

The Merchant *of* VENUS

The Life of
Walter Thornton

“When the fierce, burning winds blow over our lives—and we cannot prevent them—let us, too, accept the inevitable. And then get busy and pick up the pieces.”

Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, 1937



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Dedication

This book is a tribute to our father Walter Clarence Thornton, who secured a publishing contract for his autobiography titled “The Merchant of Venus” in 1955. Regrettably, if he did create a manuscript it remains undiscovered, a piece of history lost to time.

Additionally, we extend this dedication to our beloved mother Candelaria Thornton, whose love and care for our father endured until his last day.

Author's Note

This book is a collaboration between two daughters of Walter Thornton, a man cherished deeply by his seven children, just as he cherished them. Mr. Thornton was an exceptional individual—a combination of kindness and humor, a larger-than-life presence.

This book primarily focuses on his life before the authors were born. It presents a factual account built upon a wealth of resources, including a substantial collection of documents, photos, newspapers, magazines, books, and insightful interviews. The authors spent years meticulously researching and compiling these materials to create an accurate and thorough account of their father's life, drawing from a variety of sources with the assistance of historians and research librarians from the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library and many others from around the country.

As this is the first story of Walter Thornton's earlier life, the authors consciously chose not to overwhelm the narrative with constant citations. Instead, they have provided a carefully chosen bibliography and mention sources as the story unfolds. If you're curious to learn more about this remarkable individual or the captivating story, please feel free to contact them. Your interest is greatly appreciated.

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Roberta Thornton: To our beloved sister, who has stood by our side throughout this long journey of discovery. Thank you for always being there to listen to our frustrations, complaints, and celebrations, and for offering your help whenever we need you. We are forever grateful.

Begin Again

Nancy

We understand it's highly unusual for a man born in 1903 to have six adult children—and a widow—*all still living* as of 2024, but such is the case with our family. Our parents, Walter and Candelaria, met in Guadalajara, Mexico in 1958, when she answered a “help wanted” ad, in which he was seeking a secretary who spoke fluent English.

Our dad, Walter Thornton, was a businessman from the United States. He owned charm schools in several locations across the U.S. and Canada, and he had just moved to Guadalajara with intentions of opening his next location there. Charm schools (sometimes called finishing schools, where girls and young women were instructed in the social graces) were very big in North America and Europe in the 20th century.

Candelaria was exactly the no-nonsense kind of assistant he needed to keep him grounded. And he definitely needed grounding because a couple of things were happening that he had never counted on. The first was that the local ordinances and red tape were making the opening of his school a much slower process than an adventurous guy like my dad had bargained for. And secondly, although she was only twenty-one years old when they met and he was fifty-five, their relationship had taken the unexpected turn from business to personal and they had fallen in love.

Walter in many ways was like an impetuous kid to begin with and now with these new impediments to his business, he was losing the

excitement for the new school. It occurred to him that his businesses up north were very steady and in great shape. They brought in all the money he needed to live a comfortable life. Each location had a solid management team and all that was required of him were periodic visits to each location.

He had been working hard ever since he was a preteen. Why was he wasting time trying to open another school when all he really wanted was to spend time with his new love? And so, just like that, he scrapped his plan for the school in Mexico, they were married in 1960, and Walter became a 'remote worker' long before it was common.

There then followed a progression of little Thorntons, each of us spaced almost exactly two years apart, over a twelve-year span. Our father chose our names, which were largely the first and middle names of his several siblings and parents—and himself: Walter, Jr., Roberta Virginia, Adriana Anabel, Nancy Louella, Richard Orlando and Ethel Ivette (who goes by her middle name). We were a somewhat insular, self-contained family unit. We all had friends and playmates, of course, but we relied heavily upon each other for fun and adventure.

Our beautiful mother, Candelaria, glows when she speaks about her husband, Walter. Theirs was a happy life together, for over thirty years, until he passed away in 1990. They were in love and completely involved with the living of their exciting lives in the present. The only glimpse we ever had into our father's world before us was his 'Movie Star Picture'. Well, that's what we always jokingly called it.

It was a photo from the 1920s that had been color retouched and has our dad, in profile, looking very dashing in a derby hat and a walking cane. It always sat on my mother's nightstand. Papi (as we all usually called him) dismissed it whenever we wanted to know the story behind it: "*Oh, I was just posing when this photo was taken*" with no further explanation. We all posed for photos, so we didn't ask more about it. Since we never pried further when it came to questions like this, what we eventually uncovered about Walter Thornton came as brand-new discoveries to all seven of us.



Above: Walter's movie star photo (believed to be from 1928/29)

So, how did our Ohio-born dad end up in Ajijic, Mexico, where we six Thornton kids were born and raised? Well, it was a full fourteen years after our father's passing when we were propelled to finally search for the answer to that question after a surreal, 2004 encounter with a mysterious photograph of him from 1929. What we thought would be a cursory records search has turned into a nearly two-decade journey

down a phantasmagorical rabbit hole that would rival any Hollywood movie...shot in beautiful black and white.



