

Martha's Diary

Laura E. Roberts

Eastern Kentucky University, biroberts@windstream.net

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Recommended Citation

Roberts, Laura E., "Martha's Diary" (2018). *EKU Libraries Research Award for Undergraduates*. 5.
<https://encompass.eku.edu/ugra/2018/2018/5>

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Reagan Roberts

Martha's Diary

1923

disclaimer: I did write this with improper English to make it more like how Martha would have spoken

Entry #1

I do not really know much of keeping a diary. I think it will be fun though, and it will give me someone to tell all my stories too and in a way, something to talk to. That being said, to me it makes good sense that I should write everything down about myself, so whoever may read this one day, if ever, will understand what all these stories are about and who all these people are.

My name is Martha Maggard. I was born in 1894 in Leslie County, Kentucky. I was born on August 27 to Rebecca and Coon Melton. I was one of six and I was the only girl.

I completed school to the fourth grade, then Mommy and Poppy pulled me out to stay at home. I would have liked to stay longer.

I am now married to Israel Maggard, but everyone calls him I.D. I just call him Id. We were married in 1910 when I was 15 years old and he was 21.

I have three children now. Bessie is my oldest, she is 12 years old and was born in 1911, then comes Herman in 1916 who is 7. The next one is Grace who was born in 1919 and is now 4 years old. Then came Ivan, he's the youngest born in 1921.

We live in Leslie County, Kentucky up a hollow away from everyone else. It is often very lonely out here. Israel works in lumber and is always up and gone early in the morning. Bessie goes to school with Herman then it's just me and baby Grace left at home alone for hours. I have decided

to use this old book as a diary to write about our lives here seeing as there is no one to talk to out here.

I think that is a good start for today.

Entry #2

Id has decided that we will be moving to Jackson County now. This time he says we're going to be merchants. Id has always thought that if you was ever going to make any money you had to be your own boss that's why he never much cared for the work in the mines. That's were a lot of men in this area go. They'll work underground from dawn to dusk. He seems to think that he'll be making more money there, so we are leaving.

I can't say I'm upset by this news. I will miss being close to my parents and my brothers, but I do hate living up this hollow all alone. I hope we will be moving closer in to town this time. My brother, Marion lives in Jackson county with his family so if nothing else we will be close to him. That's one person to know.

There is a whole pile of clothes that need mending that I should probably be doing instead of writing, but I hate sewing. I dread it more than anything. For that matter, I hate all housework. Cooking, cleaning, laundry, everything.

Laundry is almost as bad as sewing is. I have to carry all those clothes down to the creek. I usually drag Bessie along to help, but she is so little she can't even swing the paddle to beat the clothes. Not to mention when the clothes are wet they weigh more than her. If she drops anything we got to wash it all over again. She's too short to reach the clothesline too, so she can't help with that either. Outside of laundry though, she's pretty helpful, at least with the indoor chores. That's the best part about having girls really. Everybody needs a girl.

1924

Entry #3

I am afraid that I forget to write in this thing an awful lot. I get busy doing one thing or another and before I know it the whole day is gone. Those children run me all over the place, especially Bessie. I swear that child can be sweet as sugar one minute and then light up so fast I don't know what happened. It's the redhead in her I suppose. She's a fiery little thing.

Herman is no better either. He is quite the trickster and that boy could make a pastor swear. He instigates an argument all the time and is always stirring up some kind of trouble. It must be a redheaded thing because Grace has dark hair and that baby is the sweetest child I ever laid eyes on. She's as content as they come and is pleasant as can be. A very easy child that Grace is.

I named Grace after my good friend Grace. Grace used to be my best friend growing up. We used to have such a good time together and we would laugh so hard our sides would hurt. Id and I do not always agree on names. Usually it is a fight over what the new babies will be called, but we both agreed on Grace very easily. It was the perfect name.

Entry #4

There was a bird that got in the house today. That means somebody is going to die. I've got that awful uneasy feeling tonight as I write. We finally got it out of the house after we swatted it down with a broom. Bessie wouldn't let us kill the bird. Bessie loves birds. She can sit outside and watch the birds all day long. She's always loved them too. If she could figure out how to keep a bird she would, sometimes I see her feed them little pieces of whatever she is snacking

on. I've scolded her about it before, but she always keeps doing it, so I just let it go. I don't suppose it is really hurting anything anyway, as long as they stay out of the house.

