

President Ronald Reagan's Ties To Kentucky

*Adopted Son's Mother, A Fifth Generation Kentuckian,
Came From Willard In Carter County*

By Ward Harrison - 2007

President Ronald Wilson Reagan, the 40th President of the United States, was born in 1911, in Illinois, and died in 2004 in California. In one poll, after his demise, he was voted as the second most popular president of the United States following Abraham Lincoln. It is therefore a befitting honor to recall his ties to our great and beautiful Commonwealth.

First, and foremost his Kentucky ties become evident through his adopted son, Michael Edward Reagan; born as John L. Flaugher, in Los Angeles, California March 18, 1945, to an unwed mother named Essie Irene Flaugher who chose to put her newborn son up for adoption. Reagan married Academy Award-winning actress Jane Wyman (1917-2007) January 26, 1940, with their first child, Maureen, being born the following year (she died in 2001). It has never been brought to light why the Reagans chose to adopt a child, but adopt they did, and afterwards another daughter was born in 1947 who died an infant.

Of course, Irene had no idea that two of Hollywood's top-ranking motion picture celebrities had adopted her son and even more astoundingly that Ronald Reagan would one day become President of the United States.

Ironically, Essie (preferring the name of Irene) had come to California from the small hamlet of Willard, Carter County, Kentucky (population 164 in 1940), hoping

for a career in the movies. Adopting the stage name of Betty Arnold she obviously was attractive, or talented enough, to obtain bit parts in several films, her most notable being in the 1949 film *The Big Wheel*, starring Mickey Rooney.



President Ronald Reagan (1911-2004)

A fifth-generation Kentuckian, Irene was born October 18, 1916, to Deucey (or May) Graham and Mr. Flaugher. Unfortunately I have not been able to determine her father's first name. However, it has been documented that the father of Michael Reagan was an army corporal named John Bourgholtzer (died 1993) with whom Essie had had an affair and became pregnant. Whether she became pregnant in Kentucky, or met Bourgholtzer in California has not been clarified. Its interesting to note, however, that biologically John Flaugher, who became Michael Reagan, by all right of title is a Bourgholtzer. As an adult, Michael Reagan, upon learning he was adopted, longed to meet his birth mother, so with President Reagan's sanction court records were opened and mother and son met before her death occurred in Portsmouth, Scioto County, Ohio,

in December, 1985. Having married a restaurateur she died under the name of Irene Lange.

Growing up in Beverly Hills and nearby Pacific Palisades, Michael was far from being a spoiled Hollywood brat. In 1953, at age 8, he asked his father for an increase in his \$1 weekly allowance. Reagan informed his son that since 90 percent of his earnings were taxed by the govern-

The first Salyersville courthouse was built in 1862 and used until 1893.

ment there could be no increases until he was given a tax cut. When this took place in the 1960s, under President Kennedy's administration, young Michael's allowance was increased to \$5 a week.

Michael Reagan spent the better part of his young adulthood trying to find a self-image apart from the towering personalities of his renowned father and his two actress wives, Jane Wyman and Nancy Davis, in homes where children were to be seen and not heard. And, of course, when two children (Patti and Ronald, Jr.) were born to Ronald and Nancy there was eventually sibling rivalry, teenage rebellion, and estrangement.

Michael Reagan went on to become a talk show host, as did his brother Ronald, Jr., and his life as the President's son became a best selling autobiography, in 1988, titled *On The Inside Looking Back*. In 2004 his second book, *Twice Adopted*, was published.

Aside from his adopted son, President Reagan's other ties to the state of Kentucky are as follows:

In the 1948 film *John Loves Mary*, Reagan played opposite Kentucky native and Oscar-winning star, Patricia Neal. The following year they were paired once again in the film *The Hasty Heart*.

In 1951 Ronald Reagan appeared in a slapstick film titled *Bedtime For Bonzo*. This film was directed by Fred de Cordova, a former producing director of Louisville's Iroquois Amphitheatre during the seasons of 1942 and 1943. Mr. de Cordova married "Skeeter" Thomas, a native of Dover, Kentucky.

In the 1981 CBS miniseries *Guts And Glory*, President Reagan was portrayed by Louisvillian, Bryan E. Clark, who graduated from Louisville's St. Xavier High School, the same school attended by Tom Cruise.

During 1986, I was commissioned by the Sons of the American Revolution to trace President Reagan's genealogy to determine if he were eligible to become a member of this prestigious American society.

Since the SAR headquarters had previously been moved from Washington, D.C., to Louisville, it was very convenient for me to utilize their research facilities. However, in an effort to accomplish this goal there were many death certificates of Reagan's parents. The death certificate of his father, who died in 1941, indicated he had been born in Illinois, as had his mother. While his father, John Reagan, had been born in England, the death certificate of Reagan's mother, who died in 1962, indicated she had been born in Illinois also and her mother in England. The informant on her death certificate had been Ronald Reagan, and I found it very curious that he had no idea where his maternal grandfather, Thomas Wilson, had been born. The end result of my extensive research project was that President Reagan was not eligible to become a member of the SAR as both his paternal and maternal ancestors were living in Ireland at the time of the American Revolution.

Ward Harrison, 1800 Dutch Lane, #21, Jeffersonville, IN 47130, shares this article with our readers.

Thoughts To Ponder From The Kentucky Philosopher

It is much easier to repent of sins that we have committed than to repent of those that we intend to commit.

—Josh Billings

Friends are almost always the union of a part of one mind with a part of another: people are friends in spots.

—George Santayana

Admiration is a very short-lived passion, that immediately decays upon growing familiar with its object.

—Joseph Addison

Little minds are tamed and subdued by misfortune; but great minds rise above them.

—Washington Irving

If we begin with certainties, we shall end in doubts; but if we begin with doubts, and are patient in them, we shall end in certainties.

—Francis Bacon

These times of ours are serious and full of calamity, but all times are essentially alike. As soon as there is life there is danger.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

The noblest exercise of the mind within doors, and most befitting a person of quality, is study.

—William Ramsay

Imagination disposes of everything; it creates beauty, justice, and happiness, which are everything in this world.

—Blaise Pascal

Moralizing and morals are two entirely different things and are always found in entirely different people.

—Don Herold

Loyalty means nothing unless it has at its heart the absolute principle of self-sacrifice.

—Woodrow Wilson

Experience is something you get too late to do anything about the mistakes you made while getting it.

—Anonymous

Expedients are for the hour; principles for the ages. --Beecher