

The Jail Cell

KEEP HIS CAMPAIGN POSTER ON MY WALL. His gaze is steady, unsmiling. Hair set and combed. Gray suit, pale tie. The Depression. It felt like a hatchet hard on this place—his son told me the story, how they happened across two rail-thin men butchering a yellow dog in the yard, its legs nailed to the wooden brace of a clothesline, and his father said not to look, you dare not look, don't you gawk at someone's shame.

D. WALTER NULL

Democratic Candidate for State Senate

Second Senatorial District of W.Va.

Composed of Marshall, Wetzel, and Tyler Counties

YOUR SUPPORT WILL BE APPRECIATED

ELECTION TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1932

This is my great-grandfather, man of the left, or what passes for it in America. He won and served with distinction, by all accounts, a New Dealer, trying to bring back what solace he could. Seven years later, in 1939, he drew the belt from his waist with a snaking sound, tied it to the iron bar, and hanged himself in a jail cell in Moundsville, a town he once represented in the legislature.

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IT'S AMAZING THE POSTER SURVIVES. Our relative Reah Lemley ran a country store on sleepy Ned Ridge for decades on end, and when she died

in the early 2000s, her heirs auctioned off its contents. My dad showed up out of curiosity. He was stunned to find the near-pristine image of his grandfather in a box of junk. His own family certainly didn't have one. He never knew such a thing existed. He bid and won. Later on, he complained about it. "I was always taking you kids to see Reah and buy a pop off her. Why didn't she just give it to me?" But Reah Lemley had lived through the wretched 1930s, and that kind regarded each dime, each stray clothespin, like a drop of precious blood. The store, a single square room, had a potbellied stove kicking out heat and high shelves of canned goods—once a big blacksnake took up residence therein and had the bad habit of knocking them down in a great whacking commotion. I took a glass Coke from the antique cooler, her eyes upon me. Her hand would palsy in an alarming way as she handed back the change, still running the register alone, childless, exacting, in her eighties. She unsettled me.

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YOU MOSTLY LIVE AMONG THE OLD HERE, with ghosts and people who seem like them, bits of stressed reality.

When I was a child on the streets of Hundred, West Virginia, the aged would sometimes stop me and say what a good man my great-grandfather had been. Why they were stopping me I didn't understand. I stood there bashful, looking at my feet, as they inflicted their praise. I knew nothing about David Walter, not even that he had been a politician. But now I do. He had become rich in oil- and gas-drilling, but as the Depression dragged on and his business failed, he gave away everything he had to see this small place through: payroll jobs he couldn't afford to men in need; sacks of groceries delivered anonymously to the poorest; five dollars here, twenty there. *Forgive him*, they were saying.

The people felt enough love and loyalty that, sixty years on, they would stop a small child in the street. When my great-grandfather killed himself, he was in financial ruin and left a wife and six sons, some still teenagers. Their farm and their home, the largest and most sumptuous in that backward part of the county, were foreclosed by the bank and auctioned on the steps of the Wetzel County Courthouse. His widow Cecile was to be forced out. A crowd gathered. The bidding began. Her eldest son Arthur, an engineer and bridge-builder, stepped through the crowd. He raised his hand: the starting bid. The auctioneer was calling out, but the crowd fell silent. The people loved her. The auctioneer had no choice but to bang the gavel. The son signed the deed over to his mother. (Did it happen this way? Sounds like a novelist's invention.) Cecile was able to remain in the house until her own death in 1973. It still stands, right across the road from our farm. I've never been inside. I knew the last owners, the Foxes, and played music with them elsewhere (the wife wore gloves as she thumped an upright bass), but I never asked and they never offered. I heard it went to hell inside and I'm afraid to see. In the 1920s, when the family was rich, David Walter brought an artist to live in the house for a year and paint hunting scenes on the walls, and there were stags and birds etched into the frosted glass of the interior doors. Somehow, the local undertaker got hold of the doors and installed them in the town's one funeral home, and

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A reunion you'd never
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every time I go there to bury another relative, he says, “Here, let me show you, did you know these were in your family’s house on Rock Camp?” He never seems to notice my obvious discomfort. We’ve lived through this scene ten times over. I can laugh about it now.



THE PATTERNS ARE CLEAR. The senator’s father, a farmer-carpenter, kept up a robust social life right to his death at age ninety. One evening during a snowstorm, he rode his horse eleven miles over the ridge to Littleton to drink with his cronies. On the return home, the horse tossed him into a snowbank. He took chill and died a couple days later. May we all carouse and ring in our ninetieth in such a fashion.

