



Three Rivers Crossed...

The good intentions and needless secrets surrounding an unwanted birth become a negative and cleverly woven heroic tale utilized to mold a mid-20th century Afro-American female and prepare her to take the next step up the ladder to the American Dream. The community of her childhood is forever memorialized as the Village within a diverse neighborhood on the northwest side of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This memoir is a tribute to the shared mission of the Afro-American residents of the Village to save every child despite the confusion of the black experience within a nation undergoing war, death and revolution. It is also a personal, frank and sometimes humorous account of a determined search for identity which moved forward even when confronted with self-imposed obstacles, deceptions and blatant untruths.

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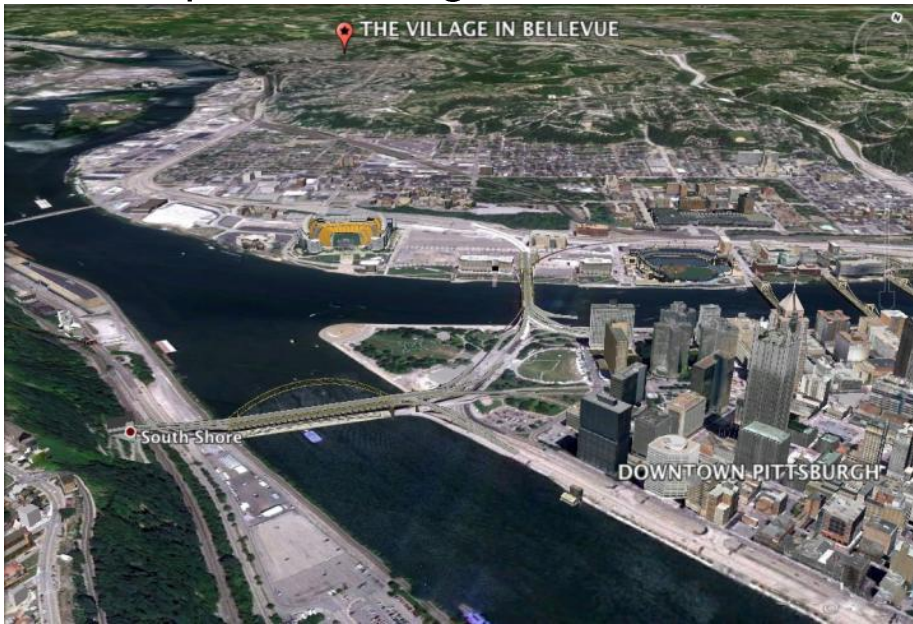
Linda Jean Hall

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Map of the Village in Bellevue, PA



Map Courtesy of: © Google 2012, Image © Terrametrics 2012, Image NOAA.

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DEDICATION

*¡A mis familias en todas partes del mundo
Y a la nueva vida
Para todos!*

*A Linda Fardan, a Curtis Edward Fairfax,
a mis amores los que están en el cielo....
Y a ti, m'ito menor....gracias por el título!*



*Real parents are
the ones that
love you.....*

“Mom and Dad”

James
Washington
(1900-1964)

Hallie White
Washington
(1903-1963)

FORWARD

Three Rivers Crossed is a marvelous, engaging and spirited story of the coming of age of a remarkable young woman in Pittsburgh. Many books chronicle the lives of the rich and famous, but Linda Hall's life story resonates precisely because it speaks to the great majority of us, who are neither rich nor famous nor notorious. Were they written, our lives also would tell fascinating stories of struggle and the will to succeed. For that reason, many of us will look to Linda's story and nod our heads knowingly for the universal truths it contains about ourselves. I will be using *Three Rivers Crossed* in my course on the History of Black Pittsburgh; my students are in for a treat. –

Laurence Glasco, *Associate Professor of
History, University of Pittsburgh*

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Introduction

In a small town, close to where the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers feed the Ohio River, the life of one individual began without much anticipation. *Three Rivers Crossed* reveals how fundamental life skills are acquired, and countless steps are taken by a child who lived in the northern rolling hills of the three rivers during the post-World War II era between 1948 and 1966. The memoir is a come to maturity tale of a search by an Afro-American female as she begins a very arduous journey along the pathway to an unsure future.

