

LOFTON

JOURNAL OF AN AMERICAN WOMAN

KENT D. WALSH

outskirtspress
DENVER, COLORADO

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Journal of an American Woman
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Outskirts Press, Inc.
<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN: 978-1-4327-8921-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012904240

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

This book is dedicated to a very unique and special woman:

LOFTON HELEN FOX

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I WOULD LIKE to acknowledge the following people who have contributed to the writing, accuracy, and completion of this book. For without you, Lofton Fox's dream of one day having her life story told would not have happened.

First and foremost I thank my loving wife Madeline Walsh, with whom I share my life, for your patience, understanding and support of all that I do. You are not only my companion in life—you are my closest friend; my sister-in-law and friend Emily Brown, for without your introduction to Lofton Fox, the many writings and photos you provided, and your uncanny memory of your many years of friendship with this wonderful woman, this book could not have been written; Bob and Marion Wiens, especially Marion, for your valuable time and willingness to help with this writing, and your contribution of supplying and verifying details that happened long ago; and finally, to my contributing editor and friend Nick Miller of WordWise Publications for your expertise in punctuation and detail, and your invaluable recommendations.

Kent D. Walsh

FOREWORD

LOFTON WOULD DEFINITELY be one of Reader's Digest' 'Most Unforgettable People'.

The first time I met Lofton I was interviewing for a part time church secretary position for the Yucaipa Valley Presbyterian Church. I didn't know who she was and I just assumed that she was on a hiring committee with the church. She must have been in her early eighties; around four foot eleven with small white curls all around her head. I didn't give her a second thought.

I was hired for the position and it wasn't until the next week that I realized that Lofton was part of my new job. She didn't drive and I would pick her up one or two days a week on my way to work. Her title was Church Financial Secretary, but her position was far more complicated. She timed the pastors sermons letting him know when she felt he was going on too long, kept attendance, noted the weather and seemed to be part of everything. Her friendship with the Pastor and her sense of duty and caring for the church family and a few special friends was her life. She was also very involved with the Sunday School and Youth Programs.

Prickly and singular are both accurate, then mix in strength and purpose and a very strong faith. Lofton was so much more and describing her doesn't do her justice. Our friendship was one of the more important ones of my life. We

started as coworkers and then became family. She worried about me and had very strong opinions and advice. "Use it up, wear it out, make it last, save your money." Lofton died in 1999, I moved away in 1996 and the letters I have from Lofton are full of love and caution and more advice.

I think her book does a great job of making her real.

Emily Brown
February 2012

PROLOGUE

*When I was young and my slippers were red
I could kick up my feet clear over my head.
But then I grew older and my slippers were blue
But still I could dance the whole night thru.*

*But now I am old and my slippers are black
And I walk to the corner and puff my way back.
The reason I know my youth has been spent,
My 'get-up and go' has got up and went.*

*But I really don't mind when I think with a grin
Of all the grand places my 'get-up' has been.
Since I have retired from Life's competition,
I find every day an exact repetition.*

*I get up each morn and dust off my wits,
And grab for the paper and read the 'Obits'.
If my name is missing, I know I'm not dead,
So I eat a good breakfast, and go back to bed.*

I have no idea who the original writer of this poem was, but I found it typed on a wrinkled piece of paper that was loosely lying in an old dusty cardboard box at my sister-in-law's house.

It was a Saturday evening in the summer of 2009. My wife, Madeline, and I had been at the home of her sister,

Emily Brown, for dinner, during which Emily started telling a story about an old friend she used to have by the name of Lofton Fox. She said Lofton's parents were immigrants who had moved to the United States from their home in Austria a few years prior to Lofton's birth. She told us Lofton was one of the funniest and most interesting people she had ever known. Emily said, "She was a real character!"

Unfortunately Lofton's life had also been an extremely difficult one, filled with heartbreak and disappointment. Emily explained how devastated Lofton was when she lost her only child shortly after it was born, and how she never got over it. She said Lofton also had a great fear that her husband, Melvin, whom she loved dearly, was still in love with his ex-wife at the time they got married—and that his love for her lasted for many years beyond.

