

Paint by Letters

by Jenny Kaufman

Sometimes life can seem so black-and-white . . . until a forgotten stack of love letters fills it with color.

Cindy Pringle, a forty-seven-year-old photographer, lived with her grandparents for much of her childhood in the big square house that her grandfather's grandfather built in Paxton, Illinois. So, after her grandmother Edna died in 1997, it seemed only natural that Pringle would help ready the place for sale.

It was while she was sorting through memories that she stumbled up on it—a stack of musty old papers wrapped in a blue, silk necktie.

Unwrapping them, Pringle realized they were long-forgotten love letters from her late grandfather Elmer to his then future-wife, Edna.

Pringle savored the letters, discovering details of her grandparents' lives she would have never known otherwise. She learned that Elmer struggled through the winter of 1928 in Chicago, trying to earn money sell-

ing vacuum cleaners while Edna was back in Buckley, Illinois, teaching at a country school. Pringle relished every word but she couldn't help thinking she had only half of the story—her grandfather's side—and wishing all along that she could read her grandmother's responses as well.

Eventually, the Paxton home was sold, and the new owners began a renovation. During the process, a grimy stack of envelopes was unearthed inside the upstairs bathroom wall—Edna's responses, the missing half of the correspondence, stashed away for safekeeping by Elmer years before.

Past Unrealized

Pringle never guessed what a different picture a few words could paint of a couple. But as she read the complete set of letters, she realized how much she had missed of her grandparents' lives. "In my vision before, Grandma and Grandpa were an elderly couple," Pringle says. After reading the letters, she says, "I saw them like a different couple almost."

Elmer wrote of finding Edna's anklet in his Model T and his worries that the car would have flat tires and a dead battery by the time he came home from Chicago for a visit. Edna offered tongue-in-cheek sales pitches to help boost Elmer's career: "I am concerned with giving the American housewife more leisure—to emancipate her from the laborious and unsanitary hand broom—so she may devote more time to civic matters, petitions and such. I have shown countless thousands how the vacuum cleaner may be used to pull the stubborn shoelace from the listless eyelet; to remove the tenacious sock and retrieve the elusive collar button."

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Speaking in Letters

What can you learn from the correspondence of an ancestor? According to genealogist Laura Prescott, “the best things are tales about family, references to siblings, uncles, aunts—even friends of the family you wouldn’t hear about [in official records]. You learn about the rest of the family members and understand them through the eyes of a person back then.”

If you’re not lucky enough to find letters on a closet shelf, don’t give up hope. Prescott says you may also want to look in a few of the following places:

- *College archives and special collections.* Many people leave their personal correspondence to academic libraries. As Prescott points out, “College is an important four years of your life. People have a real affinity for their college.”
- *Local or regional libraries with a mission to preserve records of their area.*
- *Regional or state historical societies.*
- *Ethnic associations.*
- *Manuscript catalogs online.* The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) at the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/nucmc.html) includes listings from a number of archives. Keep in mind that not all archives send their listings to NUCMC; you may have to search some catalogs directly.

Old Words, New Plans

Genealogist Laura Prescott says it’s rare to find both halves of a correspondence, and even stumbling upon just one set of letters can be fascinating. “It’s almost like watching a soap opera,” she says, “watching a person’s events unfold.”

Prescott points out that much of the excitement people feel about their family history is “find[ing] ourselves in our ancestors. We are part of them.” This fact, she says, really hits home when you have the rare opportunity to read that an ancestor had the same thoughts and feelings that you have.

Those mutual sentiments are what drove Pringle to find a way to share the letters. Her initial thought was to compile them into a small book to distribute to family members. But Pringle’s sister-in-law instead suggested the addition of other material—pictures from family members and vintage photos, including some from the online archives of the Chicago Historical Society. Pringle created a historic setting for the book by dropping in recipes, drawings, and ads from the period as well.

Together with her husband Kirby, a newspaper reporter, Pringle built a manuscript of forty-three letters and seventy-four illustrations titled *See You in My Dreams: Love Letters of a Country Teacher and the Eureka Man*. Their goal is to publish the book and distribute it to family members and interested local historical organizations.

Former Friends and Strangers

“Just the fact that [the letters] were discovered is a miracle,” says Pringle. “It seems like a gift, and I just want to share it. It’s a wonderful picture of romance and love at that time.”

Pringle wasn’t the only person affected by the letters. “When I would read excerpts to [husband] Kirby,” she says, “he would see how similar my personality is to [my grandmother’s].” And when an area newspaper ran a story on Pringle’s book and printed a photo of the class Edna taught, one of Edna’s former students wrote Pringle in response, noting that she could still remember the tan dress with brown velvet trim that Edna wore on picture day.

Timeless Travel

Most of us don’t think too much about the parts of our daily lives we’re leaving as artifacts—if we did, we’d probably spell better in e-mail. But when we happen upon a forgotten batch of love letters written by our grandparents or great-grandparents, we learn that a kiss is still a kiss, and that a single, simple sentiment can linger for an eternity.

The project, says Pringle, has been nothing short of a joy. Sure, she admits, sometimes as she reads the letters, she misses her grandparents more than ever, and she realizes just how many questions she will never have the opportunity to ask. But, she says, the mere act of poring over her ancestors’ words also has a positive side—it inspires her to learn more about them. “And it makes you wish time travel were truly possible,” says Pringle. ♡

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