Atlantic secretly to meet him for a few days in Montreal. In 1913 she again returned for a brief furtive rendezvous in New York after Harding had told the Duchess he was going to Texas on a hunting trip. But from then on she settled firmly in Berlin. She was not coming back the next year, she told Harding, perhaps she would never come back. Only the outbreak of the war forced her home. On 24 August 1914, she sailed from Bremerhaven.

Harding's most explicitly sexual letters were written to Carrie in Berlin. Her growing independence stirred his jealousy, sending him into frenzies of emotion. Compulsively he wrote her crudely amorous, flesh-gnawing letters thirty and forty pages long, scribbling the words on a pad of the newsmen's copy-paper that he usually carried. "Constant," he referred to himself in their private code. She was "Sis." "Jerry," he called his *membrum virile*. The letters also indicate that he had had an earlier affair with a Marion woman, long rumored to be a Mrs. Thomas Hodder, the daughter of a well-known Main Street merchant.

After Carrie's return Harding's letters are less frequent, less passionate, more self-doubting. When she asks him for a new car he refuses, although later a receipted bill shows he gave her a Cadillac. There are also hints in these letters of the heart trouble that would kill him. At Plattsburgh he writes that he almost keeled over when he was speaking.

Carrie remained a blatant German partisan until the United States entry into the war, and as this event became increasingly inevitable, Harding kept urging her to be discreet. On 23 January

1917 he tried to warn her publicly in a three-page letter written formally on Senate stationery and signed “sincerely yours”:

I suppose you are not a little perturbed over the diplomatic break with Germany. Really I do not see any other course which might reasonably have been adopted. Ruthlessness on the seas to neutral commerce does not harmonize with the advocacy of freedom of the seas on which I thought Germany and the United States might agree. I fear it means war, and pray that it does not. I know you are in rebellion, but I think I might say to you that only two men in all the Congress opposed the action thus far taken—though there are many pro-German sympathizers in Congress who are as earnest as you. Senator Gallinger is an extreme pro-German, so is Townsend, Hoke Smith, Stone, Hitchcock, and Reed, but they all agree that Germany made any other course impossible. I do not expect to modify your sympathies. I hope we shall not be forced to actual conflict. Few, if any here, actually know the inner motives of political intrigue. I am sure I do not. I do know there is genuine regret over the possibility of a conflict with the Central Powers. If it does come, you will be American first of all. Even if you were to say Nay, I would know what is in your heart. In spite of your reverence and sympathy and love for Germany (much of which is justified) you are after all an American and ever must be, and you will wish that the anxieties—and great trials, perhaps, will exalt the American soul and spirit. It is a difficult time for a public servant, it is trying for individuals, but there can never be but one answer in the end. “My Country—May it ever be right! But right or wrong, MY COUNTRY!”

Perhaps the saddest letter is the last, written in 1920 when Harding was barnstorming from state to state in what then seemed a forlorn hope for the presidential nomination. Possibly because he had again refused to consider marrying her, she had turned on him in fury. The break was complete, and Constant—she specified the amount with cruel emphasis—would have to pay. He replied, his final reply:

I can't secure you the larger competence you have so frequently mentioned. No use talking about it. I can pay with life or reputation but I can't command such a sum! To avoid disgrace in the public eye, to escape ruin in the eyes of those who have trusted me in public life—whom I have never betrayed—I will if you demand it as THE PRICE, return back to Marion to reside. I will also avoid any elevation, but retire completely to obscurity. If you think I can be more helpful by having a public position and influence, probably situation to do some things worth while for myself and you and yours, I will pay you \$5,000 per year, in March each year, so long as I am in that public service. It is not big. It is not what you have asked. . . .

After Harding was nominated, the Republican National Committee solved the awkward problem of the importunate Carrie

by sending the Phillipses on an extended trip to the Orient and by paying them \$25,000 through Albert Lasker, the advertising genius and Harding's 1920 campaign manager.

Riffling through Harding's letters in Williamson's back office I sensed that for all his bumbling erotic language, he was no rake, no libertine, but a man in love, and I grew to pity this limited man grasping so awkwardly for words to express a passion that nevertheless rang true. Here was no cold-blooded lechery. Carrie Phillips was the love of his life. What he was denied in his own home he groped for elsewhere. Even his belated affair with Nan Britton can be seen in this light.

