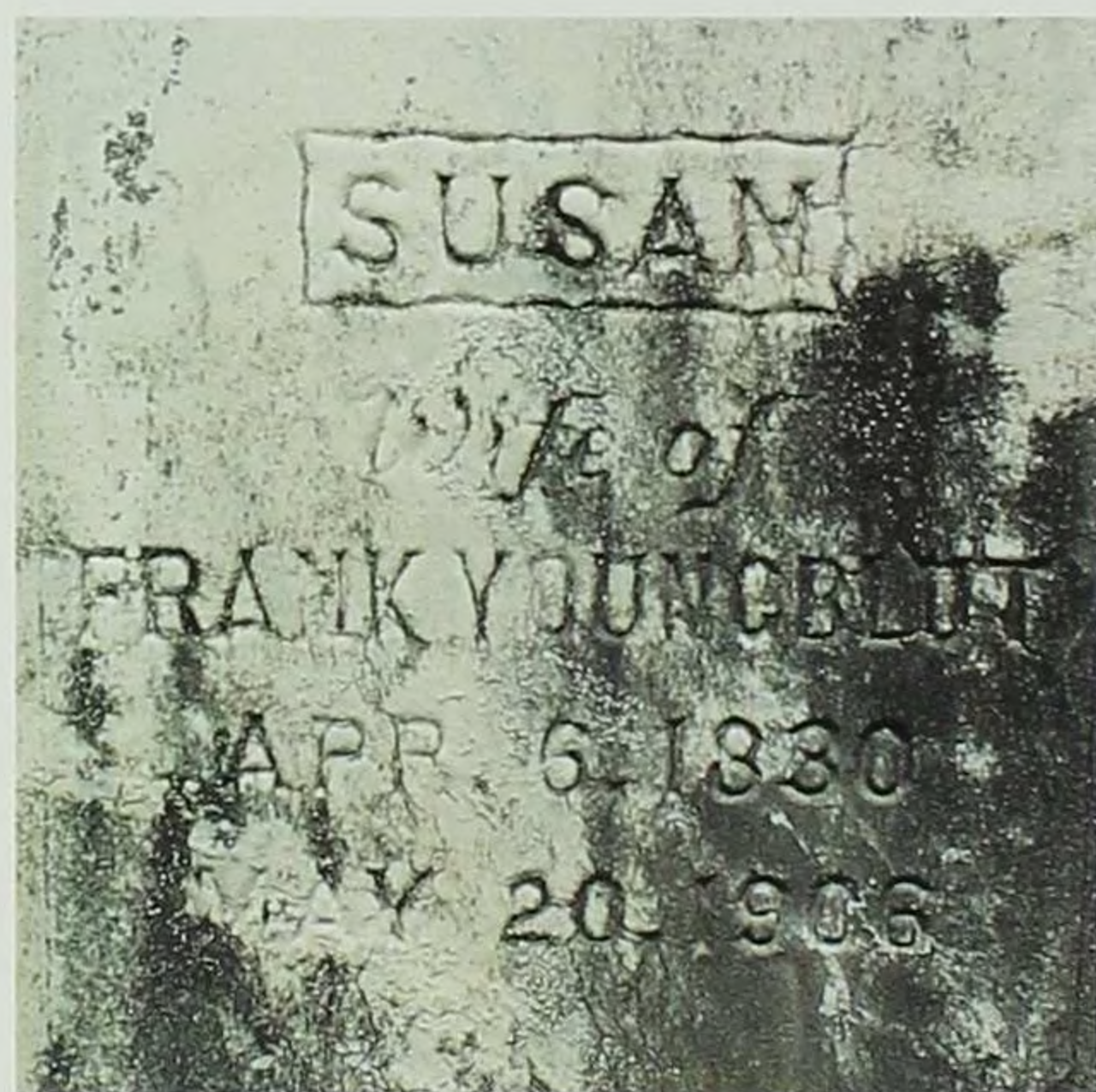


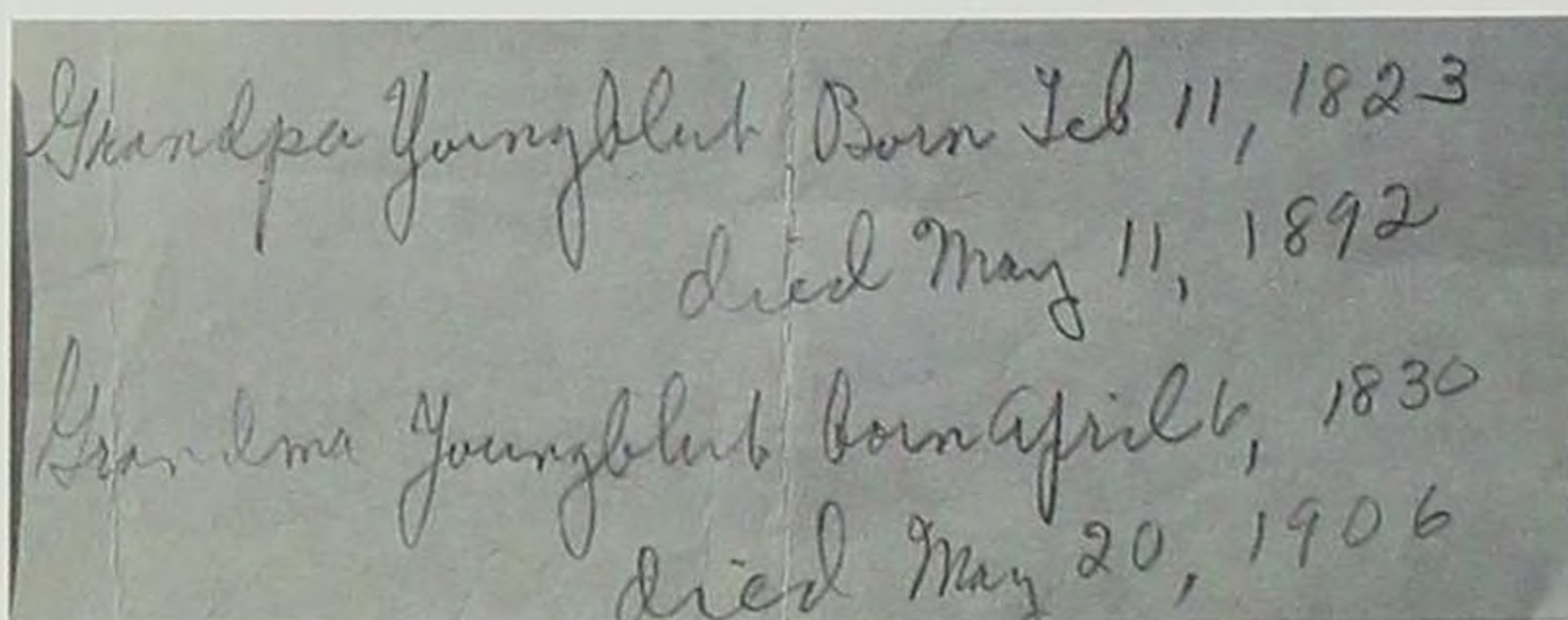
Left: List of Susanna's children, including Barbara. Above: Author and Bible where list was found.



In Search



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY THE AUTHOR



More puzzle pieces, from middle left: Susanna's grave marker in Gilbertville. Frank Bunkers and Lillian Welter, 1908. From lower left: Our Lady of Consolation in Niederfeulen church. Family records ("Grandma Youngblut" is Susanna).

“There may come to be places in our lives that are second spiritual homes—closer to us in some ways, perhaps, than our original homes. But the home tie is the blood tie. And had it meant nothing to us, any other place thereafter would have meant less, and we would carry no compass inside ourselves to find home ever, not anywhere at all. We would not even guess what we had missed.”