With Melvin suffering extreme health issues through most of their married life, Lofton was left to run the family egg farm almost entirely by herself. Melvin's main job was to do the daily egg and chicken deliveries. Though Lofton never complained, doing the farm chores was extremely hard and tiresome work. Sometimes she even found it quite painful. But with her very strong work ethic and self-discipline, which were implanted by her parents when she was very young, Lofton was up to the task—and by herself she did the job it should have taken the two of them to do.

At that point Emily ended her story by saying that Lofton was in her late nineties when she finally died in a convalescent home in California. She also added that since Lofton's passing she has missed her terribly.

After dinner was over and the dishes were picked up we

all sat in the living room while Emily continued with more stories about, Lofton. After this went on for quite some time Emily suddenly blurted out: “I want you to write a book about Lofton’s life. She always wanted someone to write a book about her—she wanted me to write it—but I told her I couldn’t. But still she insisted I do it. And then she gave me a box full of her most prized possessions to help in writing it. So, Kent, you’re an author, so I want you to write it instead!”

While I sat there trying to think of a few good reasons why I needed to pass on her *unexpected* idea, Emily opened the door to a large storage area next to the living room and pointing to a cardboard box said, “That’s it! That’s the box with all of Lofton’s prized things in it. Come over and pick it up and bring it into the living room.”

Walking over to where she was pointing I picked the box up and carried it into the center of the living room. After I set it on the floor, she told me to go ahead and open it. Slowly I opened the folded top as I urgently continued trying to think of those “good reasons” I couldn’t write “this” book for her. I mean, I really didn’t want to hurt Emily’s feelings by telling her I didn’t want to write about her old friend’s life, but I just didn’t think this was something I was interested in. Lofton had been Emily’s friend, not mine, and besides I knew nothing about her.

Reaching into the box I suddenly felt very strange as I began pulling the items out from inside. Here were all of Lofton’s old school report cards, from when she was in grade school clear through her high-school graduation; tattered and torn, some were almost one hundred years old, but legible enough to read. I thumbed through the faded pages of two four-inch by six-inch autograph books in which many of her

friends from school had written funny little comments. (I believe nowadays these would be considered the equivalent of someone's writing a note in a student's yearbook.) One of the things I was able to discover in looking at these two autograph books was that almost all of Lofton's former classmates seemed to think they were poets. Some made up their own little poems and some either quoted or modified existing poems. Here's an example:

*Lofton,
When the golden sun is setting,
When your mind from care is free,
When of others you are thinking,
Will you sometimes think of me?
Jeannette Green
March 11, 1915*

The box also contained several of Lofton's handwritten school *lesson* books, a few blurred photographs of Lofton and her husband, and two raggedy old booklets called *Handy Notes* that were filled with her favorite notable quotations that she collected throughout her many years of life. For example, a couple of them read: "Nothing is good or evil until thinking makes it so. – Shakespeare" and "God couldn't be everywhere, therefore he made mothers. – Jewish Proverb"

One of the things Emily mentioned was that what Lofton loved the most was cooking; and some of the items I pulled from the box definitely proved that. Here they were, hundreds of special recipes scribbled in several large *well used* recipe books. Some recipes appeared, by the way they were written, to be of her creation, while others had most likely been borrowed. But *apparently* they were all very good, or she

probably wouldn't have kept them in the first place.

Perhaps the most interesting of Lofton's collection of items was a typewritten *journal* highlighting the memorable events of her life. It was a bit difficult to read though. Written over a long period of time, much of the lettering was faded and blurred, and many of her thoughts were scattered and incomplete. But because it was so very interesting I couldn't help but study every single word she wrote. In her journal Lofton declared:

Much of what I write will be what Mother told me, the balance will be what I myself observed. So many things keep popping into my head that I do not know what to write . . . I get all choked up and tears run down my face.

