

"There is something to go to all the time"

Using Personal Letters to Add Depth to Family Stories

RANDY MILLS

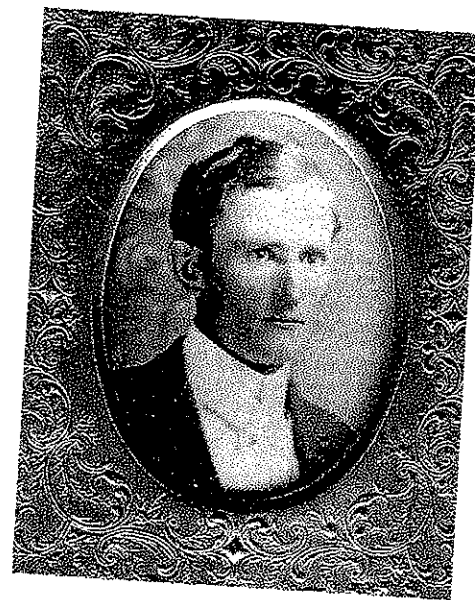
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Recently, upon the death of my mother, I came to possess almost fifty letters exchanged between my grandfather, James Newell, and his family in fall 1906. Every time I read through the correspondence, I grew exhilarated by a sense of being with ancestors long gone but with whom I felt a mysterious and powerful connection. Eventually I sat down and wrote a narrative incorporating these letters, hoping the exercise would bring an even greater understanding of my ancestors' unique lives and their possible impact on their descendants. In this article I will use this correspondence to demonstrate how family historians may use their family's personal letters to gain a deeper understanding, a greater appreciation, and a stronger empathy for their ancestors. Some may come to recognize, as I have, that their ancestors' experiences may account for events in their own lives.

As Larry Lockridge gathered material to write the story of his famous Hoosier father, *Raintree County* author Ross Lockridge Jr., he found an amazing wealth of written artifacts from which to draw information. Among the most important of these sources, he noted, were letters. Families often possess more than one set of letters from distant and more recent ancestors, and as Larry Lockridge came to discover, such correspondence may offer a treasure trove of possibilities for adding interest and depth to family stories. When presented in a particular way, family correspondence may reveal the kind of fascinating archetypal family interactions that provide insight into ongoing family dynamics as well as the human condition. Teasing out these kinds of dynamics, however, is

not always easy—as my family's letters showed me.

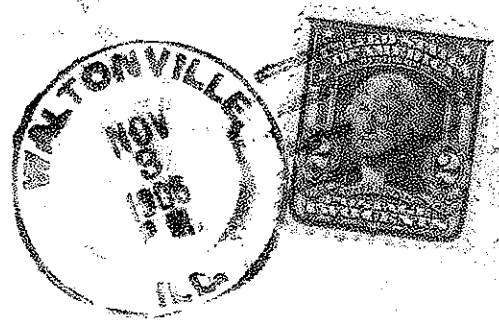
Biographers can fall prey to misinterpretations and the projection of oneself onto their subjects and the same goes for genealogists telling their family members' stories. Lockridge noted these problems at the beginning of his quest to understand his father's suicide. Staying consciously aware of his biases and maintaining an intellectual distance helped him overcome these pitfalls. After writing a book about his father using resources such as personal letters, Lockridge came to believe the endeavor had been successful. "If I still don't ultimately know him—a tall order in any circumstance—I've become well-acquainted for the first time."¹



My grandpa, Jimmy Newell, had this photo taken in Evanston, Illinois, in 1906 and sent it back to his family in Waltonville, Illinois.

Personal letters do not give up their deeper meanings easily. A process of organizing letter narratives that I call "framing" can help a researcher ascertain meaning from personal correspondence. The framing process reflects the basic elements of biographical writing.

The first step in framing involves gathering and presenting in narrative form contextual information so that family members' thoughts and lives are placed in the environment of their unique time and place. Reading sources that offer information about a particular environment can help the writer develop and convey a correct cultural setting for writing an accurate narrative. To provide context for my mother's family, the Newells, who were farmers in southern



Mr. James P. Newell,
460 1/2 Church St.
Evanston,
Ill.

