

## The Box in the Farmhouse Attic By Virginia Pavay Wignall

*Editor's Note: Virginia and Robert Wignall live in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Their roots and memories, however, remain in Walworth, as evidenced by this story.*

Not far from Lake Ontario, atop one of western New York's many glacial drumlins, sits the tranquil village of Walworth. It was here my father-in-law Uncle George Wignall, grew fruit and root crops for some 60 years. George and Carrie married in 1897. In a few years, they acquired 120 acres adjoining the village and built their life-time residence. This beautiful Victorian structure was far removed from what one would normally classify as a typical farmhouse. It had large front and back porches, and a side porte-cochere for carriage arrivals. The interior was spacious, even by 1906 standards; thirteen rooms adorned with varying kinds of wood trim, natural oak front stairway, stained glass, gas lighting, and central vacuuming system. On the third floor was a 1500 square foot attic, reached by a rear stairway from the kitchen. The farm itself, comprising acres of orchards, woodlands, and open fields, contained an enormous rambling barn, carriage and equipment shed, dry house for apples, maple syrup plant, chicken coops, and homes for up to five tenant families.

This is where my story begins, with my father-in-law (young Rob) as a lad of twelve years. In 1906 his father was dying from TB. His mother, unable to cope with a sick husband and two children, sent Rob to live with George and Carrie in their spacious new home, as they had no children of their own. Rob assumed his visit temporary, never imagining it would evolve into a life-time stay. Instead, he would mature, marry, raise two children, and eventually die there in 1981 at the age of 87. Rob quickly adjusted to the routine of farm life. After college years at Cornell, he returned to share with George and Carrie the full responsibility for running the business. He never chose to be a farmer, but felt obligated to them for their generosity in raising and educating him. In 1920 he married Bertha and they moved into a newly-built home on the farm, a wedding gift from his aunt and uncle. As the family grew, the children would daily run between the two adjacent houses. The farm provided endless opportunities to explore. On rainy or wintry days, the attic of the big house was where they could usually be found.

What a glorious place it was – lighted by windows on all four sides, with lace curtains adding a touch of elegance. Here a child's imagination could literally run wild, allowing hours of uninterrupted pleasure. The attic was amply filled with everything imaginable: furniture, lamps, china, glassware, pictures and paintings, pottery, antique tools, and implements, equipment for making cheese and cider, spinning and yarn-winding wheels, clocks, trunks, old guns, antique toys and games, costumes, books, musical instruments, old letters and postcards, scrapbooks, picture albums, stereopticons, quilting frames, fabrics, advertising tins – a veritable antique shop! There was also a magnificent walk-in closet preserving all manner of vintage clothes – hoop skirts, wedding dresses, suits, coats, bathing suits, ladies' and gentlemen's hats, gloves and walking sticks, as well as quilts, handmade blankets, and linens. Had nothing ever been thrown away?

We were married in 1960. By then, George and Carrie were gone and my in-laws had moved to the big house. Their own treasured items had been added to the collection of family memorabilia in the attic. As our children grew, we often traveled from Maryland to Walworth. The highlight was always a trip to the attic. Each exploration unearthed new treasures and we felt surrounded by family history and memories. Returning home, our car was always full – children, luggage, fresh produce, and at least one grape pie – a Finger Lakes specialty. Yet we always managed to leave a little trunk space for a few treasures from the attic. Over the years we accumulated a large collection. Rob eventually retired and sold the farm property and the big house. They still took most of the attic contents to their smaller home. Our kids became teenagers, but continued their trips to the new attic.

Shortly after this move I uncovered THE BOX. Among all the far more valuable attic collectibles, I realized this was something very special, for it contained a window into the story I have told. King Melchior in the Menotti opera, "Amahl and the Night Visitors," also had a box. He sang, "This is my box, this is my box; I never travel without my box." One could visualize a handsome creation of rare woods encrusted with jewels, a priceless gift for the Christ Child. In contrast, our box is small and quite ordinary: constructed of solid oak with a simple brass latch and carrying handle. Two tiny hinges read: "WIZARD – L. E. Grammes & Sons, Allentown, PA." The lid's interior is papered with a colorful advertisement which reads "Lakeview Seed Co., Rochester, NY."

Inside this box was a folded letter, dated March 1907, which 12-year old Rob wrote from the farm to his mother and sister in the city – just a few months before his father succumbed to TB. He tells of his intention to sell "horseradish and seeds" (from this very box) to save money for a typewriter. He asks them to locate his prized collection of marbles. His life and future had forever changed! Though never formally adopted by George and Carrie, Rob's devotion and loyalty to this loving couple resulted in his inheritance of the farm and all their possessions, including the history-filled attic. He gave the box to me and we keep memories alive by prominently displaying it, along with the letter and a small arrangement of pretty dried flowers. We hope it will remain with our children and grandchildren for generations to come – the curious little box from the farmhouse attic!