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LOVE AND COURTSHIP AT THE TURN OF THE LAST CENTURY

by Patricia Abelard Andersen

Before e-mail and before the telephone was in general use, young men who didn't marry the "girl next door," had to find some way to communicate their interest and affection to the girl they were courting. Letters have been an age-old device for communicating and tell us a great deal about the times in which they were written - what people did, what they thought of various matters and how they expressed themselves. The samples here are from a collection of the letters of Miss Catherine Edna (or Elinor) Beall.

The person who donated the letters to the Montgomery County Historical Society did not know who Miss Edna Beall was, so no biographical material was received with them, but among the letters was a black-edged note to Cornelius Beall which gave the first clue to her parentage.

After piecing together information in the letters and using census and church records, Edna Beall's family has been identified as being descendents of Colonel Ninian Beall. Her father was Cornelius W. Beall, son of Robert Acey Beall. Cornelius was a farm laborer, later a carpenter, born in the District of Columbia in 1847. Her mother, Lucy (Connor) Beall, was a native of Ireland, born in 1858, and they were married at St. Mary's Catholic Church in 1874. Three of their children were baptized at St. John's: James Allen, born in December 1874; Thomas Nolan, born in June 1777; and Catherine Elinor, born in the spring of 1880.

The family was living at Burnt Mills, in eastern Montgomery County, and Catherine Elinor, or "Edna" as she was called, was 19 years old when she received the first of the letters she saved from Griffith Rabbitt.

"2200 12th Street, Washington, D.C.
December 4th 1899

Miss Edna:

Perhaps you will be surprised to hear from me, but: I cannot get my mind from you. I think of you every minute in the day.

So I will endeavor to pen you a few lines. You do not know how much I love you. It is more than any tongue can tell.

You may have thought that I was joking when I told you that I loved you, but I was not. I told you that I loved because I do love you, and, love you from the bottom of my heart. You do not know how it bored me when I saw you go to the theatre with Mr. Smock.

Miss Edna you could make a man of me if you would! But, I am afraid my hopes are in vane. I fell in love with you the first time I met you. And, hope you have a small mite of love in your heart for me.

Perhaps you will think it is very bold of me to write such a letter to you on such short acquaintance, but, my love is so great for you I cannot refrain from it. Well I guess I will close this epistle, hoping to hear from you soon.

Respectfully yours,
Griffith Rabbitt"

Griff wrote again later that month:

"A Merry Christmas and Happy New Year
Washington, D. C.
Dec. 22nd, 1899

Dear Friend Miss Edna: -

I received your most welcome letter, and, was more than glad to hear from you. But, I expected an answer before I got it. I am very sorry that - you don't believe in love at first-sight. I suppose then by that; you do not love me. I have kept my vow. I have not touched a drop of intoxicating liquor since I wrote the last to you.

I do not see how it is that you do not believe in love at first-sight. I think if a person falls in love with another whether first-sight or last sight - it is love just the same. And, what more is there in it. Besides that - I heard a great deal about you before I met you. And, from the information I received about you, as to your winning ways and loveliness, I could not help but fall in love with you.

No, we are not working on the Brightwood line now, we have been working in the eleventh St. car barn for the last two (2) weeks. But, we were put off Wednesday until after Christmas, but, I don't think there will be much more work for me before next Spring. Mr. Skelton and I are thinking of going to Danville Virginia next month.

The reason I asked you not to give up anyone for me was because I do not like to have an enemy. I would not like a trick of that kind myself. Well Miss Edna as it is getting late I will close. Hoping to hear from you sooner than before. Good night -

Most lovingly yours,
Griff"

Griff continued to write in much the same vein in letters dated January 15th 1900 and February 7th 1900. In the latter letter, he notes that:

"I received your short letter this afternoon, when I returned home from work. And as always was very glad to hear from you.

I did not get lost coming home Sunday night. But it was so dark coming through those woods, that at times I was completely blind. I think it was the darkest night that I was ever out. But I will walk again for you (if I lose my way and have to do as your Father said Sunday night; Make a fire and wait until morning). I arrived home at exactly eleven (11) o'clock. About three (3) hours earlier than the time before ...