Among the scattered pages were photographs of Carrie, post-cards, and five home-made poems. "I love you garbed, but *naked* more," Harding wrote in one of his verses, twice underlining "naked." With Carrie his sensuality struck depths he was unaware of in himself. God, the whole immeasurable universe, he associated with her throbbing flesh:

Carrie, take me panting to your heaving breast,  
In thrilling rapture sinking, in your embrace to rest.  
Sweetheart! Joy! O God! It's there I'd wish to die  
And awake to resurrection—in your arms to lie.

At one point Harding had curiously enough got back most of his letters and could have destroyed them. Instead he returned them to her, adding at the same time that she had the power to ruin them both and remarking that no one but a fool would have written what he did.

**A**s I leafed through the pages and began to take notes I kept thinking of Don Williamson. That well-meaning man who had merely wanted to preserve presidential documents from destruction would be in trouble on all sides once the news of these letters leaked out. How could he protect himself or be protected? The most suitable, the safest place for the letters would be, to my mind, the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus. As a stranger I thought of the Ohio Society as akin to the staid independent Massachusetts Historical Society, unaware that the

Ohio society was a political entity, subsidized by the legislature and headed by one Fred Milligan, a friend of Governor Rhodes, whose sole claim to scholarly distinction was that he had been formerly traveling secretary for his Ohio State fraternity, Phi Delta Theta. It seemed to me, sitting in Williamson's back office among the spread-out Harding letters, that if I could persuade him to give them to the Ohio Historical Society, the trustees would be endlessly grateful and he would be relieved of a burden that might prove too much for him.

When he came in at noon, I explained the situation. The letters were a danger to him, though without them no adequate estimate could be made of Harding's life, no adequate biography could be written. Once they were made public there was bound to be an explosion. Would he consider giving the letters to the Ohio Historical Society? He agreed at once, seemed almost relieved, told me to call the society from his office. I managed to reach Duckett before he had gone to lunch, told him I had just made an important discovery about some Harding papers, and that I was leaving at once for Columbus to bring him back to Marion. "Be sure to take some official Ohio Historical Society stationery with you," I told him. He asked no questions, merely said he would be waiting for me.

The forty-five-mile ride to Columbus seemed a hundred. All the way there and back I was afraid Williamson might change his mind, might deem it more prudent to notify the Harding nephews, or Dr. Sawyer, or the Harding Memorial Association. As we drove back I told Duckett about the letters. He seemed astonished, but also a little dismayed. Glancing sideways at him I sensed then what a nervous, uneasy man he was, his long narrow face anxious under his close-cropped receding hair. "We must keep all this a secret," he told me reflectively. "If Dr. Sawyer gets wind of it I'll never get those files he's holding back."

Williamson had not changed his mind. Much relieved, I re-packed the letters in two shoe boxes. Then I dictated a letter that Williamson's secretary typed on Historical Society stationery, acknowledging Williamson's free gift of the letters. One copy stayed with Williamson, one went to the society, and the third to Judge Ruzzo, who had been told of the letters—though not of their content—and approved the transfer. It had all been so easy. I couldn't believe our luck.

By the time Duckett and I reached Columbus it was dark. Each carrying a shoe box, we reached the grey blank Historical Society building. Duckett rang for the night watchman and we went upstairs to the double-floored privacy of the directors' room, spread the letters out on the long table and began arranging them chronologically. I planned at first to finish my notes, but after such a tempestuous day I felt too weary, and I still had the drive back to Marion. "Let's leave them till tomorrow," I said to Duckett. He began to gather them up. I glanced at another poem, then thrust the lot aside. After a night's sleep I should better be able to go through them. At the basement entrance Duckett and I said good night.

Next morning when I went to his office I found him looking drawn and agitated. "I can't open those letters to you," he said suddenly. "The best I can do is to let you look at them for an hour. Then I'm going to lock them up." I was astonished, angry, dismayed. "Look," I told him, "when I got Williamson to give up those letters I assumed I should have access to them."

"If you'd made that a condition when we were driving up to Marion, I'd have said yes," he said. "But you didn't."

"It never occurred to me. I was doing you and the society a big favor. That was the least you could do in return."

"I'm not so sure about the favor," he said, "but in any case the best I can do is to let you see them for an hour."