—From Eudora Welty's essay "Place in Fiction" in *The Eye of the Story and Other Essays* (1956)

h of Susanna

by Suzanne Bunkers

FOR MANY YEARS, author Eudora Welty's words have inspired me to ask, What is the "home tie," the "blood tie," in my life? What defines "home" for me? My sense of the home tie, the blood tie, derives not only from places but also from people. "Home" is linked to my search for Susanna.

Susanna Simmerl, my great-great-grandmother, was born in Niederfeulen, Luxembourg, in 1831. Susanna spent her first twenty-six years in Luxembourg. Then, in 1857, she immigrated to the United States, where she married Frank Youngblut, another Luxembourger who had come to the United States in 1853. Susanna and Frank, who farmed near Gilbertville, Iowa, had nine children. Frank Youngblut died in 1893, and Susanna died in 1906.

These facts briefly outline the life of Susanna

Simmerl Youngblut. But, as I have learned during the past thirteen years, facts are only the tip of the genealogical iceberg; they do not tell the whole story. To find and assemble more pieces of the puzzle, I have needed to search in unconventional places, and I have needed to come to terms with a complicated web of ideas and feelings about the many meanings of "home."

For me, "home" is a green house on Long Street in Granville, Iowa, where I spent the first eighteen years of my life. "Home" is a white house on Carroll Street in Mankato, Minnesota, where I have lived for the past thirteen years. "Home," in a larger sense, is the entire midwestern United States, where I have spent my entire life.

"Home" is also my family of origin—reaching back through the generations, and forward into my daughter's (and future) generations.



The author's genealogical search for her great-great-grandmother led her to Niederfeulen, Luxembourg.

"Home" is Luxembourg, the tiny European country that my maternal and paternal ancestors left when they immigrated to the United States. They began arriving here in the 1840s, settling near the Mississippi River, just outside Dubuque, in the tiny farming communities of New Vienna and Luxemburg, Iowa. From eastern Iowa, their descendants spread across the state, south to Gilbertville and west to Granville, eventually crossing into the Dakotas and Minnesota. Most of my ancestors were *journaliers*, that is, day laborers—Luxembourgers who had little money or possessions, individuals for whom immigration to the United States most likely promised opportunities for a better life.

"Home," for me as a university teacher, is also the scholarly community that shapes the way I do my research. Reading and teaching about women in literature, analyzing approaches to women's writing, and asking questions about the concept of *woman* are central to my work. Finally, "home" represents the connections I have made, the links I have forged with others who share a strong commitment to

studying the lives of forgotten American women.

My weaving of the scholarly with the personal, the geographical, and the cultural has several strands. In reconstructing the lives of women whose daily lives generally passed unnoticed by historians and literary theorists, I am exploring how my forebears' experiences and values might have shaped my own outlook. I am learning the importance of interweaving the tapestry of my own life with the tapestries of other women's lives. I am analyzing directions in my own life, choices I have made, decisions that have affected my beliefs and strategies for daily living. I know that my experience as a mother and as a daughter is central to my study of Susanna's life. During the past thirteen years, as my own life has changed, I have formulated—and discarded—many theories about who she might have been. Thus, in studying my ancestor's life, I am exploring the psychological terrain traversed by many generations of my family, so that someday my daughter might have a "map" to help her discover where she has come from.

MY SEARCH FOR SUSANNA began in 1980, when I made my first trip to Niederfeulen, Luxembourg, accompanied by my cousin, Frank Klein. At the time, the two of us were writing the history of the Kleins (Frank's paternal and my maternal ancestors), who had emigrated from Luxembourg to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Some of the Kleins had once lived in Niederfeulen, and, as Frank and I searched through the parish and civil records and met several cousins, I discovered that my paternal ancestors, the Simmerls, had also once lived in Niederfeulen.

