

## EDITOR'S PAGE

"What shall we do about those letters. . . ?"

# CONSTRUCTING THE PAST FROM EVERYDAY SOURCES

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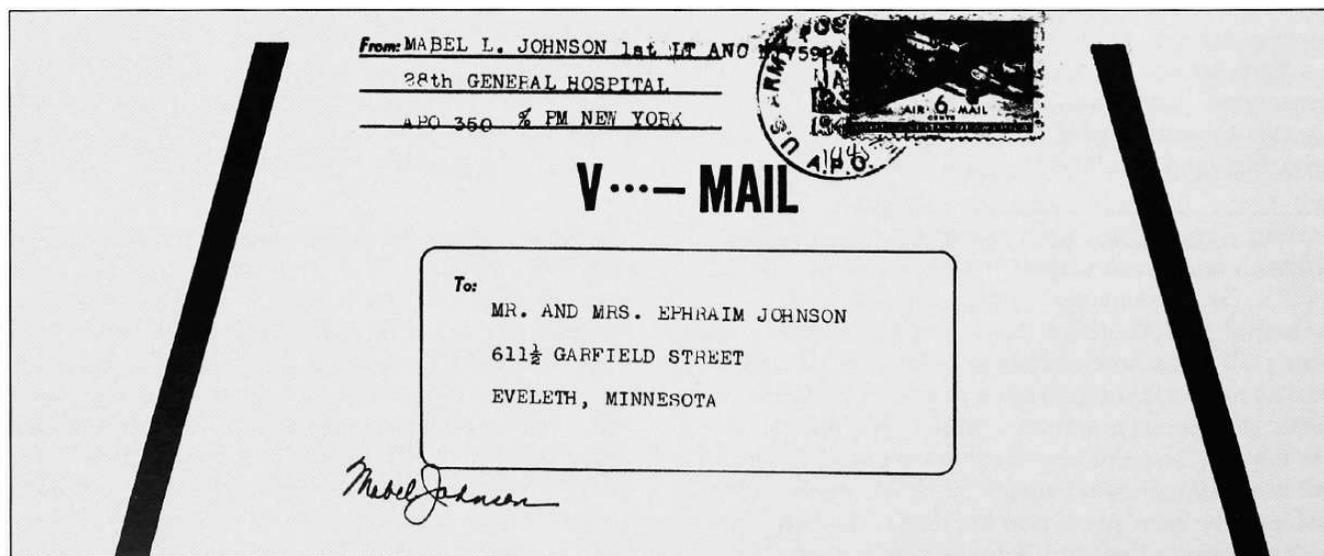
**W**hat shall we do about *those letters* we wrote to each other during World War II?" John and Georgiana Sonnen asked each other. "Keep them another year? Throw them out?" It is a question, I imagine, that couples in Minnesota have been asking at least since the 1870s when Civil War veterans pondered whether their letters and diaries were worth storage space. Soon, those who lived through the Korean War, Vietnam, and Desert Storm will be asking the same question—if they have not already.

The Sonnens arrived at a felicitous solution: John

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reread every letter, took copious notes, and wove a memoir of his service—and his wife's experience on the home front. Yet his article in this issue presents only a tiny fraction of the 1,116 letters the couple exchanged. What should happen to the original letters themselves? This question has a happy and productive answer, too. In response to a request by the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS), John discussed the matter with his children. He has promised to donate the letters for permanent preservation and eventual research use.

Few sets of war letters or diaries are appropriate for publication by themselves. Rather, they are excellent source material, contributing individual perspectives on particular events or eras. Furthermore, publication



rarely brings to print an entire collection. On the other hand, it is the mission of historical societies—whether at the state, regional, county, or local level—to provide a repository for the original material and—most important—make the material known and accessible to a wide range of potential readers. The choice for the Sonnens was not as narrow as letting the letters gather dust or throwing them out. “*Those letters*” are important historical sources that would be welcomed by virtually any historical society.