Old Ajijic [pronounced ah-*hee-heek*] was a kids' paradise when we were young. Picturesque mountains, canyons, Lake Chapala and the abandoned gold mines in the mountains above Ajijic, all just waiting for us to explore. There were endless opportunities for six curious little mischief-makers. A lot of our time was spent helping our parents build our castle. Yes, you read that right, *our castle*. We regularly piled into the pristine 1956, baby-blue Cadillac Coupe de Ville (our dad's pride and joy), taking trips into Guadalajara to visit its many tile factories.

The owners of the factories knew Dad by name, and vice versa. It seems likely he was one of their best, most frequent customers. He would become spellbound as he studied row after row of the beautiful, hand-painted little artworks that he would use to adorn his house, top to bottom, inside and out. It became known as his *Casa de los Azulejos* (The Tile House).

But some older, long-time residents of Ajijic still refer to it as "The Arabian Circus House," after our dad memorably invited, and hosted, a traveling circus—with multiple live elephants—to perform in our front courtyard in the early 1970s, free to all local residents. He had a standard reply when asked why he decided to cover everything in tile: "*I hate to paint.*"

Our father did base our house upon an actual blueprint by a professional architect. But the traditional, Mexican-style *casa grande* shown in the original blueprints looks absolutely nothing like the Islamic onion-domed *palacio* that our father's imagination transformed it into. He always said it was "*your mother's house. I'm building it for her.*" It was his legacy of love to the woman with whom he had found such long-sought-after happiness.



Above: Candelaria at Casa de los Azulejos April 7, 2023

I'm sure you can imagine, with a house that looked like ours, it was not uncommon for us to have perfect strangers appearing at our door, asking if they could enter the gates and have a look around, like it was a museum or a park or something. And strange as it might seem to anyone who didn't know him, I don't recall our father ever declining such a request, or saying, "Sorry, *we're busy*." He always enjoyed giving these unannounced, guided tours. Our mother was always gracious to these drop-ins too, though with her constantly busy household, we imagine

she probably would have preferred they enjoy the view of her house from the street.

Even though our dad was thirty-four years older than our mom, we really never noticed the vast age gap between them. His youthful energy was so infectious that we thought of him as ageless. And we thought of them as contemporaries to one another. Our mother is the first to admit that she never really asked him for information about his life before he met her. I remember one time about fifteen years ago pressing her for why this was the case. She answered me without mincing any words.

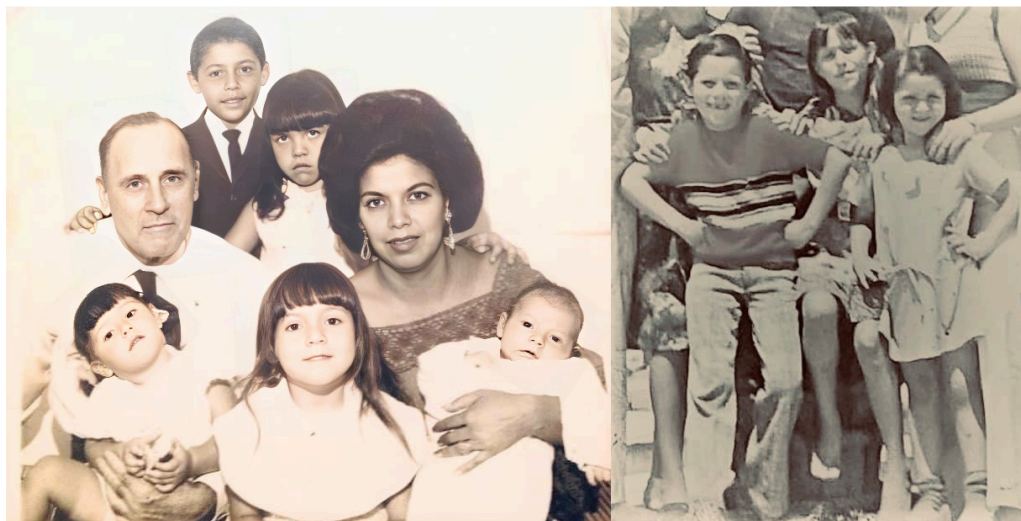
“I was too busy raising six kids, dogs and cats, chickens, ducks and turkeys, dealing with the construction workers and helping to build a castle to worry about what kind of life your father had when he was young. Besides, I knew your Papi had an unhappy early life. Why would I want to remind him of it? When you have six kids of your own, you’ll understand. I was very busy with the present.” Okay, fair enough.

The years we spent with our father leading up to his passing in 1990 were, for the most part, serene and happy times. *“When will your castle be finished?”* he’d be asked. *“I’ll know it when I see it,”* he’d reply. *“But there’s always room for improvement.”* He did, indeed, keep making improvements, nearly all the way to the end. Though he never said as much, we think he knew that—other than his family—*Casa de los Azulejos* would be his lasting legacy in Ajijic. The castle was essentially completed on May 14, 1990, when our father was taken from us by a stroke. He had just turned eighty-seven years old.

After his passing, it was like entering a new world order for us. Normal daily events would regularly trigger memories of him. The void left by his absence seemed impossible to fill. By the same token, it very often felt as if he were still with us. He had nurtured, guided and taught us all his life lessons. His words of wisdom still ring in our ears today.

