

Charles Wesley Lynch
by Dorothy Davis

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the puritan ethic, which pervaded the United States, plus the Victorian optimism and the general economic prosperity gave people a belief that Utopia could be achieved if man worked hard enough for it. Everywhere was the idea that material rewards, once gained, were not to be enjoyed solely by the man who had won them. The successful man must have a sense of mission to lift those around him, to inspire others to push for a better life.

Life for most citizens was simple and centered around the home, the school, the church, and the workplace. Most members of families involved themselves in the activities of the community and gave liberally of energy and money to keep community institutions viable. It is little wonder that by the beginning of the twentieth century Horatio Alger was the favorite hero of young readers.

Charles Wesley Lynch, who was born March 11, 1851, on Brown's Creek five miles south of Clarksburg, West Virginia, typifies the successful man of conscience in the age in which he lived. He was the seventh child of ten children¹ born to James² and Catharine Jane Stout Lynch and grew up in an area where many Lynch kin lived.³ After having attended subscription schools near his home, Charles Lynch went to private schools farther away in the county. Two of them were near Romine's Mills and both were taught by Dr. William Meigs, well known as a competent teacher. The other was in a building near Prospect Valley in Eagle District.⁴

When he left preparatory school Charles Lynch may have worked to make money for college because he was twenty-three years old when he graduated from West Virginia University in 1874. Outstanding as a speaker in college, the faculty assigned young Lynch to deliver the historical oration at college commencement the day the graduate was awarded a bachelor of arts degree. Lynch accepted a position as superintendent in the school at Burning Springs, WV, where he taught for one year before returning to West Virginia University to study law in the fall of 1875.⁵

Charles Lynch was ambivalent as to the profession to follow during the years 1876-1882. The board of education of Clarksburg Independent District offered him a position in spring of 1876 to be a teacher in the Clarksburg graded school which was the old academy school.⁶ He took the position. But he began immediately to read law in the offices of John J. Davis, Clarksburg attorney, and on July 4, 1877, was examined by Charles S. Lewis, James Madison Jackson, and Jonathan Brannon and declared "proficient in the knowledge of the law". He was admitted to the Harrison County Bar.⁷

Being naturally extroverted and endowed with forensic and organizing skills, Lynch may have been attracted to education by the new teachers' institutes. In 1870 the Peabody Fund had supplemented the state appropriation for education by \$1,000 to start week-long meetings held in summer to instruct and inspire teachers. By 1874 eight institutes existed in the state and in 1877 the West Virginia school law required every county to hold an institute each teacher was required to attend.⁸

Here was an opportunity for a young, footloose man to travel in the state to help organize the institutes. He needed to have a commanding stage presence, forensic skills, and a positive approach to teaching. The teachers met together each day for a week for group singing and inspirational talks. Later in the day they attended small group meetings to learn skills in presenting subject matter they would teach. Charles Lynch led institutes all over the state in the summers of years 1877-1882.

As soon as he signed a contract in 1876 to teach the classical department in Clarksburg graded school, Charles Lynch was named to the examiners board of the school system. Before the board candidates who had passed the written portion of a test to qualify for a teaching certificate must appear for oral testing. Lynch was active in a Harrison County Teachers' Association to lift the standards of teachers.¹⁰ He began purchasing one volume at a time the Encyclopedia Britannica for his personal library.¹¹

Charles Lynch taught upper grade courses in Clarksburg two years before the board in 1878 named him principal and superintendent of the school system. The school had grown from four teachers in 1868 to eight teachers when Lynch took charge. He continued in the position until 1882.¹²

During the years Charles Lynch was a professional educator he continued, when he found time, to read law under the Honorable John J. Davis. In 1882 Lynch was admitted to the West Virginia State Bar and immediately threw his hat into the ring for a seat in the West Virginia House of Delegates. He was nominated as a candidate in the spring of 1882 about the same time he resigned his job with the school system. He opened a law office in Clarksburg¹³ near the courthouse and watched election returns in November which sent him to the West Virginia House of Delegates for the term that opened in January 1883.¹⁴