TOO OFTEN, people feel sure that their private letters or papers could be of no interest to anyone outside their immediate family. If their children or grandchildren show no appreciation for the material, it seems that the recycling bin is the only alternative. But letters, diaries, photo albums, scrapbooks, and other papers do have a value beyond the family circle. The letters and diaries of soldiers and civilians are the fundamental building blocks historians use to understand the human, personal element of a war—or any other era. The acclaimed Public Broadcasting System documentary on the Civil War is only the most recent example of how vividly such sources enrich our understanding of the past. As historians Judy B. Litoff and David C. Smith recently wrote, archives and libraries “make up the infrastructure of history.”

For nonfamily readers and researchers, the most useful and important letters are those like the Sonnens’, which reveal telling details about daily experiences and reflect upon their meaning. Moreover, since soldiers often did not—or could not—save the letters they received, historians especially appreciate finding two-way correspondence because it sheds light on the home front. Litoff’s and Smith’s *Since You Went Away* focuses entirely on women’s letters to their loved ones in the service during the Second World War. From hundreds of letters in private hands and in historical repositories, the authors drew important conclusions about the women’s perceptions of the war and the ways in which it changed their lives. As one reviewer wrote, “The letters illuminate a time when sex roles were first showing the changes that would culminate in the women’s movement.” There will almost certainly be more studies based on such sources, as researchers from high-school students to professional scholars look for the clues that will explain the social and personal implications of a global conflict.

So, we are delighted to be receiving the Sonnen correspondence, which will join a growing collection of World War II letters at the Minnesota Historical Society. Among those are a fine group received in 1991 from the Follett family of St. Paul. This collection includes letters to and from two sisters, both of whom served in the Women’s Army Corps, one sister’s husband in the

U.S. Army Air Corps, and the sisters’ parents. We are especially pleased to be able to document the often-forgotten role of the WACs, WAVEs, WASPs, and other women in the armed forces. Another recent donation consists of the correspondence between Ted Hall, a seaman in the Merchant Marine, and his parents in Red Wing. But this is barely the tip of the iceberg: 340,100 Minnesota men and women served in the military during the Second World War. We hope, as the period of the fiftieth anniversary of the war proceeds, that many more veterans and their families will consider the historical importance of their diaries and letters.

All of the attention being paid to World War II, however, does not mitigate the importance of correspondence and journals from other wars (or periods of peace, for that matter). More than one hundred years later, interest in the Civil War remains remarkably deep and broad. Americans are beginning to pay more attention to the three “forgotten” wars: Spanish American, World War I, and Korea. Research interest in the Vietnam conflict has spread from domestic politics to include the lives and experiences of the combat soldiers. Even Desert Storm is not too recent to interest students and scholars. We recognize that people may not always be ready to part with original letters and diaries, especially from the most recent conflicts. While historical societies prefer to preserve originals, some, including the MHS, will consider transcripts or high-quality photocopies instead. The ultimate goal of repositories is to make important historical resources available to the broader community.

At the Minnesota Historical Society these papers are arranged and cataloged into both a state and national computer database, so that as many people as possible will know of their existence. We store our collections under the best archival conditions and make them available for research in our free public reading room. Papers and memorabilia may also be used in MHS exhibits or loaned to other repositories for exhibit around the state and the nation. Students, amateur historians, teachers, writers, scholars, genealogists, and others find the bricks and mortar of history in our collections. The Sonnens’ letters are part of that building material. Well over half a million Minnesota men and women have served during America’s wars since 1861. Add to these figures the hundreds of thousands who participated through the Red Cross or other civilian agencies, who engaged in war work, or who were keenly affected by having loved ones in the service. Clearly, the experiences of “ordinary people” are central rather than incidental to understanding military conflict.

The Minnesota Historical Society—and the state’s hundreds of county and local historical societies—welcome inquiries about donating soldiers’ and home-front letters written or received by Minnesotans.



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