When I began my search for my great-great-grandmother, Susanna Simmerl, I knew nothing about her except for what I had gleaned from short notations in the parish and civil records. I learned that Susanna had been born to Angela Hottua and Theodore Simmerl on April 6, 1831. Although I found nothing about her childhood or adolescence, civil records revealed that at age twenty-five, Susanna had given birth to her first child, a daughter named Barbara Simmerl, on December 30, 1856. Yet the parish baptismal records listed Susanna's mother, Angela Simmerl, as Barbara's mother, and labeled Barbara *filia naturalis* [illegitimate daughter]. No father's name was listed on either the parish or the civil record of Barbara's birth.

I realized that I needed to consider carefully the implications of "legitimacy" and "illegitimacy." Within the almost exclusively Catholic culture of nineteenth-century Luxembourg, a *filia naturalis* would not have been viewed in the same light as a "legitimate" daughter. Barbara Simmerl's baptismal record, which listed her grandmother Angela as her mother, had wiped Barbara's biological mother, Susanna, out of existence. How could I find Susanna again?

Although I knew that Susanna and Barbara had immigrated to the United States sometime before 1875, I didn't learn the circumstances surrounding their immigration until 1984, when I was able to study the passenger list for the ship *William B. Travis*, which sailed from Le Havre, France, early in 1857, arriving in New York City on May 6. Listed among the ship's passengers were Susanna Simmerl, aged twenty-one, and Peter Simmerl, aged twenty-

five. (Both Susanna's and her brother's ages appear to have been mistaken. According to church and civil records in Luxembourg, Susanna Simmerl was twenty-six and Peter was thirty at that time.)

Although I was puzzled not to find Barbara's name on the ship's passenger list, I took it for granted that, because she was an infant, she might not be listed there. Surely, I imagined, Susanna had been a heroic woman who had taken her infant daughter and sailed for America, no doubt to escape the shaming to which she would have been subjected in her native village. Susanna must have hoped to find a more hospitable climate in the United States where, with her child, she could make a fresh start.

I clung to this "heroic mother" theory despite my intuition that certain things just didn't add up. For instance, by 1870, according to U.S. census records, Angela Simmerl was living with her son Peter in Luxemburg, Iowa, not far from Dubuque. The same census records listed Barbara as a thirteen-year-old servant girl working in a neighboring family's household. The census also indicated that Susanna Simmerl Youngblut was living with her husband, Frank, and their young children on a farm near Gilbertville.

How and when had Angela and Barbara come to the United States? Why was young Barbara working as a domestic servant on a farm near Luxemburg, Iowa, and not living with her mother, Susanna, on the Youngblut farm near Gilbertville? I did not yet have any answers to these questions.

BY 1875, when Barbara was nineteen, she had married twenty-seven-year-old Henry Bunkers at Dyersville, Iowa. Church and civil records also revealed that the young couple had settled on a farm near Granville, a few hundred miles to the west. There they raised twelve children, one of whom, Frank Bunkers, married Lillian Welter in June 1908. Frank and Lillian Bunkers became my paternal grandfather and grandmother.

I remembered my childhood walks in the

Granville cemetery with my father, Tony Bunkers. We'd stop to pray at the graves of his parents, Frank and Lillian. Sometimes Dad would cry when he'd repeat the story of his father's unexpected death from a heart attack in 1926. His mother had been left with six children. Dad, the second youngest, had been only five years old. The family had struggled to make ends meet during the Great Depression, and Dad eventually went to live in the home of his maternal aunt and uncle. As a result, Dad knew little about his Bunkers ancestors.

After stopping at Frank and Lillian Bunkers's graves, Dad and I would walk over to the main Bunkers family plot, where my great-grandfather Henry Bunkers was buried next to my great-grandmother, Barbara Simmerl Bunkers. A small grey obelisk stood next to Barbara's grave. Inscribed on it was the name *Angela Simmerl* and the date of death, 1897.

"Who was she?" I asked.

"I don't know," Dad replied.