I broke one of my New Year resolutions last night; I went to the theatre to see a play entitled Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. It is one of the finest I ever saw in my life. I saw it played some years ago by Mr. Richard Mansfield, the great English actor. And I went last night to see Mr. Thomas E. Shea play it. I think that Mr. Shea is by far superior to Mansfield in the characters of Mr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde ...

Well dear: As I am very tired and sleepy I will close.

Good night Darling.

Lovingly yours,

Griff"

Then there seems to be a play at jealousy and trouble over one "Tater Wax,"

" Washington, D.C.

Feb. 21st 1900

My Dear Edna: -

I received your most welcome and loving letter yesterday and would have answered last night but Harry Gumpman asked me to go to the Theatre with him, and it was nearly twelve (12) o'clock when we got home and I did not feel much like writing.

We saw a grand play entitled 'Devil's Island,' founded on the famous Dreyfus case. I called on Miss Veihmeyer tonight and sang several songs and had quite a nice time. But you don't care, Do you?

I really thought you had gone back on me when all of last week went by without a letter from you. And Frank told me Saturday that "Tater Wax" had been out to see you last Sunday a week ago, and I did not know whether to believe him or not. You do not know how bad I felt about it until he told me better Sunday. It made me very angry to think he had been out to see you, and you told me he had not.

But I know now that you told the truth about it when I was out. I expected a letter from Pearl this week but have not received one yet. Mr. Redmond is dead in love with her, and asked me to write a letter to her for him which I did. I suppose you have seen it before now. It was a 'peach.' He said he would have written it himself but he was afraid she would think it was too bold of him. He ought to have the nerve that I have. How about it? ...

Bessie and Harry have made up again; and are just as loving as ever. That would kill you too. They keep very quiet though. Harry is afraid his brother will send him back home as he said he would do if he caught them speaking.

Well Darling as I am getting sleepy I will close with love and good wishes. Good night -

Lovingly yours

Griff

P.S. Don't look for me Sunday if this weather keeps up."

Griff then moved from his boarding house in the city out to another in the suburbs of Washington, and he comments on the lovely girls boarding at the same place:

"Corner Foxall & Conduit Roads
Washington, D. C.
March 16, 1900

My Dear Edna: -

I received your kind letter Wednesday, but I have been working nights and until noon every day and have not had time to write.

I have moved out in the suburbs as you can see at the heading of this letter. Harry is out here with me and we like it very much. And the best of all we are with a Catholic family and a young Lady who lives in the house is going to take me to church tonight. She is a lovely girl, and says if I don't go to church with her she will make her mother put me out of the house. She sings in the choir and wants me to join that choir too. I never saw so many girls in my life as there are in this neighborhood; and they are all Catholics and go to Trinity Church in Georgetown.

It is very lively out here too. The lady that we board with keeps store and the house is full of girls every night. But - I can not have any fun with them for thinking of you. I have been thinking all day that I would like for it to be you that I am going to church with instead of the other party. Edna Dear - Please excuse such a short letter this time as it is nearly time to go to church.

I will be out to see you the first fine Sunday ...

Lovingly Yours
Griff"

We do not for the most part know how Miss Edna felt about Griff, but it appears she was rather cool to him:

"Washington, D. C.
April 13, 1900

Miss Beall: -

As I have not received an answer to my last letter, I will write again to know why you did not answer. I suppose some one has been telling you something.

But what do I care! There are so many others. But I think you might have written and told me all about it. You may have your [Tater Wax] now, I do not care! And your Mr. Brown too. I was always suspicious of your corresponding with Tater Wax! And now I am sure of it. I suppose that was the joke you spoke to Bessie about in that letter. I wish you would answer and please return my letters and I will return yours.

I would like to read them in days to come, and see what a dunce I have been.