A sister of his attended a family reunion not long after. The Nulls gathered on the banks of a pond for the picnic. She got so fed up with her relatives that she walked into the pond and drowned herself in full view of everyone. A reunion, my dad and my aunt like to say, you’d never forget! A showstopper!



THIS IS HOW I REMEMBER THE STORIES I’ve been told. None of this should be treated as gospel. Now that I think of it, that skinning-of-the-yellow-dog happened on Scotts Run, and a supervisor is the one who told my dad about it while they were working on the state road, circa 1970. The story leapt back to the 1930s, when it occurred, leapt into my grandfather’s vision, a scolding that never happened. Apocrypha at best.



I SPENT MY EARLY YEARS in the company of Neill, my grandfather, who spoke warmly of his mother but never mentioned his father or his father’s suicide to me—or to anyone else, for that matter. Which is unsurprising. Neill was twenty-seven years old and freshly married when his father hanged himself in 1939. The mother, now, Neill adored. A natural companion, intelligent and sharp and politically active, Cecile was tomboyish and eccentric, loving nothing more than to fish and hunt and garden with her sons. She kept six different pies in the safe, as each son had his own favorite, and she let the older ones operate a whiskey still in the basement, keeping with her habit of letting them do what they wished—she didn’t even complain

when Neill quit high school (not that he lacked intelligence, but because the school day interfered with his hunting).

I imagine the sons' disdain for the father came not only from his suicide but from his reputation. Paired with his generosity and charisma was his drinking and womanizing during the legislative sessions in the capital, 150 miles to the south. Down there he lived a separate, boardinghouse existence from the family. I can understand. When they did have children and wives, the men of that family regarded their brood sidelong, not quite knowing what to make of the situation, feeling like impostors. And their families seemed to shrug in response, mostly regarding the men as breadwinners. No marriage seemed a true coupling, but a truce between rivals who now would fight for a common good, for a while.

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IMAGES I HAVE, BUT WORDS ARE FEW. For instance, a line-drawing in David Walter's hand of an oil-field wrench he filed to patent on May 3, 1915, also signed by an attorney and two witnesses, D.L. Haught and Jos. H. Sacher. His only sentences are in the bloodless grammar of such documents:

To all whom it may concern: Be it known that I, DAVID W. NULL, a citizen of the United States of America, and resident of Ned, county of Greene, and state of Pennsylvania, have invented certain new and useful Improvements in Wrenches, of which the following is a specification... The object of the invention is to provide a wrench of that class having a toothed handle or shank and a rotatable worm associated with a movable jaw whereby adjustment of the latter is effected, said wrench having means whereby said worm may be bodily dissociated from said shank to permit of a rapid shifting movement of said jaw.

The idea of “bodily dissociation” pleases me, as does that company of “saiDs” marching across the page, but there’s little to discern here. So I look to the campaign poster. I don’t think of it all the time, but in this life, the thought of suicide has been my constant friend. *If nothing turns out, I can always do this.* It comes and it goes like weather. I’ve another photograph tacked up: David Walter and his wife in their best clothes, 1910 or so, in the brilliant decade that young couples have together at first, their carriage hitched to a massive, gleaming draft horse with head held high and haughty. The eldest sons Arthur and Gene are seated on their parents’ laps, handsome farm behind them. The man’s hat is tipped back in a jaunty way. The woman’s own is elaborate and banked in flowers like a parade float and she wears a high collar. They’ve no idea of the disaster what will come—when I look, I feel omniscient. I could shout and warn them, I want to tell them stop, have no more children, cancel my life and cancel your suffering, cancel it like a bankbook. Cecile. Cecile Virginia Riggs. This is my great-grandmother. Such a part of my dad’s childhood, a legend. She sprang from respected colonial families of Raven Rock, the Puritan Riggs’s and the Huguenot LaRue’s, judges and hoteliers ruined by taking the evil side in the Civil War in a divided state, and the senator

D. W. NULL.
WRENCH.

APPLICATION FILED MAY 3, 1915.

1,152,832.

Patented Sept. 7, 1915.