The story begins in Pittsburgh's North side district, to explain how and why the child was destined to repeatedly transverse the streams. Many events take place in the Borough of Bellevue, and in Ross Township within an isolated community referred to as the "Village." Family ties in the Village are strong and the child is swept up and nurtured by the many extended families whose names include: Washington, Thompson, Brown, Brogdon, Carter, Clinton, Burton, Parker, Robinson, Piper, Kelly, McRoberts, and Crenshaw. The Village is not a recognized and celebrated black community like its culturally distinct next door neighbors of Manchester and the North Side, or the upper and lower Hill District across town. *Three Rivers Crossed* unapologetically provides a humorous insight into two of the most sacred of institutions of the Black community, the church and the family. The memoir is frank, honest,

and it painfully dissects the child's development in simple language that rings true for current generations. This book is inspired by and dedicated to the loving memories of the many aunts who nurtured the child in the Village: Clare Clinton, Felda Thompson, Florence Brogdon, and Louise Robinson, and her parents of the heart, James and Hallie Washington.

Many events in the book are of great historical significance because they are marks denoting social metamorphoses in American society. Little known opinions about these events, that ran through the Black community, are included to demonstrate how these helped to shape the child and prepare her to leave the Village. The memoir confronts critical topics such as, traumatic death, war, national changes in discriminatory practices and the tumultuous impact to families during the financial booms and busts of the time span within the text. The Village prepared the child in its particular way to participate in the changes that rocked America's personal identity.

Three Rivers Crossed was initially written to exorcise the tortured soul of the woman who was the child in the Village. The novel is an emotional tribute to the residents of a now lost and small black community at the fringes of North Hills. Several initial readers who are lifelong educators recognized the book's relevance as a teaching tool in the areas of History, Black Studies and Feminine Studies. The initial release was well received and enthusiastically supported towards its current and more mature edition by Professor Laurance Glasco, noted Historian and educator at the University of Pittsburgh. During the Christmas holiday in 2011, the author sat in the Porch restaurant with Professor Glasco directly in front of the

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Cathedral of Learning on Pitt's campus to discuss her life and the work. The symbolism of this event was poignant because during her formative years, the author frequently walked from the North Side to the Cathedral to sit for hours in the Commons where she always felt connected to her destiny and at peace. The final touches to prepare this work for formal publication – a book that would tell her story -- would be compiled based on the insight and contributions of Professor Glasco in the shadow of the same edifice in which she was inspired to create a future.

L. H.

CHAPTER 1 -- THE RESCUE

The chestnut brown-skinned, attractive woman was pregnant again. This was not a happy event and she wasn't making any effort to hide her disappointment. The brutally hot late July weather in a sweltering inner city without shelter left her absolutely nowhere to hide to collect her thoughts. Despite possessing an abundance of pride, she and her common-law husband shared a life that consisted of stumbling from relative to relative with their two existing children in tow.

Her requests for temporary shelter were always emotional and pitiful. In most cases, without any notice, she would suddenly appear on a relative's doorstep. She dressed the children in clean but tattered clothing. There was also no attempt on her part to mask the obvious sadness in their eyes. They were only ages one and two and both were unusually well behaved.

She slowly and tearfully would begin a well-practiced appeal for assistance. This always included the promise of only a short term stay. If there seemed to be any doubt regarding the behavior of her children she would add, “Oh, don't worry about them. They're very quiet. They'll be good.” She was extremely convincing.

There was absolutely no doubt that there was a need to help. The family members were usually very touched and gladly responded by reaching out to protect their sibling. Their generosity was based on a shared religious upbringing and a commitment they all had made to their parents to help any member of the family to grab a piece of the American Dream. All twelve of her brothers and sisters fought hard to forget that even as a child she had been obstinate and a bit strange. They couldn't deny her basic shelter as she stood before them undeniably pregnant, desperately clinging to the hand of her young son and protectively carrying the eldest child on her hip.

