

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

A Letter to Bedford, 1918

Author Unknown

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Couch Crossing, Kentucky

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Dear Joe:-

Am home for a few days before reporting for duty with the Navy June 11th. Joined up last week when the University agreed to give full credit for this year's work if you joined now. Have time on my hands to write so you will receive this intellectual treat of this letter.

Joe, you have always said you were going to write a book about this place and the county picturing the people just as they are. You are not going to do it. I'll agree that you can write and may be able to do better after you have had more university work when you get out of the U. S. Navy, if you ever do.

The reason you are not going to write this book is that you have not lived here the century or more that it requires to get the material together and the little stories and histories at hand. I have the material — passed on to me by my grandmother and many others — but I can not write and you know it.

Q. E. D.----- I write you a letter ever now and again and tell you little things that you write in your book. You write it. I make a truthful soul out of a liar, — when it is written.

I got home yesterday. Came up to Brimstone on the train and rode over with the Mailman in his Tin Lizzie. For the whole seven miles he regaled me with stories. His name is Hale Hivigen, the same fellow who years ago fell under a train and had both legs cut off just above the ankles. He wears false feet and does remarkably well driving the car.

He told me about driving a drummer over the county last winter when it was bitter cold. The drummer's feet were always cold and when he would ask Hale if his feet weren't cold he was amazed when he got a No for an answer. The drummer stood it for two days and then went to a doctor with itching, burning feet. Frostbite. When he got on the train to return to Louisville he proclaimed Hale an iron man. No one here told him any different. Hale thinks that is a wonderful story.

2

The town never looked so beautiful as it does today. The old Locust trees in front of our house are in full foliage but have even now begun to shed a few of their leaves as all Locusts do from spring until fall. If I were not so tall and if she did not want to pet me, my grandmother would have had me out in front sweeping the sidewalk this morning. And I would have been glad to have done it. I just can not tell you how much you appreciate the place of your birth until you know you may be leaving it for the last time. Today I would be happy to sweep her sidewalks.

This morning I sat on the front porch and watched the people go by. This was my lazy way of visiting with all of them. Somehow they will all come by the porch and go halfway up the street and then across to the court house. Incidentally the court house yard looks beautiful since the county bought a lawnmower and quit the old hay cutting mower. Billy Gatewood certainly keeps it nice.

However what I see about the town and county that is so beautiful, something I did not appreciate until I got away and could compare, is its morals and intestinal fortitude, its ability to stand on its own feet both as a government and as individuals. When I refer to morals I mean the individuals themselves.

I had a sort of convention on the front porch before noon. Brother Pollard from the Methodist, Brother Satchwell from the Baptist and Brother Nutter from the Campbellite Christian churches came to visit and talk with my father, who was out in the county trying to sell fire insurance. The way I size it up my daddy knows the troubles and problems, the lack of morals and backsliding of a large segment of the community when the preachers run out of raw material to work on they convention with my father. I did not want to be defeated, I needed company so did my best to make them comfortable. And they were. They sat down and talked things over. I listened.

Morally I would say the community is in excellent shape. No one has come to either of the three preachers this year wailing that some young boy should do right by his innocent daughter. There has been no drunkenness they know of and there is only one family of a wife and five children who are tubercular and the husband is having

hard time. Each church is doing its part in helping this family and making a point to send a member of a different denomination each visit. The whole family needs to be put in a sanitarium.

Joe, these preachers have a new gimmick which you, being interested in education, might like to know about. They visit each of their church members home twice a year but instead of going for a big dinner to the homes of those with school going children, these preachers call after 7:30 P. M. during the week, notice whether the children are doing their school work, and if so, pay attention to the children and leave them with the impression they are much interested in their progress. Good ideal

When the preachers left I sighed. It was the longest time I have kept my mouth shut and stifled my opinion in years. But growing up has taught me at the ripe old age of nineteen that people in small towns remember what you say for a long, long time. You too, Joe, remember that for they will remember what you write much longer.

My grandmother went to the bank this afternoon and by request I accompanied her. She did not need me for anything but she is a lady of the old school of "befo the wah" and such a lady must be escorted. Besides she is proud of her grandson, much prouder than that grandson deserves.

Joe, it is two hundred feet from our house to the bank. The block facing the court house is three hundred feet and we have 150 feet of it, then comes the barber shop, then the drug store and then the bank. I followed along slightly behind my grandmother as she walked up the street. As I walked along I relived the 19 years of my life and in retrospect the 110 years our family has lived on that one spot fronting the public square upon which the courthouse was built.

To explain what caused me to relive those years, Joe, I will have to remind you that my grandmother has never, never changed the style of the skirt she wears. It barely comes above the toe of her shoes in front and it has a train in the back that sweeps the ground. I have watched that train sweep along ever since I can remember.

In 1904 I was past seven years old but my grandmother had to see the

Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis so she took me along. Now don't get things wrong, Joe, the Louisiana Purchase was made in 1803 but somehow St. Louis did not get their exposition off the ground until 1904. Grandma and I went. I remember it well.

