

Robert Lee Hassler, son of Thomas Henry Benton and Mary Hassler (12-7-1867- 2-21-1855) was born in Randolph Co., Illinois, but moved to Butler Co., Mo. when about 3 years of age.

Married Frances L. Barker b. 9-28-1878, on June 6, 1897. The Barker home was in Green County, Illinois. (George and Catherine Barker) Issue: 1. Karl Marx b. 12-25-1878 m. Dorothy Knight 2-24-27. Issue: Robert Knight Hassler b. 4-23-1928; 2. Damon Barker b.2-15-1903, m. Mary Belle Crowder; 3. Gerald Limbaugh b. 10-24- 1905, m. Mildred Esther Mathias on 8-30-1930. Live in Brentwood, Calif. Issue: 1. Frances Jane b. 10-27-39; 2. John Mathias b. 2- 9-42; 3. Julia Ellen b.2-9-42 (twins); 4. James. 4. Helen Frances b. 8-27-1909, m. John Forst b. 1905 in St. Louis on 3- 15-40. Live in Fresno, Calif. Issue; John Barker .6-24-41. 5. Joe Mitchell b. 1-5-1913 m. No Issue. Lives in Los Angeles. Robert and Frances moved to St. Louis, Mo. in Nov. 1900 and reared their family there, living for many years at 4162 Washington Blvd.

Robert was a Railway Postal Clerk for the U.S. Post Office apartment from November 1900 until his retirement 7-10-1932. His schedules of work were such that he had every other week off at home. He studied medicine at a small St. Louis "College of Physicians and Surgeons" (now extinct) and in 1911 received his M.D. degree. He passed the State Board examination in 1912 but never did practice medicine professionally.

Robert's adult height was 5'7" and weight about 160 pounds. He had dark hair and grey eyes. According to Jasper he was bookish and of a generally retiring disposition. He had a strong sense of duty and was hot tempered. He was a meticulous penman and a constant student of a variety of subjects, especially horticulture in later years. He was radical in social theory, agnostic in religion, a Socialist until about 1915, then a Democrat. His health was always excellent, but his eyesight failed in later years after they moved to Altadena, Calif. in 1940 to live at 280 W. Terrace. He died from heart failure at 87 years of age. Frances continued to live in the home.

June 26, 1992

(letter from Jane Hassler Hill, his granddaughter)

To all the Hasslers and families,

As most of you know, after Papa died we found an elegant ivory plastic jewelry box in his left bottom desk drawer that turned out to contain journals kept by his father, Robert Lee Hassler, in five stenographic notebooks. As promised, I have now typed these up.

They are quite remarkable. First, the time covered is long, from January 1, 1889 (when R. L. was 21 years old) to December 19, 1897. During this period there are only a few weeks missing. Second, the record is fairly detailed on many points. Mostly, these are not thoughtful and introspective diaries (although occasionally despair or hope are evident). Instead, they record many day-to-day activities—visiting friends and relatives, teaching school, working on farms, clerking in stores, travelling, courting young ladies, buying books, getting haircuts, repairing shoes, chasing horses and cattle, etc.

From the journals one can get quite a detailed picture of life in the end of the last century, before television and unemployment compensation. The absence of the former is vividly apparent in the rich social life that R. L. Hassler documents, including much visiting, debating societies, Sunday School classes, box suppers, fish fries, walks, and the like. The diary is dramatic evidence that while television has certainly broadened our horizons, it has made life in some ways very shallow. The absence of the latter is obvious from the fact that R. L. Hassler is working very hard virtually every day. The "Nineties" were a rough period in U.S. economic history. Great fortunes were being made (early in the diary R. L. dreams of a job with "Jay" Gould's railway), but ordinary people barely scraped by. R. L.'s employment career is very opportunistic—he does almost everything you can think of in order to stay alive.

R.L.'s career is as a "country schoolteacher," and you should find the diary very revealing on this life—the low pay, the constant struggle to find a new post every few months in competition with other desperate young people (schools were short—4-7 months), "moonlighting" as a farm laborer or clerk when school jobs were not available, the necessity to move around constantly and be far from home. After his marriage R. L. had to take a teaching job that was a three-hour walk from the new home that he shared with his "Angel sweetheart" in East Poplar Bluff, and exhausted himself going back and forth—until the schoolhouse burned down! You'll also notice that the students were not exactly rocket scientists. R. L. thrashed naughty scholars regularly, and attendance was dreadful. R. L. will note that "40 scholars" are enrolled—yet some days, on Fridays, Mondays, in bad weather, or when there is something more interesting going on—less than 10 are in attendance. On a few days R. L. records only one student! Yet schoolmasters had one great advantage: the five-day work week with short days. You'll notice that as a farm laborer or clerk R. L. was working six days a week, and sometimes seven, from early in the morning until evening. Schoolmasters also seemed to enjoy a rich social life in their communities which might have made up for the occasional unpleasant boarding situation, for obnoxious farm kids, or for days when the local School Board's "warrant" (R. L.'s pay check) bounced at the bank.