Unfortunately, soon after she and the children were given shelter, the small and thin common-law husband always appeared. He did not interact with his generous hosts in anyway. They found him at first to be cordial and their sister's commitment to him almost cult-like. She more than loved what appeared to her relatives to be a feeble man who was a bit too content to be an usher at a downtown theatre. His control over her was silent. Within a short period of time, his presence in the home became downright unsettling.

The situation rapidly deteriorated. The family discovered that the common-law husband was the subject of a vicious rumor. According to what was felt to be reliable information, he was suspected of having a

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legitimate wife and two other children. This possibility did not have to be confirmed. In those days, a man was judged strictly on his reputation. His aloofness was deemed to be a sign that he was ungrateful and the chatter about his other family only made his presence more irritating.

She could not or would not recognize that her situation was sad and headed for a possible horrible conclusion. Perhaps this was due to her desperate fight to protect the growing number of secrets about her relationships. Her strong will and often pretentious nature always seemed to get in the way. Earnest attempts by her siblings to simply talk to her usually turned into shoving and shouting matches. Together and without much effort, she and her mate consistently wore out their welcome.

There had been no indication that she would inherit what appeared to be a self-destructive nature. Her father migrated to Pittsburgh from North Carolina. He was proud of the fact that he had been able to acquire property and prestige even during the Great Depression. His wife's dazzling American-Indian and Black heritage combined to make her a striking beauty. They generously welcomed visitors to their warm home for countless dinners and treated their guests like members of the family. The couple was viewed as a pillar of the mid-city church where he was a deacon and a member of a renowned mass choir.

During the long marriage of her parents, thirteen children had been born. Even their enemies had to admit that they were all in some way exceptionally intelligent and attractive. Most had attained some form of success and stability in their lives. Those with their own families found it difficult to emotionally support

their now twenty-five year old unmarried sister who proudly carried the third child of a man they barely knew.

The growing rumor about the common-law husband's supposed infidelity continued to circulate freely. One family member even added fuel to the fire by saying that he'd seen one of the children of the suspected marriage. He added that the child looked suspiciously like the older child of their sister's union. The common-law husband's only salvation was his personal appearance. He was half white and had a mass of beautiful wavy black hair. These characteristics were greatly envied at this time in the history of Black America. But his looks did not save him from eviction. Often, he appeared at family dinners to be overly tired and weak despite the fact that he was only in his mid-twenties. At some point it was confirmed that he had a congenital heart condition.

The couple and their children were disruptive guests in the homes of her siblings. Numerous problems came about simply because of their attitudes. They never could seem to reach a point where they were able to be self-sufficient. Their presence drained resources slowly from the pockets of their benefactors. Eventually, it always became blatantly obvious that without a strong push out the door, they would never voluntarily leave.

They once again found themselves without permanent housing on the eve of the birth of the new arrival. A close friend agreed to let them move in. She also volunteered to keep an eye on the children as the young mother left for the hospital to bring another baby into the world. The future was not promising. This birth would bring another mouth to feed into their

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care for which they could not provide even a roof to put over its head. They were a couple that seemed to be playing at being parents.

The labor was uneventful and the baby was of average height and weight. Shortly after the birth, the child was presented to her father. He uttered only a few words of bitter welcome to his daughter. "I don't want another damn split tailed girl." He repeated this phrase over and over to anyone who would listen. In horror, the hospital staff noted his rejection. They all wondered what would become of this unwanted child.

The baby was full-term, healthy and it strongly resembled its older sister and brother. Everyone hoped that before the end of the required four day hospital stay that the father would overcome his obvious strong dislike of the child. However, with each passing day his unrighteous indignation only intensified. One nurse expressed deep concern for the well-being of the baby to the attending physician. The doctor dismissed her comments by assuring her that he was sure the father's rejection was only temporary. The father continued to deny the child and his harsh statements and overall disgust did not in any way decrease.