Entry #5

It was late last night when the people started running to the house. I was just finishing up cleaning up the kitchen when I saw some of the neighbors come running up towards the door shouting. Id beat me to the door. It was my brother Marion. I told Bessie to stay there with the babies and the rest of us took off. Marion's house wasn't far and we would run there.

When we got there the house was swallowed up in flames. About that time, I saw Marion come running out with one baby. I ran up and grabbed it and he went back in to find more of the children. I heard shouting from around the side of the house and it was his wife. She was yelling from the upstairs window. By the time I had gotten around the corner of the house there was a baby that flew just a couple of feet in front of me into Id's arms. They were dropping them out the windows. I saw Marion come back with another and they dropped it out too. We yelled for them to come out, but they didn't have all their children yet. I couldn't think straight. People were yelling back and forth. Many folks had gathered and were pitching buckets of water on the house, but it helped nothing. All of them babies was squalling like banshees. My head was spinning. I yelled at Marion some more. It was getting too bad now. There was too much fire. I saw him and his wife poke their heads back out the window with another baby and they tossed her out too to the men waiting at the bottom. More squalling. There was still more children to be found though. I saw them poke their heads back into the house. They never came back out.

Entry #6

Some strange lady came a wandering through the store today. She said she was from New York I believe and she was coming to study the education of children or something like that. I talked to her a little more about this because she seemed very interested in how much schooling me and the kids had. I told her I went to school till the fourth grade. That's some pretty good learning around here. Id is even better though because he went to school all the way till eighth grade. I want my kids to stay in longer than I did. I would really like it if they got to finish high school. I always liked school and wanted to stay longer. I think schooling will help my children's future. So, I want them to stay as long as possible. Anyway, back to the lady. She said she was interviewing people or something like that for a magazine or newspaper or something along those lines. She sat down and stayed for a while and was talking to Id and some of the other people in the store. I had to get back to work though, so once I figured she wasn't going to buy anything while she was waiting on her bus, I went back to serving the other customers.

Entry #7

Id came in today and said we was moving again. Apparently, this time to Harlan. I can't say exactly what is in Harlan that he is going after, but he seems to think this is what is best for the family. Normally I think Id argue a bit more about it, we've not been here for two years yet, but I don't like looking at where Marion's house was. I don't think Id does either. That's as good a reason to move as any I suppose. We don't have anything or anybody waiting in Harlan. We'll be all alone with whatever we can carry on the train with us. We aren't leaving right away, Id says it'll be a couple of months till he can sell the store and the house.

1925

Entry #8

We didn't make it to Harlan.

We got on the train with tickets to Harlan. We traveled through Owsley County first and then we went on into Perry. The train stopped to pick up more passengers and we got off to stretch out legs for a minute.

There was a man beside us on the platform there that got to talking to Id. They were chatting back and forth, but I was tending to Buster at the time (Buster is what everyone's started calling Ivan) so I didn't overhear much of their conversation. Id then told me he was going to look around for a bit before the train got back going. The next thing I knew just as the train was getting ready to take off again and Id came running up and told me he'd bought a store with that man on the platform and that they had split the difference of the cost. Needless to say, we now live in a coal town called Lothair.

We are living in the back of the store right now seeing as we haven't got any money to buy a house. There are some little rooms in the back of it that we have divided up and share. Id insists that this is just until we get enough money to buy a house close by.

I won't say that I am happy about living in the back of the store, but Id always keeps his word. He will get a house just as soon as he can, and there is always money to be made so long as he's a merchant.

Entry #9

It's been a while since we got to Lothair, but I'm afraid I lost my diary for a while. I think Herman carried it off away from me before it finally turned up. We've gotten ourselves a house now that is just up the hill from the store. I have a beautiful garden growing in the front there. I alternate rows between vegetables and flowers. I dare say I have the prettiest garden in Lothair.

Gardening is my favorite way to pass time, and it always keep food on the table. The only trouble of it is that between all the work to do in the store it can get difficult to tend to it all the time. I always find the time anyway.