Nothing for me to do but accept. I spent a hectic hour, selecting what I considered most pertinent. Never have I written so fast in my life. But to this day I have never been able to understand Duckett. Why an hour? Why not two hours? A day? Any time at all?

A few days later I left Ohio and did not return until spring. Meanwhile Duckett had kept working on Dr. Sawyer and finally persuaded him to release the file with Harding's personal and business correspondence from 1895 to 1914. He then informed Erwin Zepp, director of the Ohio Historical Society, that he had acquired some special Harding papers that he wished for the time to be kept secret. Zepp acquiesced without asking any questions. Finally Duckett confided in the Ohio historian J.H. Rodabaugh, the former head of the society's History and Science division until political maneuvering had forced him out. Then Duckett made four microfilm copies of the letters, one of which he sent to one of

the more enlightened of the society's trustees, Glenn Thompson. The letters themselves he placed in a safety deposit box in the Ohio National Bank. So the matter rested until the annual meeting of the society in the spring that also marked the official opening of the Harding papers. An all-day reception with a buffet lunch was held at the society's building on the campus of Ohio State University. Ex-Presidents Hoover, Truman, and Eisenhower wired their congratulations. The bright day was, however, to cloud before its end. A few days earlier, Duckett had told Zepp what the secret acquisition really was. Zepp, dumfounded, went to Milligan. At the meeting of the trustees following the reception, Milligan, his voice hoarse with anger, told them that a collection of Harding's love letters to another man's wife had been acquired inadvertently by the society. They were, he said, pretty hot. Several of the trustees demanded that the letters be destroyed at once. One of them, however, a lawyer, pointed out that this could not be done since the avowed object of the society was to preserve historical material and the letters had been accepted officially by the society. Also at least one outsider had read them and taken notes.

For Milligan the one problem was how to get rid of the troubling legacy. This he pondered for several days, then went to Zepp's office and summoned Duckett, ordered him to turn over the twin safety-deposit-box keys, one to him, one to Zepp. Duckett declined. An angry scene followed, but Duckett refused to yield. The most he would agree to was to give one key to Zepp, keeping the other for himself.

Milligan felt like the fisherman's wife in the fairy tale with the fish stuck on her nose. Stuck with the letters, he went to Judge Ruzzo and begged him to get the society off this particular hook. "Don't worry," the judge reassured him. Then, according to someone who was present, he added, "I'll get them back here and we'll burn them."

Letters of course belong to the recipient, but according to common law the contents belong to the writer and his heirs. The Hardings claimed their right to the contents of their uncle's correspondence, although it could be argued that according to the terms of Mrs. Harding's will the letter contents were now in the public domain. For she had willed to the Harding Memorial Association—and hence now to the Ohio Historical Society—"all

books, writings and manuscripts of every description . . . which came to me under the terms of the will of my late husband, including all the public letters . . . and all other articles, writings, manuscripts and letters of historical interest . . . all of the same of every description, [that these] shall be forever preserved to the public for the benefit of posterity.” Milligan wasn’t prepared to take a stand on the will. He just wanted to get rid of the letters.

At another meeting, with Duckett and Williamson present, Milligan conferred with Judge Ruzzo. The judge then appointed Paul Michel, a Marion lawyer, executor for Carrie Phillips. Though Carrie had died in debt, the letters were, in Duckett’s estimate, worth \$25,000. They were still her property. Suddenly she had an estate after all. Ruzzo instructed Michel to get in touch with any heirs. Michel claimed that he must first have control of the physical assets of the estate, that is the letters, and Ruzzo then issued an order to have them surrendered to him. It had all been neatly prearranged. When Michel presented the court order, Duckett had no choice but to turn over the letters.

Carrie Phillips did, it turned out, have an heir, her surviving daughter, Isabelle, now Mrs. William Mathée, who ran a small antique shop in Genoa City, Wisconsin. When approached and informed that she could have the letters only after her mother’s debts were paid, she agreed to sell them to the Hardings. Their lawyer, Byron Ford, then paid off all the debts of the Phillips estate. Including legal and administrative costs and \$3,954 owed the Ohio Department of Public Welfare for nursing home expenses, they came to \$7,807.68. This, plus a small sum to Mrs Mathée, the Hardings paid, they were at last in control of the letters that had caused them such distress.

