



3-15-1986

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Recommended Citation

Gerber, Dean (1986) "The Singing Quads," *Westview*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol5/iss3/9>

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HOLLIS QUADRUPLETS



The Singing Quads

By Dean Gerber

The Keys quads at four years old L to R: Roberta, Mona, Mary, and Leota

In 1910, Oklahoma had been a state for three years when Mr. Flake Keys moved his family to Hollis, Oklahoma. Mr. Keys, an experienced furniture-store manager from Miles, Texas, had come to Hollis to manage the Spooner Furniture and Hardware Store for his widowed sister-in-law, Berta Spooner. He would later purchase the store.

When they arrived in Hollis, the family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Keys and their four children—Rex, Jackie, Marjorie, and Charles B. They were considered to be an average, everyday type of family. On June 4, 1915, that opinion would change.

Mrs. Alma Keys, age 33, was expecting her fifth child. On June 3, the other children—ages 6, 8, 10, and 12—were taken to the home of a nearby relative to spend the night. The family physician, a Dr. Pendergraft, as well as the ladies who would assist with the delivery, had been summoned. In those days, home deliveries were the standard rather than the exception since hospitals weren't always readily available. Soon that night in 1915, everything was ready; all were prepared.

Babies seem to have their own time schedule as to when they will make their appearance, however. True to nature, the delivery process started around midnight; and on June 4, 1915, the Keys family had been blessed with an additional four baby girls. The residents of Hollis—and as can be understood, Mr. Keys—were flabbergasted by the news.

The four babies were named after the aunts and grandmothers who were on hand to assist Dr. Pendergraft. Roberta, weighing 4½ pounds, was the first one born; she was named after her aunt, Berta Spooner. Mona, Roberta's identical twin, also 4½ pounds, was the second-born; she

was the namesake of Aunt Mona Curry. Mary, an even 4 pounds, was the third child delivered. She was named after her paternal grandmother, Mary Keys. The last quad, Leota, 3¾ pounds, was named after Leota Dulan, her maternal grandmother.

The news of the multiple births was known quickly around the town, and it soon spread even across the nation. At the Keys residence, a crowd of local citizens gathered to see the newborn children. Mr. Keys had the quadruplets lying crosswise on the divan and was allowing the visitors to come through the house to see them. In all the excitement, the older children had been completely forgotten. Finally, someone remembered them, and they too were allowed to see their new sisters and also to see their mother for a few minutes.

Before long, the family was overwhelmed by telegrams, telephone calls, letters, and visitors. They received at least one telegram from every state in the nation, as well as one from President Theodore Roosevelt. Visitors continued to come to the house, so someone suggested that a register should be used to keep count of the numbers. After 3,000 visitors, no further attempts were made to keep the register current.

One of the immediate problems that had to be dealt with was the clothing supply. Not expecting multiple births, the parents found that their meager supply of clothing was far inadequate for the demand. In those days, all baby clothing was handsewn; even the diapers were hand-hemmed. To solve the clothing problem, several of Mrs. Keys' friends came to the house and brought a second sewing machine. One of the stores (believed to be the J. B. Ellis Department

Store) was opened so that the ladies could get material for baby clothes. They sewed for about a week to complete the job. The quads' first outfits were cream-colored kimonos trimmed in ribbon, with handmade French knots down the front.

The babies must have been extremely healthy, despite their birth weights. There was no attempt made to isolate them from the many visitors that came through the house. For nine months, the girls received absolutely no food except what they nursed. After the nine months, they were given other foods.

During Mrs. Keys' pregnancy, a housekeeper had been hired to help with the housework. With four new babies, Mrs. Keys needed much more help. Mrs. Dulan, Mrs. Keys' mother, stayed for quite a while but eventually returned to her home in Paducah, Texas; gradually the workload shifted to the four older children. Thus, Jackie and Marjorie washed many dirty diapers.

When the quads were three months old, the family went to Paducah, Texas, to visit. Because of flooding rivers, the family had to stay overnight in Quannah, Texas, to catch a train the next day. On the way to the train the next morning, they were overwhelmed by people who wanted to see the famous quadruplets. On arriving in Paducah, they found that the visitors were just as numerous as they had been in Hollis. Mrs. Dulan solved the problem by posting visiting hours, thus reserving some time for family visiting.

When the quads were five months old, they were exhibits at the Oklahoma State Fair. Advertised as a "Bunch of Keys," they were quite a drawing card; fairgoers were charged twenty-five cents a head to see the babies. The quads continued going to the State Fair until they were six years old. At that time, they complained about having to miss two weeks of school. Also, some of their classmates were complaining about the special privilege the quads were getting. The fair going immediately ceased; the parents wanted the quads to have normal lives.

When the quads started school, visitors were still going to Hollis to see them. Mrs. Keys made a standing rule that when the girls were attending school, they would receive visitors only during recess time. To admit visitors during class time would have disrupted the class.