Very Respf.
Geor. G. Rabbitt"

It is apparent they came to some other understanding, but there were no more letters from Griff in 1900, at least none saved. The next letter from him

was of another tone altogether. It is of interest that he mentions that they have a graphophone. The graphophone (an inversion of the word phonograph) played wax-coated cylinders and the gramophone used flat discs, but otherwise they were much the same and both were wildly popular in their day. Griff seems to be enjoying camping and bathing at Colonial Beach.

"Colonial Beach, Va.
June 18th 1901

Dear friend Edna: -

As I was thinking of some of my old friends from whom I would like to hear, I thought I would drop you a few lines. Not that I have any hard feelings against Mr. Kessler, but, simply friendship toward you. I don't suppose you have any very good blood for me, but that will never hurt you; We can be friends just the same I hope. That is friends, not as we were once, but, simply old acquaintances. I am always glad to hear from my old acquaintances, even if I have been jilted by them.

I can not see why we can not be friends again. I am camping at Colonial Beach for a month and perhaps for the Summer with two other fellows who worked with me all Winter. We are just having lots of fun. We do fishing, crabbing, boating, and bathing every day.

We have met a great many Washington Girls since we have been down here, and at night we go up the beach, to the Pavilion, and dance until twelve o'clock. I wish you could see some of the Virginia Country Girls we see. They go barefooted all the time, and can row a boat a great deal better than most men who come down from Washington. We have a Grapho-phone with us, and these Country people are so stuck on it; we have invitations nearly everyday to call and give an entertainment. And the best of all, chickens are plentiful. You know I don't like chicken. Well old friend Edna; as the boys want me to go bathing with them I will close for this time hoping to hear from you at least once. It has been so long since I have heard from you, you had better tell Mr. Kessler about this letter before he hears about it from another source. You know how some people talk when they get wind of anything. And he might get angry. I believe he is more jealous than I am.

My best regards

G. G. Rabbitt ..."

Correspondence continued from Griff, with friendly, non-presumptuous letters from 1008 Pennsylvania Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. On September 10, 1901 he wrote: "Dear Friend Edna: - ... I am very sorry that you have been so busy of late that you could not answer my letter ... I am very glad that you had such a nice time at Marshall Hall and at the Fair ... I remain your old friend, G. G. R."

And on January 26, 1902, "Dear friend Edna: - ... I saw Fred Harper tonight ... Fred is boarding at Mrs. Clark's. He said that Florence and Snapper are married, living at 2200. Fred has had a falling out with Florence and Bessie already. My father and Walter left there some time ago. They are boarding further down town, and have a nice boarding house with an old lady who is just as nice as can be. Walter says he doesn't like it because it is too quiet. But it just suits my father. They are both as well as can be expected. Your Old Friend Griff."

Griff continued to write from time to time during the remainder of 1902 and on May 26, 1903 write a consoling letter: "Dear Friend Edna: - I received your most welcome letter ... I am sorry to hear that you have not gotten over your aunt's death yet. Edna, you must try and forget her ... No Edna, your old friend has not forgotten you, and he will never forget you as long as he lives. When the love for a friend is imbedded in one's heart once it cannot be torn from them. I hope that your father will come to the City for your sake ... Your Old Friend, Griff. 1722 G NW." On June 3, 1903: "Dear Friend Edna, ... I went over to Arlington to attend the Memorial ceremonies, and today, the 'Confederate Veterans' will also hold 'memorial ceremonies' over the graves of 264 Confederate Soldiers who were buried there. This being the first time that a public ceremony has been allowed them, I guess there will be a great many people to help in the exercises. There have been a great many ex-Confederates invited from Maryland and Virginia and they expect to have a very large gathering. I think I shall go over there with them today ... Your old friend, Griff"

Griff may have been showing a little hostility to her - or perhaps a complete lack of tact - when he wrote next:

"July 10, 1903. Washington, D.C.

Dear Friend Edna: -

I received your letter yesterday evening. Also the picture which I would not have known had it not been in your letter. You certainly have changed if the picture is like you. You must be awfully stout. I can see a resemblance, but it does not look like the same Edna that I knew two years ago ... My father told me that he saw you, but he said that you were so stout that he hardly knew you.