Unfortunately there was still the problem of Duckett’s microfilms. Unless these could be eliminated too, there would be little point in destroying the originals. “My clients would like to destroy the letters,” one of the Harding lawyers admitted, “but I don’t think that will happen. They want to suppress them.”

Duckett had sent one microfilm out of the state for safe-keeping. The previous autumn I had informed the editor of *American Heritage*, Oliver Jensen, about the letters and allowed him to read my notes. He now telephoned Duckett, as did Allan Nevins, urging him to send a sealed microfilm to *American Heritage* in New York for safe-keeping. Duckett agreed when Nevins promised to

see that his salary was paid if he was discharged until he found him as good a job if not better than his present one. Meanwhile the ineptly incurious Zepp was "retired" and replaced by the assistant director, Dan Porter. Porter at once ordered Duckett to hand over the microfilms or face suspension. Duckett explained that the films were no longer under his control.

I was surprised that the letters remained secret as long as they did. The seventeen trustees of the society knew about them, lawyers and others in Columbus and Marion knew. Downes was the first in Harding Alley to find out. One day late in June I came back from the cafeteria to find him talking earnestly with Albertson with whom as a rule he did not share confidences. He had got hold of the library's copy of the privately printed book by the paranoid former professor of Wooster College, William Estabrook Chancellor, in which Chancellor had attempted to destroy Harding politically by proving that he was part Negro. The book itself is rare, since Attorney General Daugherty in 1921 sent out Department of Justice agents to confiscate and destroy all copies of its first and only edition. Chancellor had spent some weeks in Marion in 1920 and had recorded all the gossip and malicious stories about Harding that he could uncover, assiduously and uncritically tailoring his information to his prejudices. Harding he described as "big, lazy, slouching, confused, ignorant, affable and cringing like a Negro butler to the great." Of the Phillips liaison he wrote:

The Phillips case illustrates his sex instincts. Mrs. Phillips is the wife of a dry goods man in Marion, very showy and vain, with a passion [sic] for men. Jim Phillips is a poor little fellow who is part owner of a store that is there.

This woman has made herself useful to men of a kind. She got in with Warren, who as usual, paid no attention to his wife who is *passe* through the years.

On frequent occasions, even after the nomination, he and Mrs. Phillips visited together at Upper Sandusky. It is said that Herrick, who knew about this, went to Jim Phillips and offered to send both himself and the woman to Japan, with an income guaranteed monthly so long as Warren was President. It was reported in every stage of the affair just what was paid. The stake was \$25,000 down and \$2,000 a month.

Downes was pointing out the passage to Albertson.

"Most of that is true," I said. "Chancellor was crazy, but he did write down what he heard. He didn't make it all up."

"And now they've discovered letters from Harding to this Mrs. Phillips."



“I know,” I said. “I discovered them.”

They looked at me silently. Finally Albertson asked me plaintively: “You read them?”

“Yes. About a hundred of them.”

“Then you scooped the lot of us,” he said in a low voice. For the next hour he sat staring at his typewriter without hitting a key. Then suddenly he stood up and strode away.

“He’s probably gone to see his pal Dr. Harding,” said Downes.

Downes himself had been tipped off by Rodabaugh. He in turn had told one of his graduate students. The student after a few drinks in a bar had confided in a reporter from the Toledo *Blade*. Next day the *Blade* printed a garbled account of the affair. On learning this I decided to release the news to the *New York Times* along with a selection of my notes. Next morning it was on the front page, a story that rippled from coast to coast. All day long reporters kept calling me at the society’s library. Albertson and Downes grew glummer and glummer. Downes said he wasn’t interested in that muck-fest sort of thing. That evening the Los Angeles *Herald-Examiner* announced in banner headlines: HARDING LOVE LETTERS TO PARAMOUR FOUND. There was even an account in the London *Times*.

Three weeks later as I walked up the steps of the society’s library I noticed two men in white shirts standing in the doorway. They looked like furniture movers, but as they saw me one called out “That’s him!” and the other thrust a bulky white paper at me, a subpoena—as I discovered—announcing in legal phraseology that I was being sued for one million dollars by Dr. George Harding, who claimed to have suffered “irreparable damage” from my actions. Included in the suit were Duckett, *American Heritage*, my publisher, McGraw-Hill, and Glenn Thompson. Judge Henry Holden of the Columbus Common Pleas Court had also issued an injunction forbidding the “publishing, producing, copying, exhibiting or making any use whatever” of the letters pending a trial hearing.