An envelope bearing Jimmy's boarding house address in Evanston. Jimmy milked and fed a cow and cleaned ashes from a coal furnace to earn his room and board.

Illinois around the turn of the nineteenth century, I read several local histories and family histories of the area to acquaint myself with that world. Two books on farming in that era especially helped me to understand the challenges of the time and place. This deepened my understanding of the Newell family members whose correspondence revealed a difficult world of day-to-day farm life and the importance of family and community in the Midwest in the early 1900s. By itself, this insight makes these letters important historical artifacts.

However, I was more interested in the Newell family's personal interactions. I especially hoped the letters might shed light on some of my family's customs, beliefs, and attitudes. Ever since I can remember, I have been told I

was like my mother's people, especially her father, James Newell.² I could never decipher if this was a completely good thing. Grandpa Jimmy was old when I came to know him; he seemed to have run out of gas. He struck me as a very quiet but kind man. We grandkids often badgered him to tell us stories. Grandpa always did so with a chuckle and more patience than we deserved. The family letters, I surmised, could offer insight into my grandfather and perhaps help me recognize our supposed similarities, even if they were subtle.

Framing a set of letters also involves discovering and teasing out the primary conflict/drama in the correspondence. This may lead to uncomfortable discoveries. Often asked if he wasn't afraid

of what he would find in family letters, Lockridge answered that "all discoveries, however dark, have been exhilarating, confirming what the Greeks said about the pleasure that accompanies recognition."³

In the case of my grandfather's correspondence with his family, the central drama at first seemed the typical story of a young man leaving home to find his fortune. As I continued to frame the narrative, however, a second theme popped out—that of a son struggling to break free from a dominant mother.

Written over four months, the Newell correspondence sprung from a rather dramatic family event. Twenty-year-old James, called Jimmy by his family, had abruptly decided to leave his family's farm near the village of Waltonville in



The Waltonville Methodist Episcopal Church was an important cultural part of Newell family life. This church photo was taken in 1912, a few years after Jimmy's adventures at the Northwestern University Academy in Evanston. Jimmy is standing in the third row, third from right. His mother, Ida Newell, in a dark, striped dress, is the sixth person from the left, also in the third row.

southern Illinois in September 1906. He traveled by coal-fired train from the nearby town of Ashley to Evanston, Illinois, near Chicago, to attend Northwestern Academy, the preparatory school for Northwestern University. To his fourteen-year-old sister Elsie, Jimmy reported, "It was a terrible hot dusty trip. I have never told how fast the train came. It was a mail train, and being late, it came in Ashley, like a flash of lightning."⁴

One of Jimmy's early letters to Elsie explains how the correspondence came to be saved: "I wish you would be kind enough to save all my letters, and when I come home it will be very interesting for me to read them, so save them all, put them away where you can find them." Elsie wrote back, "I keep your

letters up in your office."⁵ Elsie saved all the letters and later passed them down to Jimmy's oldest daughter, my mother, Mary Alice (Newell) Pierce.

These letters are made even more intriguing by a family mystery. For reasons never made clear to later generations, my grandfather came home unexpectedly not long before his first term ended. The correspondence offers interesting clues as to why he returned.

In the 1906 set of letters that I came to possess, there were none that were written between Jimmy and his older brother, Walter Raleigh Newell. One must certainly be careful with psychological interpretation, but it is my guess that Raleigh, the first born by six years, was his father's favorite. The letters indicate, for example, that the oldest

son and his father frequently worked together on farm projects and had a financial arrangement that bound them close together. This would be typical of the oldest son/father relationship on a rural farm at that time.⁶

However, there are comments in the correspondence that indicate the two brothers did write frequently during this time, so it is interesting to me that these letters are nowhere to be found. Apparently Jimmy's father never wrote to him, although they communicated some through Elsie and through their mother, Ida. Jimmy would ask about "Pa" or tell his mother to relay information to him. Ida also conveyed information and directions from Pa to Jimmy.