As kids we used to hang on his every word. He seemed to be an expert on, well, everything! He was the Professor of All Subjects. He also knew an endless series of corny “dad jokes”: *“I failed math so many times at school, I can’t even count.”* or *“Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you do criticize them, you’re a mile*

away and you have their shoes.“). He was always looking for the laugh, even when it was not a laughing occasion (like, in church).



Above: (L) Walter and Candelaria 1969. (L to R) Nancy (2) Adriana (4) Richard (3 months) Roberta (6) Walter Jr. (8) (R) 1975 Richard (6) Nancy (8) Ivette (4)

Our families' lives and careers, of course, went on in the decade and a half after our father's passing. We each, individually relocated to the United States. Even our mom moved up to help with her growing brood of grandchildren and leased out the castle, furnished.

Regardless of all that change, Papi was never far from our thoughts; waking or sleeping. We all report Walter Thornton dreams. In fact, we would continue to receive visits from him in the unlikeliest of places. As you will soon see....

Why is Papi in Seabiscuit?

Adriana

Christmas Day 2004 was a special one for us. My husband, Luis, and I would be hosting the festivities at our home in Orange County, CA. Our mother, Candelaria, and three of the six Thornton siblings (and their families) were gathered under the same roof for the first time in quite a while. We'd spent most of Christmas week in my kitchen, preparing our traditional family dishes.

Our father had always been painstakingly specific about the exact ways the American staples were supposed to be prepared. Papi had largely assimilated the traditions and cuisine of Mexico, his adoptive land...though not its language (“*Why is the spoon a lady and a fork a gentleman? I’ll never get it.*”), but he was absolutely insistent that Thanksgiving and Christmas be traditionally American, from soup to dessert. When he told us about his life as a homeless orphan, we figured it must be important to him to enact the traditions of the happy, American family—occasions that had been in short supply during his younger days.

The piles of festively wrapped presents had grown nearly as tall as our Christmas tree. It was our fourteenth Christmas without our father, though he was never far from our thoughts or reminiscences. Most of our shared stories involved Papi and most of them involved something funny—such as his misadventures with his honeybee colony he’d fostered on the roof of the castle. Or the time when we were all

out to dinner at La Posada de Ajijic and the beautiful lady came up to our dad and, with tears in her eyes, kissed his hand—right in front of our mother! We recall it happening in the late 1970s, so we were quite young, and we had *no* idea what was going on!

“*Why was that lady crying, Papi?*” I remember asking him.

“*I guess she was glad to see me,*” he said, sounding as baffled as the rest of us.

“*Do you know her?*” I asked him.

“*Not a clue,*” he said. “*She said she worked with me in New York.*”

Our mother had flown into John Wayne Airport in Orange County to spend the holidays at my house. Nancy and her family weren’t able to join us that year, since she and her husband, Art, were running their busy law practice in Dallas. That Christmas evening of 2004, after all the presents were opened and the kitchen was somewhat restored, we continued our family tradition of gathering in the living room to watch a movie. We had an enormous, pre-digital, flat-screen TV; the kind that was contained within a very tall, pressed-wood cabinet.

I arranged the seating, so that all nine of us would have optimal viewing for that year’s Christmas night featured film, *Seabiscuit* (2003), which I thought our mother would enjoy, and which had recently been released on DVD. It seemed harder every year to find a film that would appeal to both kids and adults—and this one, from what I’d heard and read, seemed to be a fairly safe choice for family holiday viewing. It told the true tale of the underdog, competitive racehorse Seabiscuit, whose grit, drive and come-from-behind victories made him something of a folk hero for Depression-weary Americans in the late 1930s.

Our family tradition was for the adults to drink our *rompope* as we watched our annual Christmas entertainment. It is the Mexican version of eggnog, which we always served in special ceramic cups that only came out once a year. I did a “last call” in case anyone needed anything and then: lights out. The movie began.

Collapsing onto our large, overstuffed sofa, it felt as if it was the first time I’d actually sat down in about three days. I lay back and sank into the film’s narrative, *rompope* in hand. A narrator kept the action moving

as a series of vintage photographs from the early twentieth century crossed the screen. When the plot advanced to the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed, we got a full frame of a photograph that actually made some of us gasp in recognition—most of all, our mother.



“¡Ese es Walter!” our mother exclaimed, utterly astonished at suddenly seeing her late husband’s image in a modern Hollywood movie—on Christmas Day, no less. *“Este es el mejor regalo de Navidad que podría pedir”* (This is the best Christmas gift I could have asked for), she said. As for me, it truly did feel like some kind of *Nuestra Señora de Fátima*-type of vision. It was so utterly unexpected, and I was so exhausted at that point, that I couldn’t quite process this sudden appearance by our father. “Stunned” would best describe my reaction.

“Go back!” I nearly shrieked at my husband, Luis, who was controlling the remote. He did, freeze-framing the luminous photo of our handsome young father. The photo on the screen showed a fellow wearing a sporty derby hat, with his foot on the running board of a very fancy, very old car that had a big sign on it. We didn’t really give thought to