Again the letters became front-page news. Again the library telephone rang most of the day for me. And my colleagues in Harding Alley suffered. Albertson took it hardest. I felt sorry for him. Before leaving Ohio I spent a morning, as ordered by the court, in pre-trial testimony, being questioned by two of the Harding lawyers, one of them Congressman John Martin Vorhys. At the

end of my testimony, which consisted merely in giving yes and no answers, I was told to hand over my notes. I refused. The lawyers seemed to have expected my answer, merely remarking that they would have to take up the matter with the judge. Actually, fearing some forcible seizure, I had claimed sanctuary and left my papers at the local Episcopal church.

A week later I left Ohio with my notes and papers. Except for a brief television appearance I have not been back since. It took me two more years to finish my book, *The Shadow of Blooming Grove*, a book far longer than I intended, for it came to almost 350,000 words. The quotations I used from the letters came to a mere 2,500 words. Yet to include these, the McGraw-Hill lawyers assured me, would be considered contempt of court. The manuscript as it was could not be published. I should have to rewrite and eliminate all references to the letters. We held a conference in the McGraw-Hill offices, the senior editors, a battery of high-priced lawyers with the lugubrious expressions of bloodhounds, and myself. Our conference lasted most of the morning. What I remember most after a decade is the way the lawyers kept shaking their heads from side to side, emphasizing their dewlaps. Some years earlier, I had ordered a trade edition of T. E. Lawrence's *The Mint* from England. Lawrence had peppered his text with the four-letter words common to soldiers. The publishers, in the more restrained atmosphere of the fifties, felt they must blank out such words. As the lawyers were preparing to leave, after insisting for the tenth time that there was nothing for me to do but rewrite my book, I thought of *The Mint*. Why not, I suggested, just leave blanks where I had quoted from the letters? The lawyers brightened, looked almost human. The very thing! They should have thought of it themselves. In fact one of the senior editors later imagined that *he* had thought of it.

*The Shadow of Blooming Grove* was published in November 1968. I had picked as a subtitle *The Hundred Years of Warren Gamaliel Harding*, since I had carried my history to the events of the centenary. But the editors of the Book of the Month Club, who had just accepted the book, held out for *Warren Gamaliel Harding and His Times*. I held out for "in His Times", and we compromised on that. When the galleys were sent out to book editors and critics, they contained no deletions. McGraw-Hill insisted on all 2,500 in the published edition. The firm was taking no chances.

Meanwhile the suit dragged on. Finally in 1971 lawyers on both sides worked out an agreement. Duckett's microfilms were to be turned over to the Ohio Historical Society where they would remain unavailable. The original letters were to go to the Library of Congress, sealed until 29 July 2014, when they would become part of the public domain. *American Heritage* agreed to pay the Hardings \$10,000 damages.

Though the original Phillips letters are in the Library of Congress and the microfilms secure at the Ohio Historical Society, there has still been a certain amount of leakage. Too many persons have read the letters. Dr. Harding allowed Albertson, whom he considered the Harding house historian, to read them as well as a later biographer, Robert K. Murray. Copies, either of the letters or the undeleted galleys, exist and occasionally they surface. In 1972 the *Dayton Journal Herald* printed an amorous poem of Harding's. Four years later the *Washington Post* printed one of Hardings' more erotic letters ending:

There is one engulfing, enthralling rule of love, the song of your whole being which is a bit sweeter—"Oh Warren! Oh Warren!—when your body quivers with divine paroxysms and your soul hovers for flight with mine.

Harding could be cruder, more explicit, and often was, but this is the level of his passionate writing.