In 1884 Lynch and his law partner J. Philip Clifford decided it would be good for the law firm if one of them became an elected official of the county. Charles Lynch with his years in the classroom and in county school institutes was the logical candidate. He ran for prosecuting attorney of Harrison County in 1884 and won the seat for four years. In 1888 J. Philip Clifford won the seat to be followed by Charles Lynch who again won election for prosecuting attorney in 1892, making a total of twelve years that someone from the law firm held the post.¹⁵ The temperance movement was riding high and Charles Lynch, ardent member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which was in the forefront in the fight against strong drink, won a reputation as prosecutor of being "especially against those engaged in illicit sale of intoxicants."¹⁶

Soon after he entered the practice of law, Charles Lynch became aware of a very pretty girl in Clarksburg. Mary Virginia Robinson, the daughter of Fernando A. and Margaret Boggess Robinson, had attended Pittsburgh Female College in 1877-78,¹⁷ where she had distinguished herself by winning the gold medal in the McKee Prize in piano and the citation "the musical culture and talent [of Jennie Robinson] is thus recognized".¹⁸ Clarksburg at the time was a small town where everyone knew everyone else. Jennie's grandfather Caleb Boggess had been sheriff of Harrison County 1837-39¹⁹ and her Robinson ancestors had helped found the county and had held many county offices.

It was the custom at the time for girls to have memory books for friends to sign. A page in Mary Virginia's book is inscribed:

Dear Jennie,

Clouds may at times overcast the sky, and disappointment veil life in a gloom, yet forget not there is a golden key by an Unseen Hand, extended, to open the palace of eternity.

Your friend
C.W. Lynch

Clarksburg, W.Va.
March 27, 1883²⁰

Fernando Robinson and his family lived on the southeast corner of Second and West Pike streets next door to the Goff Chapel, where Charles Lynch attended church. Friendship grew into love, for early in 1888 invitations to a wedding were mailed:

Mr. & Mrs. Fernando A. Robinson
request your presence
at the marriage of their daughter
Mary Virginia
to
Mr. Charles W. Lynch
Thursday evening March eighth
at half past eight o'clock
Clarksburg, W.Va.
1888²¹

Joseph Engle, minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church performed the ceremony²² before many family members and friends.²³ Ready for the couple was a new house which would be home to Charles and Jennie Lynch the remainder of their lived.²⁴

In 1889 Lynch had ended his term as prosecuting attorney. He decided that he again would run for the West Virginia House of Delegates in 1890. His wife was pregnant, but with the child expected about the time of the primary election, it should be old enough for him to be in Charleston for sixty days early in 1891. As things developed, the primary election was over before his son Lawrence Robinson was born on May 29, 1890²⁵, and Lynch easily won as delegate in the general election with a total of 2374 votes.²⁶ He left by train to be in his seat when the session started the first week in January.

On March 8, 1891, Lynch wrote his wife. He was impatient that adjournment has been postponed largely because an important official had been out of the city. "The people will be astonished at the amount of money that has been appropriated this session and at the number of new offices created to supply places for the faithful... I am ashamed to be associated with so much indiscretion and folly."²⁷ Lynch said his trunk was ready for travel in a few minutes' time after adjournment. He would take any train out of Charleston. He said, "My little girl and boy in the Harrison hills have for me more attraction than sightseeing." He hoped Lawrence's teeth were through and his suffering at an end. He signed the letter "Charlie".²⁸

A second son, Charles Fernando, was born to Charles and Jennie Lynch on February 3, 1894. This child died at eighteen months of age on August 13, 1895.²⁹ That death plus the death of Fernando Robinson November 17 of the same year³⁰ made Lynch realize he was mortal. On June 2, 1897, Lynch took over responsibility for the Lynch Cemetery on Brown's Creek, land his father had conveyed to Peter I Lynch, Hiram Lynch, and C.W. Lynch December 1, 1879.³¹ On November 4, 1897, Lynch drew up a will which divided his estate equally between his wife and his son.³² In less than a month occurred the death of his father James Lynch on November 28, 1897.³³