The situation was only to grow more confusing. Within only a week of the delivery, in August of 1948, the mother abruptly broke all ties with her siblings. They were disappointed, but secretly cherished the peace and quiet that replaced their sister's unexpected disruptions into their personal lives. By now, they were worn raw by her frequent visits and the unending turmoil that surrounded her tumultuous lifestyle.

The baby was given into the care of a friend of the family. The reason for this decision was to become yet another protected secret. The mother's siblings never

had an opportunity to even see their new niece and were only left to wonder what had happened to totally alienate their sister. It was at this point that the young mother, father and other two children abruptly left Pittsburgh and moved into a condominium in Cleveland, Ohio. No arrangements were made to ever retrieve the missing member of their illegitimate family.

The baby remained in Pittsburgh in the hands of a reluctant personal friend of the mother. There, for the most part, it was left to lay in its own feces and urine. The meager supply of clean diapers left by its mother had only lasted a few days. Its crib was little more than a cardboard box that sat diagonally in a dark, humid corner of a small room.

The only time the apartment was cool was in the late evening. Even then, the room remained unbearably hot. Soon the roaches found their way into the baby's diaper. The friend was unwilling or unable to purchase food to feed the infant. It was perhaps for this reason she soon sought help from a cousin of the baby's grandfather who lived several miles outside the city.

The infant was almost a month old by the time the reluctant caretaker finally approached the family for help. The cousin agreed to drop by and she expected to find a happy cooing infant. She brought along a few dollars cash because she planned to leave the funds with the caretaker to help buy food and maybe even a new outfit for the baby. Instead, she was horrified to see a child that was on the verge of dying. The baby appeared to be less than four pounds in weight and she lay motionless in the filthy makeshift crib. Despite the efforts of the caretaker to wake the baby, it remained unresponsive. It was obvious that it didn't even have the strength to cry.

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Outrage and horror filled the cousin's heart. Tears began to roll down her face as she reached into the crib to touch the soft and pale skin of the infant.

The caretaker lit a cigarette and while standing over the baby she proclaimed her innocence and said, "I just want it out of here. It's sick or something. It won't eat a damn thing. I told her mother I would only watch her for so long. Shit, I don't even know what its name is. I've had enough and it sure ain't gonna lie up in here and die on me."

The cousin was now almost beside herself with anger. She purposefully took a step back in an effort to control her temper. The temptation to slap the hateful caretaker did occur to her, but she resisted. This was not the time to deal with her. Without hesitation and another word, she pushed the woman aside and scooped the infant from the soiled blankets. With the baby held close to her, she now realized it was barely breathing and extremely hot and clammy. She turned to face the caretaker and demanded something clean to cover the infant. The emaciated baby was then carefully wrapped in a dingy sheet.

The cousin's reputation had preceded her. The caretaker realized that it was not uncommon for this woman to confront even men one on one. She knew that it would be unwise to antagonize her. Therefore, she quickly began to backup towards the doorway of the room. The cousin glared at her and said, "Where the hell are you going? Call me a cab! Now!"

The taxi arrived within a few minutes because the cab stand was only a few miles from the apartment. The caretaker was now too terrified to move without permission. She made a vain attempt to gather the cousin's purse as she prepared to leave. This effort was

aborted when the cousin in a voice that could cut ice instructed her, “Don't touch my shit. The cabdriver will get it.”

Within the hour, the cousin managed to have the baby seen by her family physician. She was informed that within another few hours the child might have died. The doctor also warned her that she should not grow too attached to the baby. There was still a strong possibility that it would still not survive. His sobering words did not deter her from accepting the responsibility.

Her determination extended into hours and days in which she gently and almost constantly held the weak infant. She prayed, rocked, and sung to the child while feeding it the doctor's rich prescribed formula based on Carnation Evaporated Milk. At first, the baby could only tolerate a few meager sips. She remained committed and determined as the intake level gradually increased. It was possibly at this time that in her heart she became the true mother of the unwanted infant.

When the child was strong enough she was relieved to welcome it into her home and into her community.

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The Hag: "I just want it out of here. It's sick or something." Illustrated by Deanna Graves 2012.