The Harding centenary on 1 November 1965 was a gala day in Marion, with a Rotary Club luncheon and a symposium afterward. The Marion High School band in red and black uniforms marched to the Harding house—now renovated to a museum—to play the "Star Bangled Banner" and then Mrs. Harding's favorite, "End of a Perfect Day." But the Memorial Association, still shaken by the Phillips letters, was on the defensive. Two Harding biographers did their best. Professor Albertson took up the unspoken challenge, telling the association members "in spite of what has been written, in spite of what has been said, in spite of what has been inferred, none of you need have the slightest hesitation, to say, with pride, to anyone who asks, 'Warren G. Harding was born here.'" Professor Downes in turn described the young Harding as "always hard working, always proud, always driving." Yet in spite of Downes's goodwill, Dr. Harding still refused to grant him the access to the Phillips letters that he had allowed Albertson. A year later at the annual dinner of the Memorial Associ-

ation the usually mild-mannered Downes lost his temper and, standing only a few feet away from Dr. Harding, denounced him for his secrecy and his favoritism.

Downes did not finish his *Rise of Warren Harding* until 1969, but even that first volume, carrying Harding merely to the threshold of the White House, was a quarter of a million words long. The professor's research was all-encompassing, his patience endless, but he became bogged down in trivia that had for him assumed a factitious importance. No commercial publisher would consider his book, as he soon discovered, for he received rejection after rejection. Finally he telephoned me, asked me if I could help him, and said he was willing to contribute several thousand dollars of his savings to get his book in print. I told him that the commercial publishers were useless, but that he had made a contribution to Ohio history and some university press ought to be interested. Since he was a professor at the University of Toledo, that press had a moral obligation to publish his book. He called me again several times in increasing despair. Once his wife called. She said she knew her husband's writing was old-fashioned, but the book was the work of his life and it deserved to be printed. I agreed with her and again said I thought it was the responsibility of the University of Toledo.

How Downes was led to the Ohio State University Press I do not know. The press director, Weldon Kefauver, agreed to publish *The Rise of Warren Harding* but only if the manuscript first met the approval of the Harding family. The manuscript was sent to Dr. Harding who sat on it for nine months. He then ordered Kefauver to eliminate all "offensive and absolutely irresponsible statements." A chapter called "The Muck Fest," that Downes had intended as a defense of Harding, had to come out. So did all references to Nan Britton—whom Downes had interviewed—and to Carrie Phillips. In the revised version Harding and his Duchess might have been Darby and Joan. Downes was forced to submit in order to get his book through the press, to hold back his indignation until after publication date. Then and only then was he able to express his "outrage" at the Harding family and his disillusionment with the Ohio State University Press. Director Kefauver in reply said it was untrue that he had censored Downes's book. "It was simply told to him [Downes] that unless certain changes were made it wasn't going to be approved."

Even before Downes finished his book, Robert Murray's political study of Harding's presidential years appeared. Adequate in a desiccated way, factual, approved by the Harding family, and with a dust-jacket of Harding blue it is marred if not vitiated by Murray's thesis that Harding—all evidence to the contrary—was really a hard-working, accomplished president.

Downes lived to see his book published, but died not long afterward. Duckett, his position with the Ohio Historical Society untenable, went to Carbondale to become archivist at Southern Illinois University. Dr. Dale Cottrill has published his book, *The Conciliator*, and received a certificate of merit from the Harding Memorial Association. Dr. Sawyer and Dr. George Harding have since died. Milligan was translated from the presidency of the Historical Society to become expeditor [sic] of the state's Historical Society program of capital improvements and chief planner for the new \$10 million Ohio Historical Center.

When I was a Harvard undergraduate wandering through the American history section stacks of Widener Library, I used to remark on the gap in the presidential biographies when they came to Harding. Someone, I sensed, would one day fill that gap "because it was there," little suspecting that I should be one of the fillers and in so doing that I should create a national scandal. Biographers have closed the gap now, all the biography that Warren Gamaliel Harding will need. I doubt if ever there will be another life of the man from Marion. Perhaps in 2014 an edition of his Letters!

After Harding's election Marionites, in a burst of civic pride, built the Hotel Harding. Everyone in Marion who was anyone subscribed to the bond issue. Harding's Roman features were even woven into the towels and face clothes. But when I stayed there in 1964 the portrait towels had long since vanished. So empty was the hotel that I had a whole upper floor to myself. In 1975 the Hotel Harding closed its doors for the last time. Marion, the growing city, had outgrown Harding's shadow that had intrigued such diverse individuals as Samuel Hopkins Adams, William Allen White, and Gertrude Stein. The gap in the book shelves was indeed filled and Harding a part of the static past.