In the summer of 1897 ill health required Judge Hagans to notify the counties of Harrison and Lewis, which made up the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit of West Virginia, that he would be unable to fill his duties as judge. The courts of the circuit and the lawyers of the counties in the circuit elected C. W. Lynch a special judge to hold the courts. A Wheeling newspaper commented: "Mr. Lynch seems peculiarly cut out for a judge, and in all his rulings he has been fair, and his decisions have indicated a careful examination of the facts and law. He has given satisfaction to both the public and the Bar."³⁴

For the first time since he had started to practice law C.W. Lynch neither held political office nor was about to run for political office probably because he wanted to run for circuit court in 1904. Clarksburg was booming as a result of the extraction of coal and petroleum and the opening of industries to use the minerals. Lynch's law practice grew until by 1902 he had his own law office at 214 Court Street. At the same time he was attorney for the City of Clarksburg.³⁵

During the early years of the twentieth century Lynch was treasurer of the West Fork Oil & Gas Co. and a director of the West Virginia Bank, the People's Banking & Trust Company, and the Empire National Bank.³⁶ Lynch had joined Herman Lodge No. 6, A.F. & A.M. in 1876. Sometime in the ensuing years he had become a 32nd degree Mason and had served three terms as Worshipful Master of his lodge.³⁷ The Masonic Order was active in the laying of cornerstones for public buildings and in Harrison County it was routine between 1900 and 1915 for C.W. Lynch to preside over the start of construction for all schools and town and county structures.

In 1904 Lynch was elected for a term of eight years to be Judge of the Circuit Court of the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit of West Virginia.³⁸ For four of the eight years his duties included the work later performed by the Judge of the Criminal Court of Harrison and Lewis counties. The work of the judge increased greatly during his term because the discovery of oil and gas had enhanced the value of the land in Lewis and Harrison counties and caused litigation to multiply.

Busy as he was, Lynch agreed with his fellow churchmen that it was time for the Methodists to replace Goff Centenary Chapel, built in 1866, with a new structure. His wife Mary Virginia, who was organist for the church, volunteered to keep record of donations toward land across the street from Goff Chapel, where stood the Mulheran Hotel and the Ernst residence, and in a book dated 1905-06 listed all church members who gave toward the purchase of land for a new church. The church planned to rent the building on the land until a new church could be built.³⁹

May 29, 1908, was a big day for Charles and Mary Virginia Lynch. Their only child Lawrence was graduated from Clarksburg High School at a commencement held in the Grand Opera House. The parents enrolled Lawrence in September 1908 to enter Ohio Wesleyan College, where Charles Lynch later was to be a member of the board of trustees.

In addition to the many responsibilities C.W. Lynch carried, he agreed to be chairman of the building committee of the new church to rise on the northeast corner of West Pike and Second streets. He and his wife contributed more funds than any other member of the church toward the building and he gave almost daily supervision to the construction. The church was dedicated on Sunday, October 10, 1909.⁴⁰

On December 3, 1912, the Lewis County Bar passed a resolution lauding Charles Lynch for his work as a Judge of the Thirteenth Circuit. They said he had been fearless, honest, diligent, and impartial in the discharge of his duties made arduous by land litigation; that the Bar appreciated his competency and faithfulness; and the Bar congratulated him on his elevation to the highest court in the state.⁴¹ The last statement referred to the fact that the Republican State Convention earlier in the year had nominated Lynch for Judge of the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals. Lynch had run in November 1912 and had been elected for a term of twelve years, two years of which he was destined to be president of the court.

Lynch was surprised when the Republicans meeting in Huntington had nominated him to run as party candidate for the state judicial post because he had not actively sought the judgeship. He was too busy to enter the contest for 1912 was the year he was Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of West Virginia, a position with the Masonic Order which required that he visit every chapter of the lodge in the state.⁴² Charles Lynch was elected to be judge of the supreme court to fill the seat of the deceased Judge Brannon in November 1912 with a plurality of 16,000 over his Democrat opponent. He was off to Charleston late in December to be sworn in as judge on January 1, 1913.⁴³

The spring of 1913 was a busy one, for in addition to Lynch's new responsibilities, he and Jennie would travel to Delaware, Ohio, in June to attend the commencement at Ohio Wesleyan University where son Lawrence, who was president of the senior class, would graduate.