FIG. 1

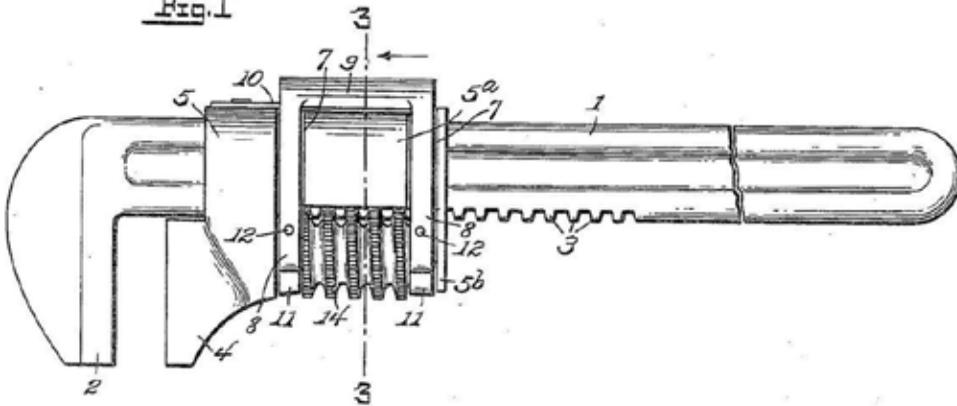


FIG. 2

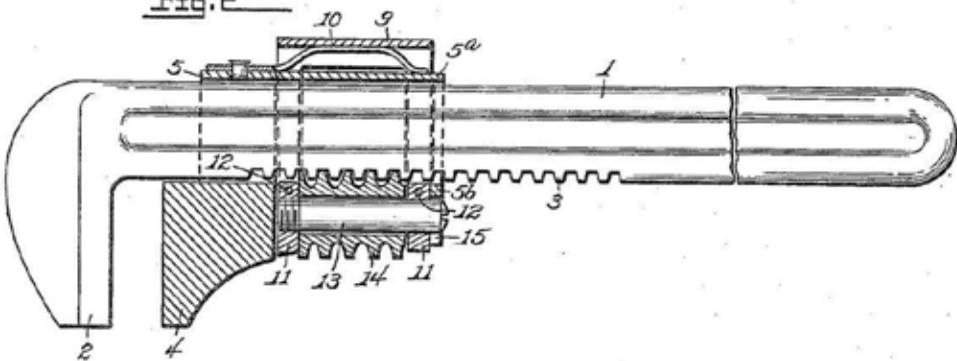
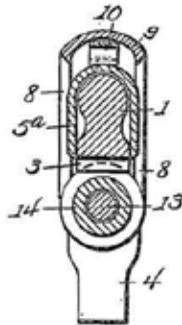


FIG. 3



WITNESSES:
J. H. Walker
H. F. Kefer

INVENTOR.
David W. Null.
BY *H. E. Dunlap.*
ATTORNEY.

*When I look back on
these people, I feel
like a snake that still
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some other form has
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its heritage, but give it
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two and the legs will
vanish, all will be lost.*

counted himself lucky to make such a match, to find such a witty and handsome wife. In 1905, proudly besting all the boys, she was the first valedictorian of St. Marys High School, where her father was a hotelier on that Ohio River port, but she had been born in the Washington Territory in 1889 when her father was homesteading a claim. I'm sure she seemed exotic to David Walter, higher-born, thrilling. I have trouble following her family's ramblings, they repaired to "the West" at least twice, to let tempers settle after the war and "improve" the land. You could trace the arc of the Democratic Party by examining her life. Despite having a Confederate sympathizer as a father (to my shame, I've been told that someone in the Riggs family even owned a slave, a rare thing in that poor state), she became an ardent leftist and for suffrage and seems to have been universally beloved, even if a quick wit is not what the times desired of a woman. Within five minutes of meeting a new acquaintance, she would grill you on your political affiliation—late in life, she liked to tell jokes on Nixon. She kept a pet flying squirrel in a birdcage and fed it peanut butter. She made dandelion wine, feeding it sugar till it would get you drunk.

Her six sons worshipped her. She was the first white child born in what is now Nez Perce County, Idaho, surely a disappointment to the Nez Perce, but at age ten she returned to West Virginia, her family's true home.

Yet she married David Walter in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, somehow, where he had gone to drill oil. How these people stagger across their country. Before I die, I'd like to see Oklahoma, land they walked, land stolen from the tribes. This was the heroic age of drilling, high derricks nailed up by hand of timbers, willing it out of the ground. In 1923, it was written admiringly, "During the eleven years [his] firm has been operating in West Virginia it is claimed for them that they never plugged a hole and never moved a rig until the well was drilled. Mr. Null, of this firm, has had a wide experience in the oil fields of the East and West, covering all the years since early youth...[He] attended the rural schools of his native county in Pennsylvania, and his activities were identified with his father's farm until

he was eighteen. Since then he has been in some phase of the oil industry. The first three years he was a tool dresser in the Deep Valley field. During 1905 he began drilling in the Bartlesville field of Oklahoma, but in 1906 became identified with the drilling operations in the Wetzel County field near Hundred. In 1910 he formed his present association with Mr. Funk, and they have conducted an extensive business as reliable contractors for the drilling of oil and gas wells, and have a large capital employed in their tools and outfits and the operating expenses...”