Our union gives an excursion to Chesapeake Beach next Friday but I don't know whether I will go or not. If I do go I will go fishing and crabbing and come home early. I would not stay late because the Electricians are nearly all Boozers and I would not like to get mixed up with them when they get full.

How do you stand this hot weather with all your fat? I think if this weather continues all summer there will not be enough of me left next Fall to make a grease spot.

I think I shall cut this letter off here and jump in the bath tub. It is the coolest place that I can find. Your old friend, Griff"

Even after that letter, they were still correspondents:

"Washington, D.C., July 22, 1903

Dear friend Edna: -

I guess it is about time of me to answer the letter which I received from you on Monday or you might think I am not going to answer it at all. I went to the Beach Friday and the ball game was so exciting that I did not catch the early train for home as it left at 6:00 pm and the game did not stop until 6:30 and therefore I had to wait until 10:00.

It was not as bad on that train as I thought it would be. The 'Boys' behaved very well until they arrived in the City and then started a row on a street car so I heard.

There were only a few who drank too much salt water and ate too many pebbles from the beach [became intoxicated?] and they were

warned not to make any disturbance under a penalty of twenty five dollars (\$25.00) to the union.

Had it not been for the penalty I guess there would have been more than two or three in a mess. I enjoyed myself until the game was over but after that I was longing for the train to come and take me home. Walter and Mary were there but had to catch the 6:30 train in order to get in the City in time for Mary to catch a car for home. Miss Tinkler and yourself must be keeping late hours if you get so sleepy that the company can detect it and you have to leave on account of it! I will not say anymore and I am about to my limit for one letter so I will close hoping that you will not get sleepy reading it.

Yours, Griff"

There were just two more letters from Griff in the collection, one July 29, 1903, advising her "I am glad to hear that you are enjoying yourself, but if you are flirting don't go too far with it; as it is dangerous sometimes. If you want to flirt, do it as the old lady of whom you will read in enclosed clipping ..." The second was dated August 21, 1903, "I heard that you were in the City when I was in New York ... There seems to be something that keeps us from meeting. We have been very close at times, but something which I cannot figure out seems to blind or drive one or the other away ... I guess I will close hoping that I will hear from you more frequently since you expect to be in the City so long ... Resp. yours, G. G. Rabbitt." The envelope was addressed to Miss Edna Beall, 1026 3rd St. NE.

Edna also saved letters from other friends and from her brother, Thomas Nolan Beall, a carpenter. In 1903 Tom was 26 years old and was working on the farm of William A. Wimsatt at Avenel. The Beall family home was at Burnt Mills and Avenel was about a mile and a half east, close to the Prince George's County line. This was the location of William W. Rapley's very large "Avenel Farm," apparently the reason the community and/or post office in 1903 was called Avenel. Tom writes of his working conditions on the Wimsatt farm, the wages he earned and some incidents there.

"Avenel Md., April 6, 03

Dear Edna ...

I thought I would see you last Saturday. I went into the store and one of the girls said you was not working there anymore, but I am coming down to 'Owens' Sat. night ... Well Edna, I have gotten work close to home at least. I am working at Wimsatts now and expect to have a couple of months work there and I am getting \$2.50 a day, that is the best part of it ..."

"Avenel, Md., June 8, 03

Dear Edna ...

I will drop you a few lines to let you know that I arrived safely at my destination (Chestnut Hill) Sunday night, but had a scrap before I got home ... Mr. Wimsatt is talking of having some more work done, he said he believed he would build a couple of greenhouses, but I don't know whether he will or not, but I hope he will ... Miss Genevieve had quite a time for a while there today, she was out riding and when she started for home the horse became frightened and ran off with her, he came in the front gate and down

the lane like he was racing for a 'Thousand Dollars.' ... when he came by the house she called for help, but that just hurried him along and he dashed by the barn and I don't know whether the horse threw her down by the dairy or whether she jumped, but he left her there ..."