Lawrence had fallen in love with Gretchen Spindler, a student in Ohio Wesleyan who lived near Columbus, Ohio. Lawrence wrote his parents after he had arrived in New York City in September 1913 to attend graduate school at Columbia University that he and Gretchen were engaged. Mary Virginia Lynch wrote Gretchen on September 30, 1913: "Dear Gretchen, I feel, under the circumstances, that I may address you in this familiar way. Lawrence has written us of your engagement. I want to assure you of our interest and love. It will be our interest and pleasure to receive Lawrence's choice as our own. I have always wanted a daughter and trust that you may fill that long felt want..." Mrs. Lynch went on to say that they had found no house in Charleston which they wished to rent; so they would buy. Mrs. Lynch was house hunting in a leisurely way for she and her husband did not want to start housekeeping until after Christmas.⁴⁴ They purchased a house on Quarrier Street November 19, 1913.⁴⁵ During Christmas holiday recess in Clarksburg they closed the house on Lee Street and took with them to Charleston Mary Hyland who for years had been housekeeper for the Lynches.

Lawrence graduated from Columbia with a masters degree in economics on June 3, 1914. The thesis he wrote to complete his graduate work "The West Virginia Coal Strike 1912-13" was published in the Political Science Quarterly, December 1914.⁴⁶ Lawrence had written his future father-in-law October 23, 1913, that his engagement to Gretchen must be a long one for he planned to enter Harvard University School of Law in the fall of 1914.⁴⁷ The engagement did not prove to be so long as Lawrence Lynch thought it would be. Gretchen Spindler and Lawrence were married in Columbus, Ohio, August 30, 1916. On the wedding invitations was printed: "at home: Cambridge, Mass."⁴⁸

Meanwhile Charles Lynch, pursuing his work with his usual diligence, had need of law clerks. After Lawrence had graduated from Harvard June 21, 1917, Judge Lynch asked his son to come to Charleston to work for him. Lawrence was licensed to practice law in the courts of the State of West Virginia at the Supreme Court of Appeals on October 9, 1917.⁴⁹ Lawrence and Gretchen soon left Charleston in order that they would be in their hometown for the birth of their first child Barbara Virginia who arrived December 5, 1917.⁵⁰ They moved to Charleston early in 1918 and established living quarters on the third floor of the house which Judge Lynch had purchased in 1913 on Quarrier Street.

In addition to his court duties, Judge Lynch worked so actively in the Methodist Episcopal Church that he was included Who's Who in American Methodism in 1916. He had been elected president of the board of trustees of West Virginia Wesleyan College in 1912 and continued as president for fourteen years, a position which meant he must be in Buckhannon for board meetings all the years he was living in Charleston.⁵¹ In 1918 the Buckhannon District of the church published a pamphlet with endorsements by churches of the district and the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Charleston for Judge Charles Lynch to be Lay Delegate to the general conference of the church in Des Moines, Iowa, in May 1920. He was elected and attended the conference.⁵²

One can catch from letters written by Gretchen Spindler Lynch to her father 1919-21 that Mary Virginia Lynch reveled in the social life required of the wife of a justice of the supreme court. Social etiquette of the time required that ladies make formal calls leaving cards which were an invitation for a return visit. Mary Virginia Lynch included her daughter-in-law when the wife of the supreme court judge received visitors. Gretchen complained to her father that there was little conversation during such visits beyond the state of the weather and that she preferred a life where one had only a few close friends.⁵³ About the same time of the birth of her second daughter, Martha Gretchen, in Clarksburg March 19, 1920⁵⁴, Gretchen was encouraging her husband Lawrence to return to private practice in Clarksburg.