Entry #10

Running a store is crazy. My average day consists of me getting up around six or before and making breakfast before the kids have to go off to school. We eat and send the kids on. The store opens at eight, so I have to go in before then to sweep and dust and put everything back in order. We've got everything anybody could need so it is a lot to make sure we have everything stocked up. We open up and wait for the crowd. Then I am with customers all day. I usually pack Id and I a lunch that we take turns eating at the store. We then work until about five when I leave to go start supper. I walk up to the house and fix supper for the kids and we eat and usually more in shifts so that way somebody is in the store at all times. We usually eat whatever comes out of the garden that is fresh. We had shucky beans because we just strung them out to dry last week. Then we usually have some kind of meat. Tonight, we had country ham. Salted meat is the easiest thing for us out here. I clean up or leave one of the kids to do it, usually Bessie, and then walk back down to the store to work until eight. Then we close up and clean some more. What we don't get done that night will have to wait until in the morning when we open up. I usually try to straighten up a little bit though just so I don't have to do so much in the mornings. I run back to the house after that to try and clean up there and to get the children in bed. I usually try and accomplish a thing or two that needs doing gets done before I go to bed. Then I get up the next morning and do it all over again. Well that is everyday but Sunday. Sunday is church. Then we come back and try to get a few things done in the garden or clean the house since it's the only day that the store ain't open. I usually work and the kids and Id will sit and play games.

Entry #11

I found out today that the lady who stopped at our store in Jackson was a writer for some magazine called Life Magazine. That picture they took while she was in the store was in the magazine today. Here's the picture.

Entry #12

Bessie got her tongue stuck to a pole today. Id was always a bit of trickster. That man loves games more than anything in this world, so he bet Bessie ten cents she wouldn't stick her tongue to the pole. So apparently, she took him up on the offer and licked an old flag pole that was frozen over. Then it got stuck and they liked to never get it off. She finally got loose, but not before she pulled a chunk of her tongue off. Id just laughed and laughed. I swear sometimes that man acts like a child. Herman is about as mature as he is.

Entry #13

We got snowed in today so the store ain't opening. I don't really like being cooped up, but it gets things done in the house which I never have time to keep up with during the week. Id and Grace sat around playing Chinese Checkers all day. He gets so aggravated that she beats him every time. He's been trying to figure out how she does that all day. Id's favorite thing to do is play games and Grace takes after him. For that matter they all do. I let them play games, but there is no card playing in this house. Id used to be a gambler when we got married. He cleaned up his act shortly thereafter, but I am not risking that changing anytime soon. I am also not about to get my kids involved in that kind of thing.

Entry #14

Buster nearly scared us all to death today. I was turned around in the kitchen fixing supper when I heard the kids all come inside. That wind was so cold outside it could cut you in two, so I told them to go stand by the fire place to warm themselves. I left for a minute to go grab some more wood to put in the fire. I was walking back when I heard Buster squalling and then I heard all the kids yelling "Mommy!" I walked in and Buster's whole back was lit up! Apparently, he had backed up into the fireplace. Now they were all yelling so I grabbed a towel off the counter and started swatting the fire out. I pulled his britches off of him and he burnt the most awful place all up and down his legs and his bottom. I sent Bessie down the hill to get Id and he went on and sent for the doctor. That boy had burnt all the skin off himself.

Entry #15

The doctor came last night and gave me something to rub on the burns. He said that was the best he could do, and the rest would have to heal itself. I was up all night with Buster. The poor thing whimpered all night long. He can't get comfortable, for Pete's sake he can't even sit. Bless his heart he's so tired he doesn't even know what to do with himself, but he still can't sleep for the pain. I had Bessie sit with him today while I went to work the store.

I'm afraid something is wrong with Id too. He has arthritis something awful, in his legs especially. The doctor looked over him last night with Buster, but there's nothing to be done for him. This means I have more work at the store. He can't move or lift anything so that makes it difficult on the rest of us.

Entry #16

Id left today to go to the hot springs in Arkansas. They are supposed to help his arthritis. At this point we were willing to try just about anything, he can hardly move these days. Today he left the house hobbling. He is set to be back in two weeks. Until then the store is mine.

There was a sweet couple that just moved in close by. The man is working at Standard Oil just across the road from the store. Everybody in this town either works for the oil or coal companies. He brought in his wife and his daughter to the store. He bought his girl, Mary I think was her name, a little piece of candy. She was awfully cute with little blond curls. She told me she was five years old. Just a little younger than Grace.