"Avenel, Md., July 19, 03

Dear Edna ...

I heard you were at Forest Glen Thursday, how did you enjoy it? And do you know how much they made? Well, I have not gone to work yet. I have been waiting two weeks for a car load of lumber to arrive, it was shipped from Baltimore and was sent out on the wrong line or some way or other and was wrecked but it arrived Saturday. I guess I will go to work Tuesday. Pap is coming down Sunday if it is a good day. He seems to stand the walk to work better this year than he did last. Mr. Wimsatt is having a time with his manager, Mr. Huges. He knows as much about running a farm as a two year old baby wood. Blanford came out yesterday ... Jim and Mamie are getting married in November, he has had his house all painted and fixed up and is gong to have it papered ... Your loving brother, Tom

July 20

P.S. As I did not have the chance to mail this letter I will add a few lines. I have another little Brother in law, he arrived yesterday evening. Aunt Mary was down at the store as I went by and she and Mrs. Peters ... tryed to persuade me not to go, but I said I had gotten that far and I was going to see the thing through but it did not disturb me at all, but I heard the little 'Chap' squealing as I came away. Jim told Mable to ask her mother if he could not have it for a wedding 'present' and she sent word to him 'Yes!'"

There were a few letters from Edna's second suitor, one Thomas S. Reilley, who for the most part seemed to be tongue-tied in his letters. In his letter to her dated October 2, 1903, however, he did loosen up a bit: "Dear Friend: I enjoyed your letter very much ... I shall be glad to call when you return to Washington and I am sure we can have a pleasant evening ... Of course it is imagination that prompted my picture of a winter's evening, but I would love to know from experience. Those that have spent winter evenings in front of a roaring fire with a sweet girl say it is fine so naturally I wish I could see for myself ..."

The third romance was with Joseph Milstead. This romance seems to have proceeded quite far before the first letter was written, or at least the first saved letter. Joseph's letters were written from South Carolina, but a 1905 City Directory for Washington, D.C., shows that he worked for the Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

"St. James Hotel, Charlestown, S.C.
Oct. 17, 1905

My darling Edna:

I have not had time to get home sick yet, but I don't know how it will be when I get up the river. It was right lonesome on the train as I did not make any aquantences. I passed the time away by looking at the country until supper time and then it was dark. Although it was a lovely night. I spent most of the evening in the

smoker listening to some fellows telling jokes. I went to bed about 10 o'clock, and slept fine but I thought of you a good many times. The porter called me at 6 o'clock this morning.

I arrived at Charlestown 6:45 this morning. After breakfast I ordered something to be sent up the river and went down to the wharf to see what time the boat went up the river and found we leave at 6:30 in the morning. This is quite a different town than Washington, but very easy to find any place. There is no numbered or lettered streets, everything is by names.

I have not seen anything of Homer yet, but I hope he will be in soon.

Now my darling don't get the blues, for your little boy is all right. I think of you all the time, but have not been sad. I will stop writing for this time. I will write and send you my address as soon as I get up the river.

I remain your loving little boy.

Jos. Milstead

Homer has arrived ... You will soon get used to reading my writing."

Joseph wrote often in October.

"Cordesville, S.C.

Oct. 22, 1905

My darling Edna:

How different today is from last Sunday. It is so lonesome up here in the pines. If I could only be with you, even if there were others around.

But if I could hear from you that would be a lot of comfort. I expected there would be a letter from you when I got home Saturday, but there was something wrong with the mail and it did not come. I will expect one Monday. I want to know that my little girl is well. I know she is thinking about me right now.