Looking at this old box and the wonderful things that had filled it, I felt a strong attraction to what I was seeing and was now wanting to know more about its owner. I thought, how sobering: This woman's entire life is right here in this dusty old box—that is, at least those things she wanted to remember, and wanted to share. Here were her most wonderful thoughts and her most important keepsakes: remnants of her long journey through the twentieth century! I wondered—could this really be all she has left? I mean, after all these years, does her whole life fit into nothing more than a cardboard box? And that's all? How could that be? I wondered. The more I studied Lofton's precious possessions, the closer I was being pulled towards her—and the more of her I wanted know.

By the time we were ready to leave Emily's house for our drive home, I had changed from thinking, "No way am I going to write a book about some dead old lady I didn't even know," to "Maybe I can do this!" Emily offered the typed

journal and some notes to take home with me. All the way back home all I could think about was Lofton, and the things she stored in that box. While trying to carry on a conversation with my wife my mind raced, trying to envision what Lofton looked like.

That night I had trouble sleeping; my mind couldn't keep Lofton out as I thought more and more about her fascinating things. The next day and that next night I almost felt haunted by her name—Lofton. In fact that went on for the rest of the week, pushing me to read every single note she had written. I studied every picture and scrap of paper Emily had given me. By that point I was more than just interested in Lofton—I was captivated by her!

That following Saturday Madeline called Emily to let her know I had decided to write the book.

Emily excitedly said, "Is he really?"

Madeline answered, "Yes he is—that's all he can think about right now—writing Lofton's story. He wants to get started right away. He asked me to call to find out if he could borrow the rest of the contents from the box."

Not only did Emily say, "Yes he could," she told Madeline she would bring the rest of Lofton's things over to our house, right away.

An hour or so later, Emily showed up with the cardboard box and the rest of Lofton's things. As she handed them to me she said, "I only wish you could have met her."

Smiling as I Reached over to touch Lofton's journal I said, "I already have!"

She said, "No—I mean really!"

And again I replied, "Like I said—I already have!"

That next day I started writing my story about this

wonderfully unique and incredibly fascinating woman. Based mostly on the information found in that dusty old cardboard box, the writings in those ragged little note books, the stained pieces of paper floating loosely around inside, Lofton's own personal journal notes—and of course, the good memory of Madeline's sister, Emily Brown—this is the story of Lofton Helen Fox—*Lofton "Journal of an American Woman."*

There is no man so poor that he has nothing to offer.

—Author Unknown

(From Lofton's handwritten Handy Notes book)

HAVE YOU EVER noticed how much more patriotic the immigrants of the early years seemed than most of us born right here in the United States? I believe it is because they knew what it was to have lived somewhere else. These immigrants were the foundation of this great nation we call America. Their children and their children's children were, and are, the blocks from which this country has been built. Lofton was one of those "building block" children.

Lofton called herself "a child of the Old Age," a sort of "change-of-life baby." She was the youngest of six children, two of them born in Austria, the other four in America. At the time Lofton was born, her oldest sister, Clementine, nicknamed Teenie, was already eighteen years old. Her brothers, Otto and Bernhardt, also known as Ot and Ben, were seventeen and fifteen, respectively. Her other sister, Ada, was thirteen, and Frank was nine. Those first five siblings were bunched together over just nine years. When Lofton came along, it had been another nine years since Frank's birth, so, as you can

imagine, her parents considered her a little unexpected—you might even say, a surprise. Despite this, and although she was a late arrival for her mother, who was almost forty-two years old, she turned out to be perhaps the most compelling member of her entire family. Not only was she one of the Kuhn family's first generation in this wonderful new land—she turned out to be a pioneer, of sorts.

Lofton's siblings are what I call a "Transitional-Nationality Family": two of them born in Austria and four in America. Lofton absolutely adored her parents, Emil and Aloisia, and cherished them both. And even with the large discrepancy in ages, she cared deeply for her brothers and sisters. As she grew older Lofton was the type of person who worried more about the feelings of other people and what they might think of her than she did about herself. Perhaps Lofton's greatest trait of all though, was that she was blessed with a wonderful sense of humor, and she just loved to laugh.