Now, over twenty-five years later, I did know who Angela was, and I wondered why she was buried in Granville, next to her granddaughter, Barbara, rather than in Gilbertville, next to her daughter, Susanna. That question opened the door for many more questions. But I didn't have time to search for answers. It was 1985. I was teaching full time, and I was pregnant with my own daughter. I wanted to give her a "family" name, yet one that would give her a sense of individuality.

"How did you give me my name?" I asked my mother on a visit to Granville.

"Oh," she smiled, "I liked that song, 'Oh, Susannah,' and I named you Suzanne."

So that was how I came to bear the name of my great-great-grandmother, although my parents had not even known it was a "family" name. Intrigued by the mystery I was beginning to unravel, I began to feel that my parents *had* unconsciously named me after Susanna. Now I wanted my daughter to share our ancestor's name.

On October 17, 1985, Rachel Susanna was heartily welcomed to this world by family and friends. As an unmarried mother, I knew I could count on receiving far more emotional support than Susanna would have received 130 years earlier, when her daughter Barbara had

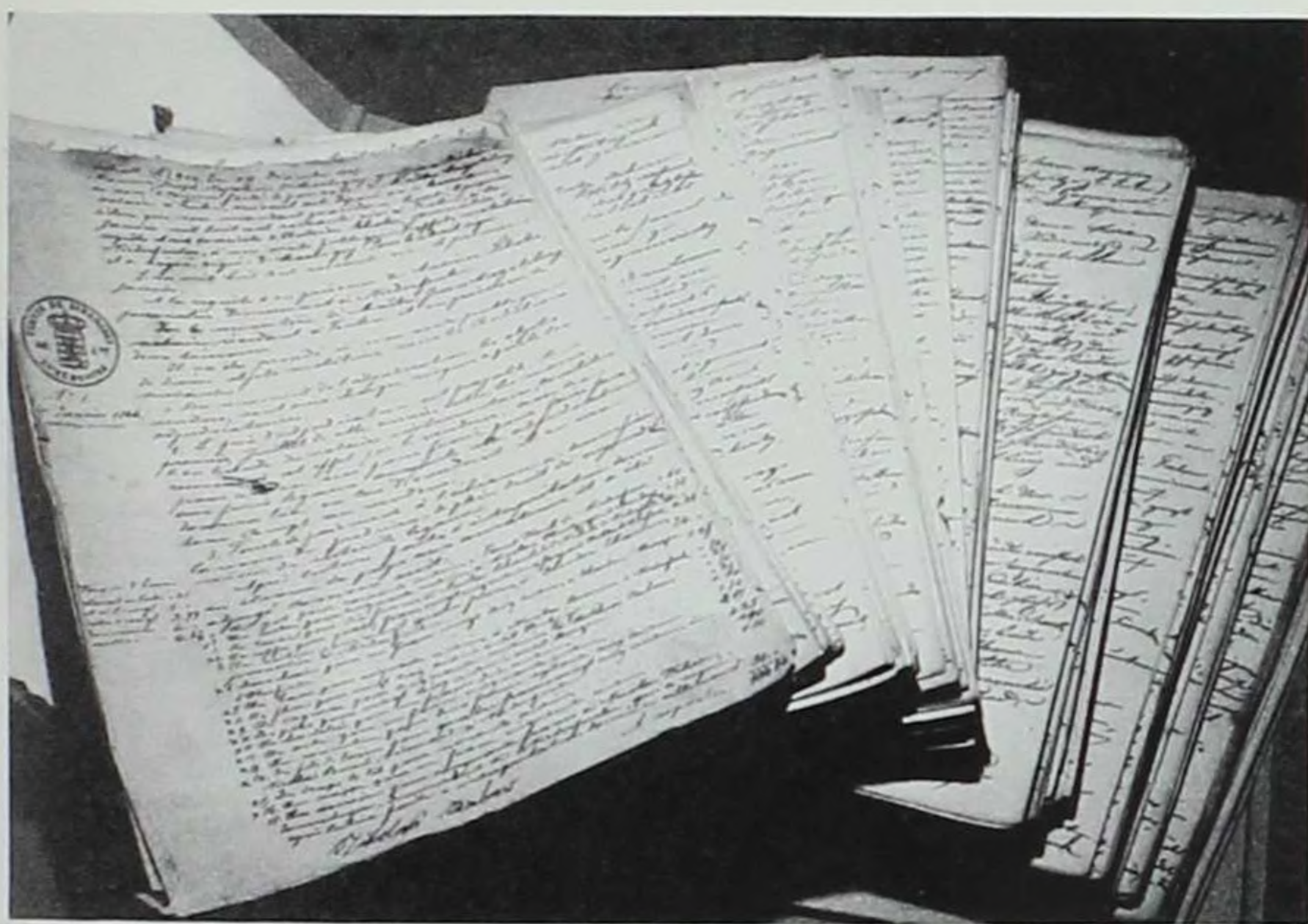
been born. I also had an education and a good job doing what I loved to do—teaching. Unlike Barbara, Rachel would know her biological father, and Rachel would be listed on her baptismal certificate as the daughter of her mother.