Judge Charles Lynch had been president of the supreme court in 1917, when he swore into office the governor, and again in 1921. At the close of his second term as president, he resigned effective December 31, 1921, three years before his term as judge was scheduled to end "because of ill health and the burdensome task. He later recovered his health sufficiently to resume the practice of law and to look after banking, real estate, and other interests the same as before he went on the bench."⁵⁵

On January 11, 1922, the new president of the supreme court said in part: "...It would be next to impossible to enumerate the instances of [Judge Lynch's] helpfulness in the disposition of the many intricate and important problems submitted to the court within the period of his service, or to portray the cheerfulness, alacrity and courtesy with which it was rendered. Association of the members of the court begets a comradeship that is deep, strong, beautiful beyond the power of words to describe... in the administration of settled law, just interpretation of new law, and the application of both to the rapid mutations of all phases of life and business, incident to modern growth and development. In this great work, Judge Lynch has valiantly done his full share, with the modesty, reserve, courage and ability of the consummate jurist."⁵⁶

Judge Lynch and his wife Mary Virginia again took up residence at 403 Lee Street; their son Lawrence and his wife Gretchen established a residence next door at 411 Lee Street. Lynch & Lynch opened offices on Court Street in Clarksburg.

When Charles Lynch had been a legislator in the 1890's "his clarity of thought and chastity of language in framing bills for enactment elicited the admiration of his colleagues". In 1925 the governor of the state, knowing of Lynch's talent and knowledge of West Virginia law, appointed the retired judge a member of the Codification Commission of West Virginia to revise and codify the statute law of the state. Judge Lynch served on the commission until the completion of the first edition.⁵⁷ The finished work is a crowning accomplishment of a brilliant career for the jurist.

Judge Lynch died at his home at nine o'clock in the morning of Tuesday, September 6, 1932. His funeral was held Sunday, September 11, in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Clarksburg. Burial was in the Elkview Masonic Cemetery.⁵⁸

The will of Judge Lynch filed in the Harrison County Courthouse was the one he made in November 1897 with his wife as executrix.⁵⁹ Mary Virginia Lynch lived until April 3, 1939⁶⁰. After her death Mary Hyland, faithful housekeeper for the family, continued to live in the house at 403 Lee Street until her death July 17, 1941.⁶¹ The house stood closed with contents intact until after the death of Gretchen Spindler Lynch in 1980,⁶² when the property was sold and the house razed to make way for the eastern extension of Washington Irving High School.

FOOTNOTES

1. Children of James and Catharine Stout Lynch were Ruhama Pindle Lynch (1/15/1836-4/14/1858), John Perry Lynch (4/25/1839-11/16/1899), Peter Irwin Lynch (2/1/1841-1/26/1915), Hiram Lynch (8/1844-9/28/1916), Mary Columbia Lynch (7/11/1846-4/15/1899), Hartman Lynch (9/13/1848-1/5/1849), Charles Wesley Lynch (3/11/1851-9/8/1932), Rosberry Carr Lynch (10/17/1852-2/3/1855), Benjamin Stout Lynch (3/5/1854-3/13/1855), James Albert Lynch (11/1/1858-2/17/1864). "Record of Descendants of James Lynch and Catharine Jane Stout Lynch as compiled by Florence M. Lynch, May 6, 1920". Charles Wesley Lynch Papers owned by Gary S. Weiner.
2. James Lynch, a farmer and stockman, was one of the eleven "wisest, best, and most discreet men" chosen at the April 22, 1861, Clarksburg meeting to attend the first Wheeling convention on May 13, 1861. Harrison County justices on July 18, 1853 named James Lynch one of six commissioners to build the third Harrison County Courthouse. He was a marshal of the Harrison County Fair in 1867. Dorothy Davis, History of Harrison County, pp. 116, 183, 476.
3. The Lynch homestead, which was destroyed by fire in the early twentieth century, stood near and south of the West Fork River one-half mile west of the mouth of Brown's Creek near Mt. Clare. Obituaries from Newspapers of Northern West Virginia, second series, Vol. 2, p. 349.
4. Ibid.
5. Charles Lynch borrowed \$20 for travel expenses to Burning Springs, money he paid back in two installments after he began drawing \$75 a month for teaching. Obituaries from Newspapers of Northern West Virginia, 2d series, Vol. 2, p. 349.
6. Waitman Barbe, Alumni Record, West Virginia University, 1903, pp. 59-60.
7. Charles W. Lynch Papers in the possession of Gary S. Weiner.
8. Carrie L. Parker, Teachers' Institute in West Virginia, p. 2.
9. George W. Atkinson and Alvaro F. Gibbens, Prominent Men of West Virginia, p. 694.
10. Dorothy Davis, p. 623
11. Bills for \$6.00 made out to "Prof. Lynch" went sent as each volume was shipped from Cincinnati, Ohio. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
12. Atkinson and Gibbens, Prominent Men of West Virginia, p. 694.
13. Barbe, Alumni Record, pp. 59-60. In 1884 Lynch and J. Philip Clifford practiced in the law firm "Lynch & Clifford, Office - Main Street, Opposite Court House." Clarksburg News, Clarksburg WV, April 26, 1884.
14. Davis, p. 169.
15. Ibid., p. 169.
16. Barbe, pp. 59-60.
17. Pittsburgh Female College, Annual Catalogue 1877-78, Charles W. Lynch Papers.
18. Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette, Pittsburgh PA., June 14, 1878, Charles Lynch Papers.
19. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
20. Leaves of Affection, Charles W. Lynch Papers.
21. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
22. Harrison County WV, Marriage Record, Vol. 5, p. 204.
23. Margaret Perry, a graduate of Mt. Holyoke College and a teacher in Clarksburg 1871-5, wrote from Taunton, Massachusetts, that she would not be able to attend the wedding. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
24. In 1886 Lynch purchased for \$1,000 a lot on Lee Street and the next year he purchased for \$850 one half of lot No. 7 adjoining the land he had bought a year earlier. The Charles W. Lynch house was razed in 1981 to make way for the east extension of Washington Irving High School. Harrison County WV, Deed Book No. 71, p. 478; No. 73, p. 385.
25. "Record of Descendants of James Lynch and Catharine Jane Lynch, as compiled by Florence M. Lynch this the 6th day of May, 1920", Charles W. Lynch Papers.
26. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
27. Charles Lynch to Mary Virginia Lynch March 8, 1891. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
28. Ibid.
29. "Record of the Descendants of James Lynch and Catharine Lynch.....". Charles W. Lynch Papers.