Lofton's parents, of German descent, emigrated from *the* old country, Austria, in the late 1800s. They came to America for a better way of life for themselves and their children. They wanted to be free of dictatorial regimes like the ones that ruled their former homeland in the past: to be able to work at whatever profession they wanted, to have the freedom to worship God without reprisal, and to have the choice to attend the church of their choosing. They wanted freedom . . . freedom to speak their own minds when they had something to say and to be able to raise their children in the customs and ways that they personally saw fit.

The journey to this new land began when Lofton's father, Emil Kuhn, traveled to America, first. The plan was for him to find work, locate a place to live, and get settled in. Once he

had enough money saved, the rest of the family would follow. It was in 1884 that Emil arrived at Castle Garden, New York; that was before immigrants began landing at Ellis Island. At the time Emil had no more than the clothes on his back and a few coins in his pocket. Although he was a hard worker and willing to do almost any type of work he could find, Emil quickly discovered things here in America were much different and weren't quite as easy as he thought they'd be. Part of the problem was that he didn't speak any English and therefore had difficulty communicating. Another problem he had was that he had no connections, no one waiting to help him find work or a place to live. Besides that, he didn't relate very well with other people.

Through interpreters, he told the immigration officers he was a very hard worker, willing to do any job available, but by trade was a textile worker, a designer of clothes. The immigration officers pinned a tag on him and sent him to Passaic, New Jersey.

Luckily, even with the little money he had Emil was quickly able to rent a place to stay. The trouble was, the German colony where he settled was an extremely clannish bunch. And because he was from Austria instead of Germany, they didn't want a thing to do with him, offering no assistance in helping him locate work. Luckily his strong determination to find a job so he could bring his family to America paid off. After searching almost every hour of every day, Emil soon found the job he was looking for.

Blessed is the man who hath found his work!

by Thomas Carlyle

(From Lofton's written Handy Notes book)

Hiring in as a mill hand at the Reid & Barry Print Works, Emil worked as a calendar man. Unfortunately the pay he received wasn't much. Back in those days the highest wage Emil ever earned was \$9.00 a week. And that was for working 10 hours a day, 5½ days a week. But regardless of how much he got paid, he was extremely thankful to have gotten a job at all. As far as Emil was concerned, he was now in the land of opportunity, and he knew he had just taken the first step in bringing his family to their new home.

As the days and weeks slowly passed by, things were gradually beginning to improve for Emil. He was occasionally able to earn a little extra money by working three or four additional hours each day; and by doing so received an extra dollar per week. Now that may not seem like a lot of money to you, but remember, a dollar bought much more back then than it does today.

After about a year and a half of saving as much money as he possibly could, Emil was finally able to send for his wife Aloisia, and their two small children. At the time, Teenie was still a toddler and Ben was just a baby in her arms. Aloisia came to America by steerage. That was the lowest passenger rate her ship offered, and was usually reserved for the poorest, lowest classes of people with the least amount of money. Women traveling alone or with children were segregated, for safety, in a certain section in the hold of the ship.

For Aloisia, accompanied only by two small children, steerage was a total nightmare. The long, tedious journey across the ocean—taking almost 30 days—was a miserable trip, at best. In the night, every so often, a naked man would get into the woman's quarter looking for someone to, "lay with." Aloisia was frightened to death, and spent many

sleepless nights watching and listening. In addition to that, living conditions on the ship were absolutely terrible. Besides the constant fear, the food was bad and the ship's hold stank.

Lofton wrote: *Something Mother told me that I hate to write, however, here goes: I quizzed Mother on why she hated the 'Old Country'. You must remember that Austria was a monarchy and these towns were ruled by (I guess) 'shirt tale [sic] relatives' of the powers that be. Mother told me that any young good looking girl that got married in that town had to spend the first night with the Obermeister; in other words, the ruler of that town. She never said she had to . . . but I wonder.*

For most of us to pick up and move to a foreign land would scare us half to death. But people like the Kuhns, whose dream of living a life of more than just survival, proved that hope is much stronger than fear. Leaving their family and friends was not considered a loss, but an opportunity to begin again, in a new life—a much better life. And that was the driving force behind the family's move to America.