TWO YEARS AFTER Rachel's birth, I received a Fulbright research grant to travel to Luxembourg and Belgium, where I planned to study the daily lives of nineteenth-century working women. On a blustery morning in January 1988, with Rachel, her toys, and my research materials in tow, I left Mankato for Europe. For nearly half a year my daughter and I lived in Brussels, Belgium, where Rachel attended a *garderie* (preschool) while I studied historical records in libraries, archives, and parishes. In late March, my mother, Verna Bunkers, who had never been to Luxembourg, came to visit us. Together, my mother, my daughter, and I walked the streets of Niederfeulen and visited the homes of our cousins, the Lindens and the Steiwers. On Easter Sunday morning, we attended Mass in St. Roche Church, where Angela, Susanna, and Barbara had worshipped over 125 years before. We wove our way through the crowded graveyard, where many generations of our ancestors had been buried.

Another day, while my mother watched Rachel, I studied nineteenth-century census records for Niederfeulen. They confirmed my hunch: Barbara had not gone to America with Susanna. In fact, during the late 1850s and early 1860s, as the census records revealed, young Barbara Simmerl was living in Niederfeulen with her widowed grandmother, Angela Simmerl.

My theory of the "heroic mother" collapsed, replaced by a new theory of the "deserting mother." Rocking Rachel to sleep in our Brussels apartment one night, I raged at Susanna: "How could you have left your baby behind in Luxembourg? What kind of a mother were you?"

In an attempt to answer these questions, I began to investigate how Angela and Barbara



Brittle notary records from 1860s reveal clues about Susanna's property and her daughter's immigration.

Simmerl got to America. Jean Ensich and Jean-Claude Muller, scholars who specialized in Luxembourg immigration history, suggested that I study notary records for the village of Niederfeulen. Those records, they explained, would detail all transactions, such as the sale of property or possessions, that helped finance immigration.

So, one spring afternoon I hiked to the state archives, housed in what had been a Luxembourg City military hospital a hundred years before. There, in a dusty packet tied with twine, was a thick stack of notary records for the Feulen area during the 1860s. Midway through the stack, I found a packet of brittle legal papers written in French and dated March 29, 1866. The name *Simmerl* was scrawled across the top of the first page. Here I found legal authorization for the sale of Angela Simmerl's property in Niederfeulen prior to her immigration to the United States. Barbara Simmerl, aged ten, was listed as accompanying Angela on the journey.

Neatly folded inside these Luxembourgish notary papers were legal papers handwritten in English, labeled "Black Hawk County, Iowa," and dated December 18, 1865. These papers stated that Susanna and Frank Youngblut had given Susanna's brother, Peter Simmerl, power of attorney to sell whatever property Susanna might still possess in Luxembourg. Both sets of

legal papers bore the signatures of Susanna, Angela, Peter, and Barbara Simmerl.