I even remember the night ride from Louisville to St. Louis on the train. I was a big strapping boy for seven and my grandmother and the conductor almost came to blows because he said I looked over twelve to him and should have a full fare ticket.

We stayed at a house on Windsor Place in St. Louis, ——— dumpy neighborhood now but it wasn't then, ——— and we went to the "Fair", we called it, every day. It was on these daily trips that I discovered my grandmother's skirt train^s and was introduced to deviled ham in cans. She would buy a can every day and make us sandwiches for the mid-day meal she called a snack. But the train ———.

They had a long exhibition street there they called the Pike. Every day after the first visit I yelled to go down the Pike. and after the second trip I got my wish. I had made friends with an Arab and his camel. Grandma gave me a ride the first day all by myself. Boys and girls saw me and they were standing in line to take a ride when I got off. The second day the Arab gave me the ride free and told my grandmother to bring me back at the same time the next day. Thereafter I was his "shill" and after lunch my grandmother would start down the Pike with her train kicking up dust with me behind her. That's the first but not the last time I remember the train.

My next encounter with her trains was on a trip to Monroe, Indiana from which most supplies were hauled by covered wagon to here. This winter the Ohio was frozen over so my grandmother and I went down in the covered wagon with Lynn Bailey driving.

At Tennyson we crossed over the river ice on a path well marked out for wagons. When we left Lynn my grandmother told him she had some carpeting to buy and would go back with him the next day. He told my grandmother he thought that the ice was going to break up and he would not come back the next day. Then she said she would walk across the ice to Tennyson and meet him there. The ice did break up the next day and she and I started out to walk it. We began to walk away up the river from Tennyson.

When we started she told me to walk behind her ~~and her~~. We would get on a large cake and walk on it toward the Kentucky shore until it hit another large cake and we would transfer to that one. Finally the cakes came up to the dike that ran out in the river downstream from Tennyson and when we hit it we climbed up. Some man in a jolt wagon saw us from the shore and drove out on the dike and picked us up. My grandmother's skirt train was soaking wet where it had swept along the ice. But we met Lynn she got in the back of the covered wagon, took off her skirt and wrung it out and hung it outside the wagon and it was dry before we reached home.

Now don't let any question of my grandmothers modesty disturb you. Her shirts were made for all occasions. When she took off the broadcloth skirt with the train she still had four or five other underskirts on her.

Joe, be not deceived. These two instances in my life depict my grandmother's skirt trains stirring up trouble. Such was not always the case.

Until I was almost out of common school we had a hundred and fifty feet of sidewalk in front of our house made of flat stones brought from the creek. Seventy five years of footstep wear had worn them smooth but Locust trees were planted on the edge of the walk between the walk and the Big road. No sooner did they shed their scented, white blossoms than they began to shed their leaves. I had to ~~sweep~~ ^{sweep} that walk now and again and the leaves got in between the stones and were Hell to get out. However when my grandmother would walk up to the bank she would sweep those leaves to the surface on one side and if I could manage to meet her and walk back with her and keep her on the other side I could have my work half done. Pretty smart for a young'un, Eh?

My father came in a little while ago and I heard him tell my grandmother he was going to the post office and would be back directly and for her to tell me to get ready for supper. I'll stop this and take it up later and surprize her. I'll get ready before she tells me. That won't make her happy. She has always hated for me to do anything without being told. She likes to think she runs the works. She does.

June 1, 1918

Joe, I really stuck my neck out last night at the supper table, --- I told my father and grandmother about the arrangement I was making with you and the letters I was intending to write.

My father's comment was that I had better be doing something useful, at the least, something that would contribute to the war effort. When he said it mattered little what our ancestors did in the past, it was what I did, he was then waving the red flag in front of my grandmother.

Her comment, she had gone through one real war, the War, and she did not want to hear about war. And that she thought it a fine thing for me to "put down" what our people did around here. She reminded him that he had often quoted some famous man as saying that if you were not proud of your ancestors you would not be proud of your posterity. Sounds like Burke.

She did outline a lot of facts that I must tell you. The fact that my great-great-grandfather made a trip with the first surveying party through this country and direct through this spot on May 24, 1774. I will get that from her later in detail.

Then she wants me to tell how they received the U. S. Mail when she was a little girl. And she wants me to tell about how they almost hung a woman, Delia Webster, in the court house yard, right in front of this house, when she was thirteen years old.

She says Uncle Jess can describe the horror of it better than she can because Uncle Jess went out in town and she had to stay in the house. I will talk to Uncle Jess later and get his gory story. You remember him, he is the only survivor of the forty slaves who had when the war ended. I should not say slaves as they were all free but wouldn't leave the "free" bed and board to go off up "there."

Before I get into these old facts I would like to describe the town as it looks on this day. "That is so rare as a day in June." This one will stand out in my memory. I will seldom see it's like this.