Assembling an individual

An unknown woman is the center of many genealogical tales of intrigue and discovery, including this one.

Our unknown woman first surfaced in public records when Thornton Melville Fincher declared that he had an (unnamed) wife and child in his 1917 WWI draft registration. A 1914 Atlanta Constitution birth notice announced the birth of a son, T. Melville Fincher Jr., to Mr. and Mrs. T. Melville Fincher.2

Thornton appears in the 1930 federal census in Atlanta, married to Maude with three children, including Harold Fincher, age 15, born in Georgia.3 The other two children, surname Jacobs, are named stepchildren of Thornton, suggesting the possibility that Maude is their mother and not the mother of Harold. In addition, the reported age at first marriage for Thornton is 24 (1911) and for Maude is 21 (1909), indicating that they were not first married to each other.

A search of The Atlanta Constitution revealed a notice of a marriage on 18 March 1930, for Thornton M. Fincher and Maude K. Jacobs.4 Our unknown woman either died or divorced Thornton before this.5

Eventually, Thornton, Maude, and Harold moved to Florida.6 In December 1940, The Atlanta Constitution contained an announcement of the engagement of Harrell Melville Fincher7 to Margaret Langdon Phillipoff.8 The Evening Independent mentioned that “the groom-elect is the son of Thornton M. Fincher, of Coral Gables, Florida, and Mrs. Robert J. Waller, of Lakeland, Florida.”9 Ah, ha! Thornton’s first wife did not die, but married Robert J. Waller. Still, we don’t know either the given or maiden names for our unknown woman.

We searched census records to find Waller. In 1930, he was living with his wife, Thelma, age 32, and their son, Robert Jr.10 In 1920, Waller is listed as the 23-year-old son-in-law of M. D. and M. C. Harrell, with their daughter 22-year-old Thelma Waller, and M. H. Fincher, grandson, age 5, born in Georgia.11 In 1910, Thelma was 16 years old, living with her parents, Marcus and Missouri Harrell.12 The 1900 census showed 4-year-old Thelma, born in August 1895, with her parents, Marcus and Missouri.13

Whoa! A sharp reader will recognize that we have found the name of the unknown woman. A sharp researcher will also realize that independent confirmation would be even better.

It appears Harrell Melville Fincher of 1940, Harold Fincher of 1930, M. H. Fincher of 1920, and T. Melville Fincher Jr. of 1914 are all the same person. We know T. Melville Fincher’s birth date from his newspaper birth announcement, so it is no surprise that the 21 October 1977 death record for Harrell Fincher agrees with that date.14

In the 1935 Florida state census, R. J. Waller and Thelma were the managers of the Lakeland Terrace Hotel and had two children, Robert and Harold. Robert was 15 years old (born about 1920 in Georgia), while Harold was 19 and born in Alabama.15 Harold was about the right age to be Harrell Fincher.

The 1945 Florida state census did not include Thelma. It did include Robert J. Waller Jr., the son of R. J. and Thelma, married to Ethel Ward Waller, with two children: Robert J. III and James Harrell.16 Note the name Harrell.

Thelma died in 1945 in Polk County, Florida.17 Her obituary in The Lakeland Ledger states that she came from Jacksonville thirteen years before her death, she was 48 years old, and named her two sons: Robert Waller Jr. and Harrell Fincher.18 Her brother, Frank Harrell, is also named. That clinches it!

Post script: Just to be sure, I searched for relevant evidence just one more time. I found
an article describing the marriage of Thornton Fincher and Thelma Harrell. Using my normal search engine, this article is invisible but it was found quickly using a different engine. I had two choices, not publish this account or use this incident to teach a fundamental principle of electronic searching—make sure you have all of the evidence.

Notes


3. 1930 U.S. census, Fulton County, Georgia, population schedule, Atlanta, p. 257B, enumeration district (ED) 61-167, sheet 15B, dwelling 247, family 381, Thornton M. Fincher; NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 357.


5. No death certificate or divorce case prior to 1930 has yet been found.


7. There are four public family trees found on Ancestry.com containing the name of Harrell Melville Fincher, all seemingly identical to each other in his portion of the tree, with three creators and no documentation of any kind. Compare the information in this work with that found in those trees (search Harrell Melville Fincher).


10. 1930 U.S. census, Duval County, Florida, population schedule, Jacksonville, p. 244A, ED 16-72, sheet 4A, dwelling 90, family 94, Robert J. Waller; NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 314.

11. 1920 U.S. census, Talladega County, Alabama, population schedule, Talladega, p. 155B/156A, ED 139, sheet 4B/5A, dwelling 75, family 90, M. D. Harrell; NARA microfilm publication T625, roll 41.


18. “Mrs. Thelma Waller Dies Suddenly,” The Lakeland Ledger, 24 October 1945, p. 6, col. 3.


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