

## LETTERS FROM THE PAST

These letters from our ancestors provide us today with some insight into what life was like at some points in our past.

We take for granted the ability to get into our cars and drive long distances, crossing large rivers, to visit loved ones. Our first letter, written in December, 1843, provides a glimpse at the frustrations of trying to visit a loved one before bridges were built across the larger rivers on the frontier.

[from Sue Hankins] My mother, Elizabeth Squires Spray, wrote in her Squire history that E. E. Squires, her father, met "Annie Finch...She came from a well-to-do family who had come early in the 1880's to Kearney from Dallas City, Illinois. Her father and brothers opened a general store, later just a dry good store [Empire Store] and operated it for 35 years. A great part of the time the Finch family lived together in a huge house....one brother through 3 marriages, the father and mother, my mother who was the youngest, a sister, two nieces, and a cousin, Jack."

The father and mother mentioned in the above paragraph are the "Lib" and "Finch" of the following love letter. On the envelope, done in beautiful script lettering, is "Miss Elizabeth Bostwick, Ft. Madison, Iowa" and the letter therein, dated Dec. 10, 1843, is from Nauvoo, across the Mississippi River in Illinois.

Dear 'Lib'.

I intended to have been up today, but business matters prevented. I send you the articles from St. Louis, thinking you would be anxious to inspect them and to look upon the simple ornaments, that are soon to adorn one that would "shame all ornaments", yet, they are necessary - custom, makes it so. I hope they wil please you. -- and I am quite sure they will.....God only knows when the river will be crossable--I soon, at least by the 8th---if not sooner.....I shall be up to \_oppenien- [word?] store in a few days to remain and attend to business--Business of various kinds---I am anxious to see you. I am always so, and particularly so about these days, but I have not long to harp upon absence, we are soon to be one and inseparable.

May peace, love and melody be our constant and everlasting song.

Yours devotedly

"Finch"

My love to family

They were married January 3, 1844 in Dallas City, Illinois, about 10 miles north of Nauvoo, and in another 100 years or so became my great grandparents.

The following two letters were received by Kay Wolfe's great grandmother, Eliza Ann Nicholas, during the Civil War. The first letter, from a cousin, gives us some clues to what life was like for those who were left at home. The second letter, from a brother, gives us a glimpse of life in the army - on the North's side - toward the end of the war. As you see in the first letter, marital discord is not a twentieth century phenomenon.

Hanoverton, Ohio

Sept 4th 1864

Miss E. A. Nicholas

Dear Cousin

I once more seat my self after a long delay to write a few lines to let you know how we are getting along. We are well at this time and hope these few lines will find you all enjoying the same blessing. I reseved your welcome letter in due time and was happy to hear that you was all well. I had almost thought that you had forgotin me but have changed my mind since your letter came to hand.

We bought a farm and moved on it last April. It is about 3 1/2 [cannot read for sure] miles from [father's]. I have put it a very lonely summer for my man belonged to the home gard and they were called out last May and has not bin home since but his time was up the 19th of August and I am looking for him home every day. You had better think the days semes long to me. Brother Eli has been staying with me and farming the place this summer. He moved in from Iowa last winter and he bought a house in Hanover and his wife took a notion that she would not live with him and locked him out of the house. She is still living in town. She has one of the children-- mother has the older one and I have the youngest one and expect to keep him. I don't knmow what Eli will do yet.

Fathers folks are all well or was the last I seen enny of them P. Hawkins and family are all well they have got a young daughter they call it Emmie. (Luella has bin living with me for the last 4 weeks.

You sayd that you had bin resting this sommer. I think you mite com and stay a while with us. Although the boys have verry nere all gone to war but there is some girls left yet. We would be verry glad to have you come. You spoke of my man's picture. When he coms home we will get some and I will send you one but send your man's as soon as you can for I would like to see him and I will do the same. Elizabeth [Lizzie?] I would like to have her and her man's photograph as soon as they can get them.