I could not be better satisfied with the place I am staying. The board is very good but the hours are long. I get up at six o'clock eat breakfast drive eight miles to the plantation and then ride a blind horse down where my work is, about one mile and a quarter from the barn and then back to the house on the plantation a mile and a half, to dinner which we have between two and three o'clock. Then we leave the plantation about six o'clock and have supper at seven or eight o'clock (Say is not that healthy?) ... I would like to come home but the work has got to be done and this country needs it. The place is so different that it makes it interesting, but when it gets old I don't know what I will do. The white people talk so funny here but there is such a few. There are lots of Negroes here ... I have just wrote to Beattie, Thursday I wrote to Harry and home. I had rather be writing to my sweet little darling than any one else. I believe I would be satisfied if I could hold her in my arms for one minute, but I would want it to be a longer minute than sixty seconds ...
From your loving Joe

PS I suppose you got my other letter, but in case you didn't I will send my address again. Cordesville, S.C. c/o J. W. C. White"

"Cordesville, S.C.
Oct. 14, 05

My darling Edna:

I received your letter last evening and was very glad to hear from you. I am sorry to hear that you were not feeling well.

I was surprised to hear that Grif is married. I don't think that he would of been a very good one to left you in charge of, as some people said. I am sure he did not do as well as I will do, but every one is not as lucky as I am.

I am glad to hear that my little darling is taking such good care of her self while I am away. I wish I had been there to go out home with you last Sunday. It was awfully dull here. I felt a little bit sad Sunday. I missed you so much.

Is there any thing special going on at church, you seem to be going so regular.

I had a letter from Homer yesterday. He wants me to come to Charlestown soon, he said he would meet me there, he knows how lonesome it is here and he tryes to make it as pleasant as possible for me.

If my appetite is as good as it is here when I go back to Arlington I will have to pay more board. This southern food agrees with me. You know I never could eat any breakfast, but you just ought to see me eat now. I eat a big plate of hominy gritz, meat and a big waffle. I don't know if I have gained any, but I am sure I have not lost.

It is getting late and I am a little tired, I will stop writing for tonight.

Your own little boy,
Jos."

Apparently Edna was working at S. Kann & Sons, a department store in Washington. An envelope postmarked November 8, 1905 was addressed to Miss Edna Beall, S. Kann & Sons, 8th & Market Place, Washington, D.C.

The letters from Joseph are matched with a set of letters from Edna counting the days until he would be back. Her letters to him were perhaps even warmer in tone than his to her.

"Oct. 27, 05

My darling:

You do not know how much I missed you last night ... there was a retreat going on last week, that was the reason I was going to church so often. It was for the women only.

Della is getting along real well down here; at the store, I mean ... your father meets her at cars every evening, so she does not have to walk up that dark track alone. Your mother is making my suit and has it nearly finished ..

With love and kisses from your little girl,
Edna"

In another letter dated October 30, 1905 addressed to "My darling boy," Edna complained about her boss, Mr. Veihmyer, who fined her \$1 for a mistake in making out a check. A few days later she commented that "Friday is what we call Devil's Day at the store, because everybody gets so cross ..."

So did they marry and live happily ever after? Perhaps. They stopped writing letters! That Edna had both his and her letters hints at marriage and so does the fact that Joseph's mother was making Edna a suit. It may be that some family historian has the rest of the story.

Some other manuscript collections at the Montgomery County Historical Society Library contain personal correspondence, including "love letters."

The Anderson Collection - Prout Family, Wallace Family, and Vinson Family letters. The Vinson Family letters have a file titled "Love Letters." Also in the Anderson Collection are copies of the letters of Captain James Anderson while he was a Union Prisoner during the Civil War and the letters of James and Mary Anderson which have been published elsewhere.

Beall Letters - Jane Beall to Upton Beall in 1819, 1841. Also love letter to Jane Elizabeth Beall from Henry A. Offutt, 1841.

Bleakwood Collection - Letters from 1860-1939.

Farquhar Collection - 1855-1867. Includes Caroline S. Miller (later Farquhar) diaries.

Jones Collection - Gustavus Jones and Elizabeth (Plummer) Jones. Letters to daughters from 1888-1896.

James Lea Letters - To Elizabeth E. Tyson in 1849.

Magruder Collection - Letters concerning the family of Samuel Wade Magruder.

Neel Family Papers - Papers and letters of Neel Family.

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