At the age of 10, the quads were given IQ tests probably because they were quadruplets and not because of problems with the academic work required of them. Their scores were 118 to 125, which placed them about two years above their chronological age. Their teachers considered them exceptional students.

At the age of 3, the quads had developed a talent for singing and were much in demand. They not only sang for their church, First Baptist, but for other denominations as well. And they sang at funerals as well as at meetings of different organizations such as Rotary and Kiwanis. They also developed a talent for playing the saxophone and at one time played from the back of a truck during a Hollis Christmas celebration. They were always receiving offers from various show-business people and letters from fans.

In 1933, the quads graduated from high school; Mary was class valedictorian. They then attended Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where they graduated in 1937. During their senior year, Leota was named to WHO'S WHO AMONG STUDENTS IN AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES. In addition to Leota's honors, one of the highlights of their college days was their being selected to go to Canada to ask the Dionne Quintuplets, then two years old, to



L to R Roberta, Mona, Mary, Leota

participate in the Texas Centennial Celebration. On the trip to Canada, they appeared on the Famous "Town Hall" Program with Fred Allen.

After graduating from Baylor, the quads did a three-year tour of show business with Mr. Keys as their manager. They performed in schools, churches, and theaters primarily in the Southern states, but they also went on two tours to the Southeastern states such as Tennessee, the Carolinas, and Virginia. After the three years of show business, they began to go their separate ways; Mona, the first to be wed, married Bob Fowler in Oklahoma City in 1940. She was a Kindergarten teacher in Oklahoma City for many years. The Fowlers have two children and two grandchildren.



June 1937, the Keys quads on graduation day from Baylor University. Clockwise from lower left: Mary, Roberta, Mona, Leota.



The first photo of the Keys quadruplets, 1915.

During World War II, Leota worked at Fort Hood, Texas, as director of the Enlisted Men's Service Club. While there, she met her future husband, Bob Hall. After her marriage to Hall, she became a professional book reviewer in Oklahoma City. Using her speech and drama background, Leota was in great demand for her humorous book reviews in Oklahoma and other states as well. The Halls had two children and three grandchildren. Leota died in 1970 at age 55.

Roberta, the oldest of the quads, married Roland S. Torn in 1941. She currently lives in Houston, where she has been in charge of a volunteer project dealing with cancer research. The Torns have three children and four grandchildren.

Mary, like Leota, was a volunteer worker during World War II and was director of the Enlisted Men's Service Clubs at Fort Hood. She married Jack Anderson, and she lives in Dallas. She's a member of the Board of Trustees of Baylor University and is also a member of the Board of Trustees of

Baylor Hospital in Dallas. She is quite active in church and community affairs. The Andersons have three children and two grandchildren.

The Keys Quadruplets at the time of their birth were the only quads of the same gender known to the world. They are also believed to be the only set of quads in which all four have earned college degrees. One of their most difficult tasks was to attain individual statuses after being a group for twenty-five years and to be successful in that individuality.

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[Editor's note: WESTVIEW is appreciative of the help of several people in the preparation of this article:

1. the author, Dean Gerber, of course, for his synthesizing of details.

2. Mrs. Dick Dudley of Hollis for her article on the quads in the Harmon County History **PLANNING THE ROUTE**.

3. Judy Webb, editor, for her June 2, 1977 article in the **HOLLIS NEWS**.

4. Mrs. Roberta Keys Torn for the pictures used in this article and for the following letter (March 1, 1984):

"Dear Sir:

"I am Roberta Keys Torn and have a few pictures that I am glad to send you. I have laminated many of our pictures and am sure they would be hard to reproduce. The small glossies were made by the Publicity Department of the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland in 1980. We were there for one week participating in a genetic study of Parkinson's disease. Mona Fowler, my identical twin, has the disease. We had national publicity at the time, and they sent (the glossies) back along with the big ones we had loaned them.

"Miss Judy Webb, News Editor of the **HOLLIS NEWS**, also used many of our pictures in a nice feature article published on June 2, 1977. I am sure the **NEWS** people would be glad to let you have the copies or negatives of the pictures.

"I'll be glad to assist you in any way possible.

"Please return the pictures to me. They are getting scarce as our children and grandchildren are becoming more interested in our 'past' fame.

"Sincerely,

Roberta Keys Torn"

5. Mrs. Charles B. Keys for information provided in a recent telephone conversation. She told us that there are still three surviving quads--Roberta Torn, Mona Fowler, and Mary Anderson--and that they were honored on their seventieth birthday with a family celebration held in a Houston-area beach home owned by Roberta's daughter. The celebration was on June 4, 1985; shortly afterwards, there was a full-page spread about the quads in the **HOUSTON CHRONICLE**. Presently, that issue is unavailable to WESTVIEW.]

Westview pasteup by: Southwestern Oklahoma State University Advertising Layout 2 students.

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