The great bulk of the existing correspondence is between Jimmy and Ida

and between Jimmy and Elsie. Jimmy's relationship with his mother comes across as passive-aggressive in the letters, suggesting that his leaving might have been an attempt to break away from her. One of Ida's granddaughters remembers her as follows:

A tiny little woman, very trim, very neat. Her hair was always wound in a bun low on the back of her head. She smiled and seemed pleasant, but I don't know if she ever laughed aloud. I had the idea life was very serious for her and she expected one to "do right" and "do their very best" at all times and would have been very displeased with any other kind of behavior. . . . I don't remember her ever praising me for doing a good job . . . or showing any outward sign of affection.

Ida was also extremely practical, being "opposed to waste of any kind." When her husband Ichabod brought her a wooden rolling pin to replace the glass jar she always used, she became so angry she threatened to hit him with the new rolling pin for his wasteful purchase.⁷

To add further depth and meaning to a narrative arising from a set of family letters, I would strongly suggest using photos, if possible, of those who wrote, were written to, or who are mentioned in the letters. Not only will this add faces to names, creating a deeper connection between those writing the letters and the modern-day reader, but such photos may also inspire deeper revelations. A photo of a group of Waltonville Methodist Church members in which Ida and Jimmy both appear, for example, may offer some clue to the nature of their relationship. Taken in 1912, six years after Jimmy's adventures in Evanston, it shows a downcast Jimmy standing slouched in the second row and

a stern no-nonsense looking Ida standing nearby in the same row. She indeed looks tiny in the photo, perhaps barely five feet tall. Despite her size, though, she strikes a determined pose. Added to this picture is her fidelity to strict church teachings as noted in her obituary in 1934: "No one was more faithful to the tenets of the church and her character was above reproach."⁸

Also of great contextual interest is a long-standing family tradition about my grandfather's abrupt return home from Evanston. According to this story, which we grandkids heard frequently, Jimmy grew overwhelmingly homesick after receiving a barrel of apples picked from the Newell family's little orchard. He came home soon after receiving the apples, supposedly content ever after with living where he had grown up.

While the Newell letters indicate there may be truth in this family story—the correspondence did mention the ongoing saga of a bushel of apples sent from Waltonville to Evanston that failed to arrive—the letters also suggest how much more complex the situation actually was. Such a discrepancy between family lore and a fuller reality is not uncommon.

As in any culture, families create and maintain myths. Such stories and traditions develop over time and bring cohesion to a family group. There is often, however, a considerable disconnect between family stories and what actually happened. In this way, uncomfortable events and complex family dynamics can be avoided or covered up. Consequently, family stories often possess a "sanitized feel to them."⁹ Family letters, if examined closely—such as through writing a narrative about them—can often provide insight into sanitized family stories.

Family tradition also presented Jimmy as a person more sensitive to life

than most men of his day and, perhaps too, a little more restless than his older brother Raleigh. Ida often spoke in her letters to Jimmy of his discontent. In truth, twenty-year-old Jimmy may have had good reason for restlessness. Besides the difficult and mundane world of farming he lived in, there was also the reality of the cultural bleakness of the region, an overriding dreariness he might have desperately wished to escape.

Much has been written about the rugged backwoods culture of southern Illinois where the Newell family lived. The region had been labeled by the odd name of Egypt since frontier days and was said to possess mostly Upland Southern people who were "lazy, ignorant and anti-intellectual." Robert Ingersoll, the "great agnostic," once gave a scathing description of the culture he observed in Mount Vernon, Illinois, just a few miles from Waltonville. In an 1867 letter to his brother, Ingersoll wrote, "I see people without education, without thought, without ambition. . . . I see young men without aspiration and old men without hope."¹⁰

These conditions apparently served to make some natives to the area bitter and aggressive. In 1875 a Chicago reporter described a group of southern Illinois locals lounging in another town a few miles from where the Newell clan lived: "Dirty roughs, clad in two shirts, butternut homespun, and cowhide boots . . . who are so proud of nothing as having knocked down some other man, and, while he is down, kicked, choked, bit, and gouged him, until the victor has spent his strength and rage." In his book *The Other Illinois*, Baker Brownell wrote in the same vein of the area as he observed it in the early 1950s.¹¹

There were other sides to the southern Illinois culture. Both Ida and Ichabod were long active in the Methodist church as were their three children.

Evanston, Ill. Dec. 8, 1906.