Entry #17

No time to write while Id was gone, far too much to do. He is back now, and he is so much better! He walked in straight as a board and strong as an ox. Our prayers were answered.

Entry #18

Id came pulling up to the house today with a car! I swear that man is always wanting whatever new thing they come up with. All the kids ran out there after him and started circling that Model T. Before I knew it Id was piling them all in to go for a ride. There was absolutely no way I was getting in that death trap! I didn't want my kids in their neither! I never convinced him not to take the kids but he never got me in there. He turns around and starts going down the little gravel lane, but there ain't no roads here! We will be one of the handful of folks that have a car, we don't need no paved roads. The minute I saw him turn to go down that gravel lane I thought for sure I was never going to see my children again.

Entry #19

Bessie is getting about the age where she should be going to high school. The problem is that there is no high school in Lothair. Every other town in Perry County has a high school except Lothair. Id decided that he and some of the other men in the community, he knows everyone in town with them all buying from us, were going to go to meet with the superintendent of education to see about getting a school here in Lothair. Nothing else is close enough for the children to walk too. They are planning on going tomorrow we will see how it goes. Bessie needs to go to high school and I have every intention of making sure she that she does.

Entry #20

The meeting with the superintendent did not go well. Id is very angry. Apparently, the man told Id and the other men that nobody in Lothair was smart enough to need a high school. Well that just sent my husband right over the edge. We have both agree that our children will be received a high school education, but Id is so angry he says we are not sending any of our children to any school in Perry County. I fear this will end badly.

Entry #21

It has been decided that Bessie will be going to boarding school in Riverside. I can't say I am happy to send her, she really is such a big help with the younger ones with me being at the store all the time but it's for the best. She will get a good education there and I don't suppose that it is that far away. She will have a dorm mother to watch over her and she will work while she is there doing chores and things. She'll be okay. She'll like it there.

Entry #22

I dreamt of a fish last night. That means that somebody is expecting a baby. I don't know if it is me or someone else. I guess we will see.

Entry #23

Looks like I am having a fifth baby. I am feeling pretty good right now and everything seems to be going smoothly. I think this one will be a girl that'll balance everything out. I'm sad to see Bessie go now, I spaced all these children out for a reason. They can take care of each that way and I can still work.

Entry #24

It is getting about time for this baby. I'm getting restless and uncomfortable, but I have to keep working. The store is going to run itself. Id does try to help more, and he keeps me from having to lift anything too heavy or the like, but everything else is business as usual. Tending the garden is difficult because it is hard to get up and down with all this weight in front of me. I'm ready to get this thing out and get on with life as usual. The doctor told me I should probably take it easy, but I simply don't have time for that.

Entry #25

1926

Praise the good Lord that baby finally came. They are getting to where they come pretty quick now, at least from the time I start having contractions. Well this is the fifth, I suppose that normal. Anyway I sent Id after the doctor who came on shortly with him. I had myself a little girl just like I thought in just a few hours. I much prefer shorter labor than the long ones I had with my first couple of children. They try every way in the world to keep you comfortable, but I don't care what anyone tells me there ain't nothing that helps any.

Our girl's name is Ruby. She's a cute thing and she seems pretty good so far. Sleeps good and easy, and don't cry much. Those are the best kinds, it makes a world of difference trying to work the store and watch a fussy baby. She just comes to the store to work with me every morning.

Entry #26

May 29, 1927

There has been a horrible flood. It has washed away more than half of Lothair not to mention the rest of the state of Kentucky. Several folks have died. They just got washed away in the river.

Our house faired okay since we sit up on that hill, but the store flooded. The night that it happened we had some friends come running up the hill asking for shelter. By the time we had taken everybody in we had stuffed people into every nook and cranny of the house.

We shoved the kids in the beds with our kids. Grace woke up so confused this morning. She slept right through the storm for the most part and then woke up this morning with her good friend Margaret in the bed with her. Margaret's house is completely underwater so we told them they were more than welcome to stay with us as long as they like. There are so many people in need there aren't enough supplies to go around. We have been trying to get anything we can out of the store today that is worth saving. Most of it was past saving. I was told today that the state of Kentucky has declared a state of emergency. Everyone is panicking but I am remaining calm. When you start panicking is when you stop thinking clearly. The kids do better if we all stay calm. They don't need to know all the fear.