The economic details in the diary are quite interesting. A visit to a doctor cost a dollar. Shoes could be repaired for \$1.25. A school teacher bargained for \$50.00 a month, but was lucky to get \$35.00. Board and breakfast in a boarding house cost 50 cents. Robert's and Fanny's first small house in Poplar Bluff cost \$465.00. Among the more entertaining economic records is that of R. L.'s visit to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893—he took in the whole thing for \$29.50, including the round-trip train fare from Poplar Bluff in Southeastern Missouri.

Also entertaining is the politics. We don't learn much about the substance of the issues (you'll have to look them up in the history books), but R. L. was an early activist in the Populist Party and even ran one of their newspapers for a few weeks. He seems to have run for some Populist office (perhaps electoral delegate? The critical pages are among the few that are missing), and the details of his canvassing in the tiny towns around Poplar Bluff for votes are interesting. He is very distressed when McKinley is elected President!

Most of the diary takes place in small communities around Poplar Bluff, Mo. R. L. also works for a while in 1889-90 in western Missouri near "Hughesville" (near Sedalia). You will need a very good map to find even the largest towns that he

frequented. This reminds us of an era when most of American life was quite rural. Getting around was accomplished by foot, horse (and buggy), and by what apparently was an excellent network of railroads. R. L. hardly ever owns a horse, and usually is borrowing from friends, or hiring (50c per day) from livery stables. Cold, mud, and high water were more of a problem for travellers than they are now and R. L. documents weather more minutely than we might today.

One of the things you'll notice in the diaries is a lot of illness. R. L. suffers from malaria which recurs from time to time. Early in their marriage Fanny Barker Hassler is extremely sick and R. L. must quit his job to nurse her. They must have been very frightened because one of her brothers, Orven, had died of an illness only a few months before.

For those of us who have only a vague notion of how R. L. Hassler's family functioned, the diary is very enlightening. I wished so much that Papa had been around to help with explaining the details. Perhaps Mother or Julia will remember and be able to provide us with a "Who's Who". Anyway, apparently R. L. was not seriously estranged from his father's second family, as I for some reason thought was the case. Many letters and visits go back and forth from R. L. to his half-siblings "Jap" (Jasper Hassler) and Nell, and Joe Gardner (stepbrother?) is a frequent correspondent and companion. R. L. is a regular visitor at "Mother's" (his stepmother). I would like very much to know who "Thulie" was. A half-sister? Cousin? He doesn't live with this family (after all, he is a full-grown man), but is apparently always a welcome guest at their home. You'll also find brief notes about the Barker family: Orven, who died, and Fanny Barker's brothers Clyde and Henry, and of course "Mama Barker" and "Father Barker."

There is a great deal of R. L. in these: His extraordinary thirst for knowledge, which is what I remember most about him, is obvious throughout. He is a compulsive reader and student of diverse subjects. Of course some of this is necessary if he is to succeed as a teacher, but I think you'll be impressed at how much he reads, from bestsellers (he borrows "Ben Hur" from a friend!) to mathematics to law to long-forgotten disciplines like "phrenology." Bits of German appear from time to time, and the occasional (and, frustratingly, at the end, dominant) shorthand! R. L. was very fond of small technicalities. On the computer it was too tedious to mark this every time, but when R. L. abbreviates "night" as "nit", the actual orthography is nt. "Hughesville" shows up as "hsvl". In the early volumes R. L. is very interested in calligraphy and his hand is exquisite copperplate, with month names illuminated with plumes and scrolls—later on the handwriting becomes more serviceable and occasionally even hasty. He uses many abbreviations which may take a bit of getting used to, but are easy if you type up the whole thing—common, for instance, is "Do." for "ditto," or P.B. for "Poplar Bluff," or F.B. for "Fanny Barker." The Barker family lived at "Vinegar Hill" and references to "V.H." or "V. Hill" mean visits to Fanny or her folks. Every now and then he tries out a bit of unusually elegant vocabulary (often apparently tongue-in-cheek).

Two significant dates you might want to look for, since they are how we all got started: May 3, 1894: R. L. is "Introduced to Miss Barker." (Don't be led astray by earlier "Fanny's" that are mentioned—he even meets a "Fanny B." in the Hughesville era who apparently is no relation to Grandmother Hassler). On June 16, 1897, Frances Barker and R. L. Hassler are married, at 9:20 in the evening after he comes home from a long day clerking at Cohn & Pelz's store. During this three-year courtship they saw each other

several times a week whenever they could—at least once a week even when visits required heroic efforts like getting up at 3 A.M. to catch trains, or riding through swamps. They were definitely very much in love.

I hope everyone appreciates these diaries as much as I do. I especially hope that R. L. Hassler's great-grandchildren enjoy browsing in these. One motivation for dipping into them is that there is excellent school paper material here. I guarantee an "A" in American History if this resource is properly used! And it is very good to be reminded that this recent ancestor of ours was an ordinary small-town boy—perhaps more intellectual than most—who worked very, very hard. Our roots are certainly not in the big house on the hill.

What should we do with the originals? I recommend archiving them professionally, probably at the Missouri State Historical Society. The reason is that the paper is fragile and the ink is fading—the notebooks really should be in a controlled temperature/humidity environment. I think I can promise that none of you would be able to read the journals better than I could from the original. I have copied the originals exactly as they appear on the page (with some typos, unfortunately, which I am sure have not all been caught—because of the many abbreviations this material is almost impossible to "Spell-check"), with notes where the original had unusual features.