

SUN-GAZETTE

Williamsport Women

A Life in Letters: Martha Heim



PHOTO PROVIDED Pictured are letters addressed to Martha Heim, which were discovered by Jean Nagy when she moved into her home. The letters found were dated from 1898 to 1906.

When Jean Nagy moved into her home, she discovered a box of letters in the attic. These letters, dated from 1898 to 1906, were written to Martha Heim. When Nagy, who has since passed away, relocated to the Williamsport Home, she instructed her son Andy to give the letters to “*that woman that writes the stories.*”



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The Heim letters are not literary masterpieces, but they do represent the kind of written communication that connected people at the turn of the 20th century. Evidently, Heim (1866-1932) wrote many letters, because she received many in return.

Heim grew up in Loyalsock Township, one of eight children born to Isaac and Mary Mutcher Heim. Her grandparents had emigrated from Germany and were among the early settlers of Bloomingrove.

These letters begin when Heim was 32. Although we know little about her except what we can glean from this correspondence, she is occasionally mentioned in the Williamsport Gazette and Bulletin in 1914 and 1916, in the section "*News of the Rural Free Delivery: Mill Creek.*" In one instance Heim was attending a masquerade party, and at other times visiting a sister in Williamsport. In 1913, the newspaper announced her father's sale of a farm three miles north of Montoursville, including farm implements, milk cows and 30 colonies of Italian bees.

The addresses on Heim's letters usually consist of just her name and "*Warrensville*" or "*Williamsport,*" with no street address. The letters are uniform in size — about 5 1/2 inches by 3 1/2 inches — and the writers seem to have put an emphasis on saving paper, with writing continuing around the edges of the pages. The salutation often is "*Dear Friend*" or, in the case of letters from the Dawson, Nebraska, relatives, "*Dear Cousin Martha.*" The letters are lengthy by today's standards and deal with everyday topics such as the weather, life of the church, family updates, health, simple pleasures and a bit of gossip.

Rural Life

Letters frequently begin with an apology for not writing sooner because of all the work that needed to be accomplished — or because of exhaustion from doing that work. Rural life was hard, with animals to slaughter, and cherries, peas, grapes and tomatoes to can. Weather was a constant challenge, and because of it, roads were frequently too rugged to be traveled upon by buggy.

There was still time for simple pleasures, often revolving around the church: the sociability of prayer meetings, baptisms, weddings and funerals. In addition, friends enjoyed the occasional birthday party or sledding outing — or just watching logs float down the river.

Medical care was primitive by today's standards, and Heim's health was often mentioned as correspondents wished her well. She is quoted as saying "*home is the best place if you are sick.*" Sometimes a relative or friend suffered from "*the old complaint,*" a tooth that needed to be pulled, intense headaches, or a cold; one person "*lost his mind*" and had to be sent to the asylum. A letter from a friend in Rose Valley mentioned scarlet rash spreading through the community, as well as a relative who had sliced his foot with a hatchet while chopping firewood. Home remedies might be exchanged, such as taking a teaspoon of salt every evening.

Gossip

After relating some church news, one letter says, "*Please don't leave no one read this letter for I would not want everything to come out what I have written.*" Another letter stands out because of its appearance. It is from a "*newly 'maid friend*" and is written on ornate Park Hotel stationery, which features a picture of the establishment with the following words underneath: "*The largest and most pleasantly located hotel in Williamsport.*" The friend living there writes that she has been nursing a woman who is "*crazy ... she has been drinking hard and is very dirty and mean. The only thing in her favor is she has plenty of money. They have half interest in the John Stearn's silk mill here. She has lots of silk dresses.*"

Hired Girl

The correspondence suggests that Heim was employed as a hired girl at least some of the time. There are numerous letters from people asking her to reserve dates to come and work for them. One letter, from Mrs. Rosa Henry, of 418 Park Ave., begged Heim to make her home with her for a salary of \$1.50 per week. The “girl” they currently employed wanted to “run” every night and was Catholic so insisted upon going to church on Sunday, plus she was unable to bake pies or cakes or cook anything but meat.

Stuck among the Heim letters is a brochure of “*Confidential Instructions*” from the Woman’s Mutual Benefit Co., which described the best ways to sell its products for women. This might suggest that Heim considered taking a position selling Balm of Figs, a cure for all forms of female diseases.

Heim’s death certificate states that she died of pneumonia at the age of 66, while living with a sister at 1248 Vine Ave. in Williamsport. She is buried in the Oak Lawn Christian Hill Cemetery in Warrensville. One friend summed up the joys of exchanging letters with Heim: “*Think of me long; Think of me ever; Think of the good times we had together.*”

Heim’s letters are now part of the collection at the Lycoming County Historical Society.

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