Lofton wrote: *The folks never talked very much about the 'Old Country'. When they came to America they severed all family connections. Mother had a younger sister, Louise. My father had a brother, Anton, who done him out of his inheritance. They never wrote or heard from them . . . they made a clean break.*

Soon after Aloisia arrived, she and Emil purchased a small shabby old home. No, it wasn't much to look at, but at least it

was a place for them to live. Located in Garfield, New Jersey, it was basically just a roof over their heads. In all, it had only three rooms: a bedroom, a kitchen and a living room. And since there was no plumbing or electricity, the living conditions were very primitive by the standards of today.

Over the next six years as Aloisia and Emil added new babies to the family, Ot, Ada and Frank, they also added new rooms onto the house. First they added an upstairs over the existing structure. Then came a “back kitchen.” That’s something that today would probably be the equivalent of what people call a “service porch” . . . it was more or less a catch-all place, or perhaps just a storage area.

The back kitchen had a trap door that led down into the cellar. The portion of the cellar that was located directly under the back kitchen had a cement floor. The rest of the cellar, the larger part, had a dirt floor. At the time the kitchen didn’t even have an “ice box”—refrigerators were not that prevalent yet. Besides, even if they had been, there was no electricity to run one. Those foods that needed to remain cool were kept on the concrete floor of the cellar.

For a toilet—or as it is called today, the bathroom or restroom, all they had was an “out-house.” Or in other words, it was an outdoor toilet. The outhouse had no bathtub, shower or sink; it was just a small wooden building with a wooden bench inside that had a round hole cut in the center.

Lofton wrote: *Outdoor toilet—we had a lovely honey suckle vine on a lattice work in front of it. About once a year we had the hole cleaned out. It was done at night. We called them ‘honey dumpers.’*

As challenging as these living conditions were for them, they were nothing compared to the life Aloisia had to endure as a child, growing up in Austria. Lacking a proper education, she unfortunately could not read or write. This was apparently caused out of fear of a very mean and unsympathetic teacher. At the time in the community where her family lived they had no public schools, only a Catholic school. So, even though they were not of that faith, she had to attend the Catholic school. The schoolmaster was extremely cruel; his punishment for a child who did not know the lesson was to make her kneel on hard chicken corn for half an hour. Consequently, Aloisia's education suffered because of the harsh treatment meted out to the hapless students, and to her in particular. But as it was with many of the children of that era, her childhood was a very brief one anyway. To help her parents pay for food and shelter she had to leave school and go to work very young as a *domestic*, a household servant.

Despite her limited education, Aloisia was a very smart and an extremely hard-working woman. In only a short time after her arrival to this country she discovered what a perfect fit it really was. Not only was it everything she and Emil had heard it would be, it was even more than she could have ever imagined, a place where you could work as hard as you wanted to, and then actually be able to enjoy the riches you earned. From the first day Aloisia landed in this country she was proud to be an American—and she raised her children with the same patriotism and beliefs that were so deeply imbedded within her.

Lofton wrote: *Mother had a great, great love for this country . . . To be able to own your own home; worship*

wherever you pleased; have your children attend school and go as high as their ambitions led them . . . That could only happen in America. She always said, 'America at its worst was far better than any other country at its best.'

When her children were small Aloisia would take in washing to earn extra money. For a long time, she did most of the washings at home, using a hand pump to draw the water from the ground and then heating it on the kitchen stove, which burned pea coal (there was, remember, no electricity). She would use a rubbing board to scrub the laundry clean and a hand wringer to squeeze the water out before drying it on a clothesline.

Lofton wrote: Back before in-door plumbing, electricity or sewer or gas, we saved rain water in barrels for washing clothes.

There used to be a community well on Monroe Street. After someone dropped a dead cat in it the folks dug their own well. You did not have to dig deep to hit water—less than ten feet.