The store is ruined though. It's half sunk just like everything else.

Entry # 27

Judy Bell is going to be staying with us for a little while. She is a girl from Lothair and she needs a place to stay for a bit. We don't ask to many questions around here. I figure if there was anything I need to really know then somebody will tell me. It's probably from the flood.

Entry #28

Id thinks my brothers are playing a trick on us, which they have been known to do on occasion. That being said the reason he thinks that is last night we are all settled in for the night and we heard this knocking in the floor. It went all the way from one end of the hallway to the other. Then it stopped. By the time it reached the other end of the hall we were all looking out our doors. Id went underneath the floor thinking it was one of my brothers, probably Henry. No one was down there though.

Entry #29

We have a knocking spirit in this house. Every night it goes knocking down the hallway underneath the floor and every night Id goes down the stairs underneath the floor and there is never anything there. Tonight, he took some of the ashes out of the fire place and pitched them all over ground underneath the floor. If anyone walks through it, we will see the prints.

Entry #30

The knocking spirit came again last night, and the ashes were not walked through. Id has decided he is going to sit under the floor tonight to watch and see who is coming. I keep telling him that it isn't a someone. It's a knocking spirit.

Entry #31

Id stayed up all night long with his gun last night waiting on whoever he thinks is going to appear to knock on the floor. Nobody ever came, but the knocking spirit came. It went thumping through the floor again last night and the minute it did I heard Id yelling and then he ran up the stairs. I was standing upstairs when he got there and the thumping was still happening all away across the floor. Id was fussing and puzzled. I told him it was the knocking spirit. Trouble of it is, I don't know how to get rid of one.

Entry #32

The knocking spirit has left. Judy Bell left too. As soon as she left the knocking spirit quit knocking on the floor. I knew that girl was trouble.

Entry # 33

1927

Bessie has graduated high school and now she's back home to stay. She helps me juggle things between the house and the store. She is sixteen now, so she is a big help. It helps keep me sane and gives me more time to garden or hook rugs. Hooking rugs is my favorite thing to do in the winter when the garden is dead. With her helping work the store and help with the children I can work more on those. She's a big help with Ruby since she's got to stay in the store with me during the day.

Entry #34

Buster clubbed the neighbor's boy with a rock in the head today. That was interesting to try to apologize to his mother for. Herman is the one that started the whole thing. Herman is best friends with their oldest kid Fred. He is a nice boy, but Herman is a little instigator. He told Fred

to holler at Buster and call him Ivan. Buster hates his name, so I reckon Buster turned around and nailed him with a rock. It hit him square between the eyes.

I switched Buster afterward once I found out and then had to go apologize to the neighbors. They were nice folks though, they weren't none too upset. When I went over I happen to notice that that lady, her name was Viola, had the prettiest quilts I had ever seen. So I went back down to the store and came back with two bolts of fabric. I told her if she makes me one she can keep the extra fabric for herself. Good for me and for her. She gets free fabric and I don't have to sew. I ain't got time to be doing that anyway. Quilting takes too long especially when you are trying to run a store and raise these wild Indians who apparently think it's acceptable to whack other kids with rocks.

Entry #35

Bessie has herself a boyfriend. Id is none too happy about that. Id gets real strict on the kids but the girls especially. His mother was a bit of a...loose woman, shall we say. So he keeps the girls on a tight reign. Bessie is out of school though and I was married by her age so I'm not too worried about it. The only trouble of it is that her fellow, Joe, is not a good one.

Entry # 36

Bessie and Joe have asked our permission to marry. Her father and I told her no. That boy of hers is not a good one and they will not be getting married.

Entry #37

Bessie and Joe ran off and got married. She told Grace and paid her to go to the movie. She told her when the movie was over to bring us the note she had written. Grace sat through the movie

twice then finally came home with the note. Id is very angry. So far we have not heard anything else from Bessie.

Entry #38

Bessie came back home today, but Id won't let her come around. He says we will not be speaking to her. I know that what she did was wrong, and I am angry too, but I miss my Bessie and I want her to come home.