When I look back on these people, I feel like a snake that still has its vestigial legs: some other form has preceded me, I can sense its heritage, but give it another generation or two and the legs will vanish, all will be lost. One Christmas day, Cecile’s brother surprised the family by returning unannounced from the war—the Spanish-American War. He brought back his rifle, a .30-40 Krag bolt-action built in 1898. Cutting edge for the time. I have it here, with its elaborate peep sight, as fussy and precise as an antique watch, embossed millimeters running up the side. Still shoots fine.



DAVID WALTER’S SUICIDE demolished the family. Sons and cousins and grandchildren scattered into the world. They began by moving north to labor in the mill at Weirton Steel. Some returned, some didn’t. Gene ended up in Roanoke, Virginia; Arthur, the one whose childhood pictures I resemble, died in Florida; Orville was the driver in a lethal car accident and later killed himself in despair. The latter was my dad’s favorite uncle (“Can I get a haircut like Uncle Orville’s?”), the man’s echo-suicide one of the great sadnesses of his childhood.

The sons who remained had, well, a mixed record. Uncle Vaughn worked in the mill and kept up the farm, an unkempt, card-playing bachelor with a drinking habit—his so-called friends took the best antiques and equipment in poker games. He once told my dad quite seriously that he’d observed a “green sheep” climb up the cliff out back. Vaughn and Orville were the jokers, a bit unhinged; the town once gathered to watch them disastrously run a homemade canoe over a waterfall on its maiden voyage, the predictable happened, the sailors were fished out, the canoe was found stove-in miles downriver (my friend Joe Parish, still living at ninety-one, howled with laughter telling me about the canoe); as teenagers

they constructed an elaborate “ghost” out of pulleys that would swing on command across Rock Camp hollow at night, white sheet billowing, frightening drivers off the road (in some screwed-up logic, the existence of the “ghost” was meant to distract from the existence of their moonshine still). A bit more even-keeled, Arthur was Hundred’s popular mayor in the



1950s (an older hunting companion told me Arthur was an elegant skater when the creek froze over, “not what you’d expect from such a big man,” and his license plate read “100”), but then his family moved out-of-state. The youngest son, Armand, nicknamed Ham, had mental deficiencies, worked as a janitor, and never had children—well, a pregnant woman some years his senior did locate and marry him, much to everyone’s aggravation, and produced an heir that was not his, but there’s some question as to whether or not he understood what was going on. My grandparents hated her. (Christmas Day, we would pay a grim little visit to Ham, a widower now and totally befuddled, and the situation was always remarked upon on the way over.) Neill, my grandfather, was the only son whose children have remained in Wetzel County, and that sprawling, eccentric family has trickled down to me and just a couple others, as if God is closing off the

tap. A few years ago, the state Democratic Party approached my father to run for the family's old seat but he declined. Despite the risks involved I wish he had, if only for reasons of historical symmetry. Unless my son has children, our name will die with me. But maybe it should.

I've a picture of the four eldest boys out working the field, 1914, in broad-brimmed hats, the eldest no better than eight, and you can tell they're really laboring, no play about it, with the wary look of workers being photographed. My grandfather Neill hardly looks old enough to walk but there he is, grubbing at the ground with his brothers. "If you can pick up a rock, you can work," was the refrain. In twenty-five years, their father will be pulled from his vehicle and led to the jail cell.



WHY HANG HIMSELF? The superficial answer is shame, public shame. David Walter was arrested while driving drunk, it is thought, though records only mention "a traffic violation" in Mannington. He had probably lost a reelection bid just before. At 7 p.m., the jailer makes his rounds and sees the prisoner alive. At 8:15 p.m., the prisoner is found hanging from the cell door. But I know the sadness has been dogging the prisoner's step all his life, as it has done to me, as it has done to the others. One can touch the threads of laughter and despair, carousing and suicide, drinking and charisma. People did love him. I imagine him in the jail cell, very tired. The exhaustion is what makes him draw out his belt. In the end he made a sound decision, shaking free of what chased him, and I'm sorry his family couldn't forgive that. As the old people seemed to tell me, he had done some good in the world and now he had earned his rest, as we all shall rest when our work is done. If only our children could understand. In hard times I think of him.