



Fueled by Obsession

BALANCING THE ROLES OF FATHER AND HISTORIAN

by William Deverell

AT HOME ONE AFTERNOON, I ASKED MY eight-year-old daughter to cut out a large circle, paper-doll style, and she obliged. It's the kind of art project she likes to do. When Helen held up her craftwork, I caught my breath. At 14 inches in diameter, the circle was the size of the mouth of the well that Kathy Fiscus fell into 60 years ago. It's one thing to know the dimensions; it's something else entirely to see them before your eyes.

Perhaps you know the story. Late one spring afternoon in 1949, three-year-old Kathy was playing with her sister and two cousins in the field adjacent to her family's home in San Marino. All of a sudden, the older children noticed that Kathy had disappeared. They quickly realized that she had tumbled down an old well that lay hidden in the weeds.

Over the next 48 hours that well and that beautiful little girl in a pink dress would become known across the nation and the world.

I'm obsessed with the Kathy Fiscus story. On more than one occasion, I've strapped my son John onto the back of my bicycle and ridden over to San Marino High School. It's there, beneath the western end of the football field, where the well once snaked down hundreds of feet into the earth. When I drive my car along the backstreets of San Marino north of Huntington Drive—Robles, Santa Anita, Winston—I think of Kathy Fiscus. When I look at my children, I think of Kathy Fiscus.

Obsession works to the historian's advantage. It fuels research. A few years ago I started exploring the story, poring over newspaper clippings, land deeds, and irrigation maps

that showed wells peppered all over the San Gabriel Valley. I visited water companies, and I talked to people who knew a great deal about wells. I found out that a work crew employed by Henry Huntington's Land and Improvement Co. dug the ill-fated well way back in 1904, probably to draw water out of the robust Raymond Aquifer to water nearby citrus trees. The well, and the land it watered, were later sold. The well eventually fell into disuse, and a wooden cap was placed atop it. But that cap had been knocked loose by a plow or a mower not long before Kathy's terrifying plunge on April 8, 1949.

Mere facts seem woefully inadequate when woven with the compelling narrative of the event. When rescuers arrived at the scene, Kathy's faint cries could be heard deep in the well. Her mother and her aunt called down to her. "Can you hear me, Kathy?" "Are you standing up, Kathy?" "Are you lying down, Kathy?"

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Rescuers determined that Kathy had fallen 90 feet. Given that tiny opening at the well's mouth, getting her out was going to be extraordinarily difficult. Rescue efforts proceeded along two paths: one laborious, the other more or less just strange. While machinery and men dug two possible rescue holes adjacent to the well, experts proposed, contemplated, and abandoned other strategies. Maybe a giant suction device could pull her up. Maybe the well could slowly be filled with water—or sand—and Kathy would somehow magically float to the surface. Or perhaps a dwarf, a jockey from Santa Anita, or a circus thin man could be lowered head first in order to reach Kathy nine stories below.

Those schemes weren't going to work. Nor was Kathy able to loop around herself the slip-knotted ropes lowered down to her. She would have to be dug out from where she was trapped. For 48 hours, well over a hundred men, almost all of them volunteers who had shown up at the site want-

ing to help, labored alongside heavy machinery in the feverish rescue attempt. Fireman uncoiled an air hose down the well in hopes of supplying Kathy with oxygen. Water seeped again and again into the rescue shafts and had to be pumped out. The shafts threatened to cave in more than once, as workers fought against big boulders and the sandy, wet soil of San Marino. Hundreds, and probably thousands, of people streamed to the site, some just because they were curious,

Kathy Fiscus with her older sister, Barbara, in a family photograph the year before her death. The rescue scene (opposite) on April 9, 1949, the day after Kathy fell into a well in San Marino. Both photos courtesy of Rick Castberg.



others to keep silent vigil as the work continued. Television—newfangled and just starting to exercise a hold on popular imagination—caught most of the drama, as two local TV stations more or less invented remote live broadcasting right there adjacent to the well.

In the end, it was all for naught. When rescuers finally tunneled their way over to the well and cut a window into it, Kathy was dead. She probably died not long after falling in. Some claimed that she had drowned, but the official cause of death was suffocation: wedged into the tight well casing, she'd simply lost consciousness and died. Deep down in the rescue shaft, one of the rescue workers dressed Kathy in a romper suit “onesie” and wrapped her body in a blanket for the slow ascent to the top.

I know it's the father in me that explains part of my obsession with this unbearably sad event. I've known about Kathy Fiscus for a long time; you can't study California history without eventually encountering the event. But it wasn't until several years ago, when Helen was three and I figured out how close the well was to our house—and to The Huntington—that the drama began to exert its powerful hold on me.

To be sure, my obsession is also scholarly. My training taught me that there's much to learn from events of disaster or tragedy. Societies, communities, and families alike are peeled back by stress, and scholars can see human behavior and motives laid more bare than usual. Why, I wonder, in

The empty swing in the Fiscus yard, photographed by Leigh Wiener, 1949. Courtesy of Devik Wiener.



the face of other equally tragic events, did this episode grab hold of the local, regional, national, and even international imagination? What can the Kathy Fiscus story tell us about Southern California—or the San Gabriel Valley or San Marino—in the immediate postwar era? What can I learn about the event by painstakingly piecing together its details, chronology, and the intricacies of the many lives and personalities involved?

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In my attempt to answer these questions I have also grappled with the age-old question all historians must confront: When do you let go of the research and get down to the business of writing? Now several years into it, my research has extended to oral interviews. I recently sat down with the son of the late photographer Leigh Wiener, the man who, as an 18-year-old, shot what I think is the most indelible image of the era: Kathy's empty swing hanging from a tree in the Fiscus yard. A few months back I met with one of the rescue workers; Clyde Harp helped me interpret the event from his own participation in it. It was Clyde who cut into the pipe that had trapped Kathy. And scholar Rick Castberg, a political science professor at the University of Hawaii, a man perhaps as obsessed with the event as I am, sent me his research notes, tapes of oral interviews, and additional photographs from the scene; his generosity and collegiality seem to be his way of passing his obsession on to me. I've also given talks on the Fiscus event to a few scholarly or other groups.

Not long ago, a close friend asked about my fixation on Kathy Fiscus. I tried to explain that this was a passing interest, and he'd have nothing of it. “You're going to have to write a book about it,” he told me.

He probably is right. Maybe this obsession becomes a book. But that's likely to close one chapter, and only one chapter, of the hold this event has on me. Book or not, I doubt I'll ever shake it. ☺

William Deverell is professor of history, University of Southern California, and director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. In March, he delivered the 2009 Haynes Foundation Lecture at The Huntington: “Little Girl Lost: The Kathy Fiscus Tragedy.” Visit www.huntington.org and enter the keyword “Fiscus” to listen to a podcast of the talk.