Together, these legal papers completed an important piece of the puzzle: Barbara had remained with her grandmother, Angela, when her mother, Susanna, left Luxembourg for America in 1857. During the next years, as the unfolding American Civil War discouraged immigration, Susanna had remained in the United States while her mother and daughter had remained in Luxembourg. Finally, in 1866, the three were reunited.

Some years ago, I was visiting my mother and other relatives in Granville. My cousin Barbara Jacobs (named after Barbara Simmerl Bunkers) showed the Bunkers family Bible to me. There, a notation listed Grandma [Susanna] Youngblut as Barbara's mother and Grandpa [Frank] Youngblut as Barbara's father, even though he could not have been her biological father. Ironically, this family record attempted to accomplish something that the church and civil records did not: restore Susanna to her place as Barbara's mother and provide a father for Barbara, thus belatedly "legitimizing" her.

Now, as I mull over all of these records, I am fairly certain that Susanna and Barbara never lived together as mother and daughter, and that Angela Simmerl lies buried next to her granddaughter Barbara because Barbara cared for Angela in her old age. Angela was both grand-



Barbara and Henry Bunkers (adults in front row) and their family. Barbara was the daughter of Susanna Simmerl Youngblut, but was raised by her grandmother, leading to interesting questions for the author.

mother and mother to Barbara. Susanna was—and was not—Barbara's mother.

LIKE MY THEORY of Susanna as the “heroic mother,” my theory of Susanna as the “deserting mother” was shattered. In fact, the more I studied Susanna's life, the less qualified I felt to pass judgment on her actions. And the less willing I was to believe that I could neatly sum up what her life meant—or what it means.

The dynamics of mother-daughter relationships are complex; feelings between mothers and daughters are powerful and often contra-

dictory. As I study Susanna's relationships with Barbara and Angela through the filter of my relationships with my own mother and daughter, I am better able to appreciate the distinctions between acts of mothering and the cultural institution of motherhood, past and present. More specifically, my search for Susanna has deepened my understanding of how my own experience of daughterhood and motherhood inevitably affects my interpretations of what Susanna did and why she did it. My search has helped me gain perspective on a woman whom I never knew but whose experiences and decisions are interwoven with my own. It has made me grateful for my close relationships with my

mother and my daughter. The story of Susanna, slowly pieced and carefully woven, will become a warm and cherished coverlet for myself and for my descendants.

Two summers ago, when Rachel and I visited our family in Granville, I was able to take another look at the Bunkers family Bible. This time I noticed two loose-leaf pages tucked inside its back cover. It was a letter, written in the late 1960s, from "Aunt Sophie and Virginia" O'Connor of Waterloo, Iowa, to my cousin Barbara Jacobs of Granville, Iowa. The letter listed the names of Susanna and Frank Youngblut's children. Barbara's name was first on the list.

As I held the letter and Bible, I felt sad that my cousin, who had died in 1984, hadn't lived long enough to know how far my search for Susanna had progressed. She would have been glad to know that I had walked Immaculate Conception parish cemetery in Gilbertville, Iowa, until I had found Susanna and Frank Youngblut's graves. On my visits to the Gilbertville area, many of my Youngblut cousins had welcomed me into their homes, eager to share what we could piece together about our ancestor Susanna's life. Susanna and Frank Youngblut had apparently enjoyed a long, happy marriage. Their children had prospered, and their descendants still farm the old home place, on the banks of the Cedar River, just a half-mile from the Gilbertville railroad depot.