Ironing was done with a flat iron heated on the kitchen stove. Aloisia received fifty cents for each washing job she did. Occasionally, after the children were a little older, she was actually able to do some of the washings in her customers' homes. She enjoyed that! Doing so provided her with a much-needed break from the everyday activities at home and gave her a sense of freedom.

Lofton wrote: Mother would have a baby and in three

days' time she'd be at the wash tub washing somebody's dirty clothes. She had a midwife deliver all the babies except me. She had Doc Davenport deliver me!

Mother was a very sensitive person. When my father came home from work he would ask the midwife how 'she' was . . . never ask Mother how she felt. That stuck in my mother's craw the rest of her life.

Sadly, not all of the Kuhn children survived birth. Emil and Aloisia were devastated when they had a set of twins that were stillborn. Though the death rate for newborn babies was quite high at the time, still, it was very difficult for Aloisia to cope with such a loss. Since this happened before they obtained a family burial plot, they had the twins buried together in the same grave, at a place called Pottersfield.

Some years later, Otto wanted to have the twins disinterred and reburied in the newly purchased family plot. He felt by doing so the entire family would be joined together as one someday. Unfortunately he never got around to it, and still today the two tiny babes remain in the original grave.

During their years in America, Lofton's parents lived through two horrible "financial panics"; they didn't call them depressions or recessions back then, they called them panics. The first was in 1894 and the second in 1907. During both of these events many factories closed and work and money were scarce. Luckily for them the family always raised a garden that produced abundantly, so they had plenty to eat.

Lofton wrote: *In the old days—no welfare. You helped yourself!*

A big help during the second panic was the free seeds they received through a local Congressman. All they had to do to get them was go to the post office and pick a packet up from the postmaster. After that it was just a matter of taking them home to plant. Sometimes they had no idea what they were even planting—but in tough times you take what you can get and then make the best of it.

Lofton wrote: Mother told me they raised these 'big orange colored things.' Mother did not know what they were . . . they were pumpkins. They took a big express wagon load of them to a butcher and received three pounds of pork chops in exchange. At that time pork chops were three pounds for twenty-five cents.

In her journal Lofton mentioned the Kuhn family Bible. She said she remembered it was very old-looking and badly worn. But the wear was not entirely from being read. It was from Aloisia and Emil storing their money inside of it. It was divided into sections. One section was where they kept their savings for paying weekly bills and taxes. And another was for money being reserved for emergencies. Lofton said during a panic her mother would save what they called “gold bucks,” more commonly known as “gold certificates.” She said, at the time, these were the only currency that was considered of any value and acceptable to merchants. And since “greenbacks” had no money behind them they weren’t worth a thing!

Lofton wrote: A story mother told me . . . when Teenie was a slip of a girl she used to help Mother with the house work. One day Teenie was sweeping the living room, which

also served as our dining room, and Teenie was beating the hell out of the footstool. Mother asked her why she did that. Teenie said 'well, I've seen you do it!' Mother said she felt so ashamed of herself, and said she guessed she did it out of frustration when things got tough . . . poor dear.

Mother was very thrifty . . . An excellent cook . . . She served well balanced meals. She was full of wise sayings. To quote a few:

'Save for a rainy day.'

'If you want to have friends never discuss religion or politics.'

'When the rich make money then there is work for the poor.'

'It is far better to pay the butcher and grocer than the doctor.'

'Work never killed anyone . . . no one ever gave it a chance.'

'Waste not want not.'

'Save – Save – Save.'

The people for whom Aloisia did wash often gave her old clothes that they no longer needed. Sometimes they constituted payment, sometimes they were a gift. Aloisia always put them to the best use possible. If a size didn't fit any of her family members she would cut and sew it until it did. Not only was this a great way to help save money, it also kept the children dressed.

Lofton wrote: *I recall mother telling me about doing the washings for some school teachers, and there were these little 'square things'. She did not know what they were, so she starched them real stiff. It turned out they were ladies' handkerchiefs . . . we laughed about it.*