30. Clarksburg Telegram, Clarksburg, WV, Nov. 23, 1894, Charles W. Lynch Papers.
31. Harrison County WV, Deed Book 62, p. 163.
32. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
33. "Record of the Descendants of James Lynch and Catharine Lynch.....", Charles W. Lynch Papers.
34. Wheeling Register, Wheeling WV, Sept. 19, 1897, Charles W. Lynch Papers.
35. Clarksburg City Directory, 1902-03.
36. Clarksburg, a Bicentennial Album, p. 64.
37. Ibid.
38. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
39. Ibid.
40. The Morning Herald, Clarksburg WV, Oct. 10, 1909, Charles W. Lynch Papers.
41. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
42. Clarksburg, a Bicentennial Album, p. 64.
43. Who's Who in West Virginia, 1916.
44. Mary Virginia Lynch to Gretchen Spindler, Sept. 30, 1913, Charles W. Lynch Papers.
45. Kanawha County WV, Deed Book No. 141, p. 340.
46. Who's Who in West Virginia, Vol. 1, 1939.
47. Lawrence R. Lynch to John Wesley Spindler, Oct. 23, 1914, Charles W. Lynch Papers.
48. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
49. Ibid.
50. "Record of Descendants of James Lynch and Catharine Jane Stout Lynch. . ." Charles W. Lynch Papers.
51. Obituaries from Newspapers of Northern West Virginia, second series, Vol. 2, p. 352.
52. Charles W. Lynch Papers.
53. Ibid.
54. "Record of Descendants of James Lynch and Catharine Jane Stout Lynch. . ." A son, Charles Wesley Lynch was born to Gretchen and Lawrence Lynch November 26, 1922, Harrison County WV, Record of Births Vol. 11, p. 144.
55. Obituaries from Newspapers of Northern West Virginia, second series, Vol. 2, p. 350.
56. Ibid., p. 351.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., p. 375.
59. Harrison County WV, Will Book Vol. 16, p. 447.
60. Harrison County WV, Record of Deaths Vol. 12, p. 155.
61. Ibid., p. 117.
62. Lawrence Lynch died January 9, 1964. Harrison County WV, Record of Deaths Vol. 23, p. 156.

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