IN EARLY JUNE 1993, Rachel and I flew back to Europe for our first visit in five years. After spending a few days in Brussels and Ostende with friends, we traveled by train to Luxembourg, where our cousins, Erny and Nico Linden, again welcomed us into their home in Niederfeulen. Erny explained that on Sunday, June 13, Luxembourgers would celebrate Mother's Day. She invited Rachel and me to join her in a parish procession honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary. Led by the parish priest and acolytes, who carried a statue of Mary, Our Lady of Consolation, the procession wound its way through the streets of Niederfeulen to St. Roche's Church at the center of the village. As



Author and her daughter Rachel (right) were welcome guests of cousin Erny Linden (left) in Niederfeulen, and joined a parish procession on Mother's Day.

the priest gave the benediction, the congregation sang "Tantum Ergo" and "O Salutaris Hostia." The strains of these Latin hymns carried me back to the St. Joseph Church of my childhood—to the pungent incense, the varnished wooden pews, the unpadded kneelers. Now, as I tried to join in the singing, my voice broke, and tears rolled down my cheeks. Rachel looked over at me and took my hand. "It's okay, Mama," she whispered.

After the benediction, she and I lingered a while inside the church. We walked down the center aisle to the entry way, and I pointed out the baptismal font where our ancestors had been christened. Rachel and I climbed the nar-

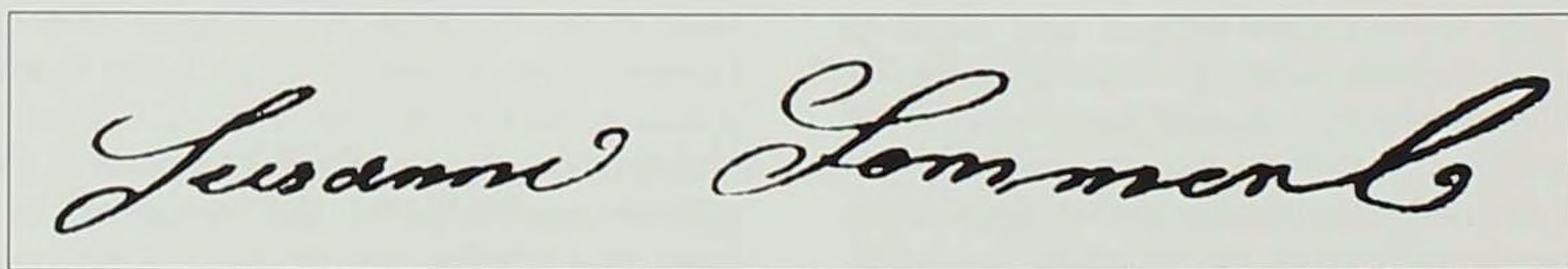
row steps to the choir loft, where our ancestors might once have sung during Mass. There my daughter and I discovered a cache of life-sized statues, their paint chipped and faded, stored behind a curtain next to the pipe organ. I realized that these statues likely stood on the altars of St. Roche Church when Susanna and, in turn, Barbara, had been girls. Then Rachel and I retraced our steps down from the choir loft and rejoined our cousin Erny. As the three of us walked back down the streets of Niederfeulen, I knew I was home.

POSTSCRIPT: I'll be stopping by the Gilbertville cemetery again next summer to leave flowers for Susanna, as I do every year. Sometimes Rachel goes with me to visit Susanna's grave. Together we sit by Susanna's headstone, and I tell my daughter what I've pieced together about her great-great-great-grandmother's life so long ago. The last time I visited Susanna's grave, I made a rubbing of what remains of its inscription:

Now no more will join our number,
Thou no more our song will know,
But again we hope to meet thee,
When the day of life is fled,
And in heaven with joy to greet thee,
Where our farewell tears are shed.

When my daughter asks me, "Mama, where did I come from?" a richer texture underlies my answers, shaped by the quilt of experience that I have sewn. My sense of "home," of the "home tie," the "blood tie," continues to evolve. Now, as I study Susanna's life, I reflect on the wisdom of feminist author bell hooks, who writes:

"I had to leave that space I called home to move beyond boundaries, yet I needed also to return there. . . . Indeed the very meaning of 'home' changes with experience of decolonization, of radicalization. At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference."



Susanna's signature, as it appeared on property transaction papers. Quotation at end of article is from bell hooks, *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990).