We have had a very dry sommer but has ben ranes a plenty for the last 4 or 5 weeks. I milk 2 cows this sommer - butter is 40 cents lbs., coffee is 50 cts a lb. tea 2 dollars lb. Shugar 25 cts for 10 lbs, calico 40 cts yd. muslin 80 cts yard so may see that it is pretty deer having. I believe I have told you all I can think of at this time. I don't want you to leve it as long as you did before you write me but write soon. I wish you ever well and all the rest of the folks.

good by Emmie McQuilkin

This letter was written by Wilson Nicholas during the time he was with the army during the Civil War to his sister, Eliza Ann Nicholas.

Camp in the Suburbs of  
Savannah, Georgia

February 24th 1865

Dear Sister

I recieved your letter to day and was glad to hear from home sweet home and that the folks were all well or so near it that there is no fun in it The boys never were in better spirits than they are now we have a ballroom built in our Company where we make the dust fly every night to the tune of a homemade fiddle which by the way makes pretty good music. I am glad that Jake [Jake Martin] did not bring my music box as it would soon have been sawed in two pieces after Jake came back he spoke to Alf about word that had been sent up in that part of the country and spoke as though he had told who sent the word. Alf supposed it was you and wrote you a letter I do not know what he said and it makes no difference as he was a little made and when he is a little spunky he has no fore thought he thought Jake was mad at him but Jake is not mad at either of us and Jake carries himself more like a gentleman than ever before since he has been in the army. A dance up there is nothing once and a while. Since we have one every night. there was a ball down in St. Andrews hall the eve of the 22nd of this mo admission 5 dollars a couple. Supper three dollars there is a great many deserters from the Rebel army coming in all the time they say Hoods army have most all left him and are in the Swamps. The bushwackers are after them with hounds. One fellow came in while I was on picket who had been hiding from them for eighteen months. he had been shot by them five times and was in a very poor condition from what he had to suffer after he was wounded about a month ago. They say all the rest want to get away and will leave the first opportunity. I do not think the war will last much longer for the rebels are not doing anything and cannot do anything if they wanted to as Sherman is strong enough to go where he wants to. O yes we some extra rations today. We got a lot of pickles and onions. It was some donation or sanitary stuff I do not know which. We got over a dozen pickles for our tent it has three in Alf, Charley West and I myself, and near a peck of injuns. I have not heard from Char since long before we left the Valley. I do not know what is the reason. I shall ask no questions about the gals. I'll wait till I get home to hear the same. We are looking for the paymaster about the last of this month but he may not come after all. today I'll be out working on the earthwork shoveling sand slowly. I can dig a hole in the soft sand large enough to cover myself up in one day, isn't that wonderful to behold when they have me on duty every other day its mighty little diggin they will get me to do, all the company that are not on duty are playing Marbles. I have no more to write this time will another some time. My love to all pretty gals. Write soon.

From your brother

Wilson S. Nicholas

Eliza A. Nicholas

Savannah, Ga.

Other notes from Merle B. niece of Wilson: On the fourth page of this old letter there are water and mud stains. Her mother, daughter of Eliza [married Jacob Martin], said they - Jacob, Eliza and family- were in a Cherokee, Iowa, flood and had to move everything upstairs. They burned corn to keep warm.

She also noted that dancing was expensive in 1865.

Now we move forward in time almost 90 years for a glimpse of life at home during another war, World War II. These two letters provide some insight into the difficulty of obtaining essential equipment at home because so much of our goods were going to the war effort.

[from Mardi Anderson] My paternal grandparents, Henry & Martha Robbins, had three sons, Earl, Ross and Harold, my father. When they retired from the farm to town - Ithaca, Saunders County, Nebraska - my father took over half of the family farm and Earl took the other half. A few months after the U.S. entered World War II, Ross and his wife, LaVerne, moved to Dayton, Ohio, where Ross worked in an airplane plant.

The first letter was written by my mother, Violet Wilson Robbins, to LaVerne & Ross shortly after they moved to Dayton. At that time I was 15 months old and my brother was due to arrive in less than a month. The second letter, written two years later, was also from my mother, this time to my grandfather who had gone to Dayton after the death my grandmother to stay for a while with Ross and LaVerne.