Entry #39

There has been and awful disaster. The Standard Oil building exploded this evening. The whole town is scared to death. Every time one of the oil tanks got lit they exploded. It shook the whole town so much some people thought there was an earthquake. I was closing up the store when it started. Grace was down in the store with me and Buster was walking home from a friend's house. I was sweeping out the dust when I saw a little girl go walking in the building. I thought she must have been looking for her father. That little girl never walked back out. I went back in the store for a while before I hear shouting. All the sudden the explosions started and the whole building was shaking. Grace grabbed me and we took off up the hill. Everyone was running up the hills now. I went up a ways and stopped. I wanted to see what was going on. Grace tried to drag me further up, but I told her just to go on and she went up and hid in the woods with most of the other folks. I watched as the whole world shook, and the barrels and tanks just kept exploding the more the fire spread. All the buildings around it caught fire too, including the old store that flooded. They are still trying to put out the fire now.

We didn't find Buster for some time. Turns out when he heard the explosions he turned away from town and started running the other way. He ran three miles in the opposite direction before he finally stopped and turned around to come back home.

Entry #40

The fire's only victim was the little girl who went in just a few minutes before. She had been looking for her father who had already left with everyone else for the day. That little girl was Mary, the little girl who came in the store with her parents with the little blond curls.

After this I no longer care what Id says. Bessie can come home whenever she wants. Life is too short to be fighting through all of it.

Entry #41

On the note of Bessie, she has started coming with me to help in the store. We've buried the hatchet and she helps most days. She already knows how everything works so it makes things much easier. She is good at keeping the books and things, I don't like doing that so much, so I usually pass that job on along to her. Bessie likes working though, it gives her something to do while Joe is in the mines for the day and it keeps a little extra money around. I admit it ain't exactly common for ladies to work much around here, at least not formally, but I always did like working. It's good to keep your hands busy. Not to mention Joe don't mind her doing it. I've actually come around to Joe and we get on quite well. He is a big help to me and he will work around the store from time to time when things need to be moved or loaded up like all the big barrels and crates that come in.

Entry #42

It was Buster's first day of school. So, I walked him on out to the schoolhouse and left him there with the teacher. I couldn't stay long though because I had to get on back in time to open up the store. I went and opened the store up, but it was slow business this morning, so I walked back up the hill to get my hook for the rug I am making. Wouldn't you know when I walked in there, Buster was sitting there. Well I switched him and then left to go on back to the store. I had no time to take him back now. That boy will be going to school one way or another.

Entry #43

I walked Buster to school every day this week, and every day when I got back home...he was sitting back there in the living room. Every day I switched him and took him back to school the next day. Finally, today when I took him his teacher told me that I should just let him sit out a year. I figured she was the teacher so if she didn't think he was ready I'd let him stay home till next fall. Next fall he will be going.

Entry #44

Nov. 1, 1929

We have been told that the stock market has crashed. Apparently, it took a bit for word to get down here to us folks in the mountains, but they're telling us the country is real bad off. All our money in the bank is gone. So is everyone else's. Nobody has anything. Folks are already going dirt poor, especially the miners. They already was stuck under all them high falutin mine companies of theirs and all those people lost all their money too. We didn't keep a ton of money in the bank, Id never did trust banks much, but we're still in trouble. My family will have food,

I'll say that. Between the garden and the store, we'll be okay. Some folks can't say the same. I have a feeling this is going to worse before it gets better.

Entry #45

Nov. 10, 1929

We always did trade people for things, you know eggs or meat or something, but now that's all anybody has got. Id has us trade anyway, we aren't about to watch people starve. So I take the eggs from the ladies who come in even though I know the ones on the bottom will be broken because I know she has six children at home and sorry husband. I take the cut of meat from the butcher because I know he's no better off. People will cut out meat if they got too, they can grow their own vegetables much cheaper. I give Viola the quilter fabric, so she'll keep making me one quilt too. I know she has nine kids and it's turning cold. She'll need to bundle up them babies with something. I don't care if I have to go without. As long as my kids have food I ain't watching anybody else go hungry. That ain't no way to live. I'll work as hard as I must. I'll have the kids watch each other if need be. If it means that we always have food on the table and a roof over our heads, I'll work myself to the bone.

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*My sources are in Chicago format.