Ithaca Nebr.  
Dec 6, 1942

Dear LaVerne & Ross:

Mardith's in bed, Harold is out doing chores, and supper is cooking, so now is my chance to get at this letter which should have been written weeks ago. When I'm this slow now, what will I be like after Christmas? We're having potatoe soup for supper, and it looks like I've cooked enough for half a dozen people. I wish you were here to eat some too. We had our first real snow yesterday. It snowed all day yesterday and it's been kind of melding today. At least the sun is shining and its been a grand day. I wish Mardith had some overshoes so she could get outside. I know she'd have a lot of fun, because she just loves to be outside. This snow will kind of slow Harolds corn picking. He has only a little over a week left, but now it will be still later. This field he's in now isn't turning out as good as the 20 acre field. This is the field where all the water ran over it last June and it didn't do it any good. I believe he said it would make a little better than 40 bushels to the acre though. The 20 acre field went 51 bu. I only hope he'll be done by Christmas so he can be my "hired girl".

....We're having a lot of trouble now trying to get a seperator and a washing machine. Our seperator is absolutely no good, so Harold has decided he'd have to get a new one. But he found out yesterday he has to get a ration certificate first, and they don't have the r.c yet, so-o-o, the new seperator sits up at Wahoo, the money in the bank, and we skim milk by hand - losing about half our cream - which sells at 46 cents a pound. It all makes sense - doesn't it? As for the washing machine, new ones are out of the question, of course, and second hand ones sell for far more than new ones ever did. But I wish so that we had one. Its so hard to run into town [to her in-laws' home] to wash - and after I have 2 kids to take along it will be still worse. We'll keep looking though, and maybe we'll come across one some day....

Did you know your cousin, Dale Swanson, is married! He was married a week ago yesterday to Doretta Behrens, my old neighbor. He is in the Coast guard and was home for only a couple days. Immediately after the ceremony, he left for Massachusetts or somewhere out east. Gee, poor kids, what fun is it to be married when they have to continue their lives in exactly the same manner as before. I guess we should be pretty thankful as long as we can have our husbands where they belong.

Gilbert [Violet's brother] isn't coaching at Scottsbluff any more because he was reclassified and put into 1-A. That meant he'd have to go to the Army pretty soon, so he is going to be an athletic instructor in the Navy. He tried to get in there last summer but couldn't because he was 4-F. But now that he's 1-A, I guess he can get in the Navy at least that was the last Mom heard a week ago. He hates to leave Scottsbluff because it was such a rise upward for him, but I guess there wasn't much choice....

Love from  
Violet Harold & Mardith

Ithaca Nebr  
Sept. 10, 1944

Dear Dad,

Harold never will get around to writing to you, so in order that you can find out all you want to know, I'll have to do it.

First of all, the alfalfa is in and coming fine. The rye is in, and starting to come through. The ground is already for brome, and he'll plant it this week. He would have got all this seeding done about 2 weeks earlier, but we had quite a lot of rain the last part of August. We needed it though, and the corn is coming fine now. That replant never did amount to much, but the cane you planted is a wonderful crop. Harold will be cutting it before long. He's getting pretty short on feed for the cattle now. He brought them home from town [Grandpa had a pasture by his house on the edge of Ithaca] the day after we got home from Missouri, because they started to get out. They've had plenty of sudan pasture all summer up until now. He has started feeding them oats bundles from the barn. This week he will be getting a supply of prairie hay from Lloyd Miller. Last week he helped Earl haul his hay home from Dorsay Davis' meadow....

Now for the big news! Harold got a brand new John Deere Model B Tractor yesterday. When he was using the Farmall a week ago last Friday, the timing gears was stripped. On Saturday he went up and talked to the Ration Board and one week later they gave him permit to buy a Model B John Deere. It cost \$1128. Harold has paid for all of it and he wants to know if you would care to pay for half of it. It doesn't make a bit of difference to us - just what you want to do. Its all on rubber, with power lift and power take-off. It sits in the garage, and the car sits outside until he gets the corn shelled, so the tractor can go in the driveway [of the corncrib].

He had to get rid of the old tractor before he could get the new one, so he sold it for \$100. That wasn't much, but the most he could possibly get. If he could have kept it, he would have tried fixing it up himself enough so it would run, and get more out of it. But he couldn't do it that way.

Violet and Harold