Dear Ma:-

I received your letter yesterday morning. This is a fine day. I guess you will be surprised when I tell you I got up this morning at 10 o'clock.

Jesse was taken pretty bad sick Wednesday evening with an attack of stomach trouble. He was taken to the hospital last night and is reported about the same this morning. Possibly ~~it~~ he may have the Typhoid.

He says he has had indigestion every since he came here in Sept. A Dr. here has been treating him. There has been quite a few cases of ^{sickness} this fall.

In this letter addressed "Dear Ma," Jimmy describes the illness of a person in Evanston, possibly another boarder or fellow student, who may have been suffering from typhoid.

Ida had been a founding member of the congregation, and Ichabod had been in charge of moving the original church building three miles from Williamsburg to Waltonville. They both held the important office of church trustee. Thus, on first glance, it may not seem strange that in the early fall of 1906 their son, Jimmy, decided to attend Northwestern University to prepare for a professional vocation, perhaps that of the Methodist ministry. The school boasted in the Southern Illinois Methodist Conference minutes that the university was "proud of its affiliation with the Methodist Episcopal Church. It wants its confidence and its young people for its classrooms."¹²

Nevertheless, there may have been some issues with the son's leaving. Farming was tremendously labor intensive in the early 1900s, and Jimmy's absence may have come after some strong discussions between him and his parents. They at least harbored reservations regarding the practical aspects of his endeavor. Ida, for example, complained shortly after her son's classes began, "I wish you [would] have taken bookkeeping instead of botany [I] think it would have been more useful." But later she wrote that with his botany background perhaps he could "learn to raise [raise] strawberries and put out a patch in the garden next spring."¹³

Despite whatever coolness Ida may have shown for her son's leaving or for the courses he took, she regularly corresponded with Jimmy, sometimes sending two or three letters a week. Jimmy usually returned comments just as quickly. Another faithful letter writer was his little sister Elsie. All of the letters from Waltonville are addressed to James P. Newell, 608 Church Street, Evanston, Illinois. Jimmy stayed at this boarding house address with an

Evanston family that he described as "very religious people. They have two boys and a girl, [the latter] studying to be a forien [*sic*] missionary, and a boy to be a preacher." For his meals, Jimmy explained, "I milk a cow and feed her, and carry ashes out of the basement when they start the furnace."¹⁴

The Newell letters from the Waltonville end are rich in detail regarding rural farm life in southern Illinois in the early 1900s. Their crops were mostly raised to feed livestock. As made clear by many comments in the letters, it was a world at the mercy of stock prices set at the Chicago market. Almost every letter to Jimmy is full of information about the seasonal rhythms of farm work, about church services, local marriages and deaths, and just plain gossip. On closer examination, one also comes to see in these letters a constant tension lingering between a young man wishing to escape the boring world of rural southern Illinois and a farm family that desperately wishes him to be happy but also longs for his return home.

In several of his first letters, Jimmy's excitement about living in the big city virtually leaps off the pages of his letters. "There is something to go to all the time," he states enthusiastically. "I am busy getting my lessons nearly all the time, sometime I read in the public library, on the main business street. . . . The time passes in a hurry. . . . I went last night to Society [a Methodist organization for young people]. I also went a week ago, and I will go to night at a Joint Reception given by the YMCA." Still, he seemed to miss the women in his life, telling his sister, "I wish you and Ma could see the lake today. It is still and looks very fine. The first week I was here, I picked up some small rocks and put them away to keep as a souvenir."¹⁵

Jimmy also touted the nice accommodations he found in the big city, writing in one letter, "They have started a fire in the furnace, we have hot, and cold water and a bath tub." This was pretty high living for a young man used to an outdoor privy, no running water, and kerosene lamps. In the next letter he told how he "went down to Chicago" where he visited "the Sears and Roebuck new plant," stating that it was "beyond description." He also spoke of going "to a big ball game in Chicago." Another letter notes Jimmy's exciting travels with a friend to the giant Montgomery Ward Store in Chicago. "We went to the tower of the [ir] building. People on the street looked like specks. We then went to the stock yards and went through Swift's Packing plant. Chicago is the largest R. R. center in the world. The trains that come in, if placed end to end would reach several hundred miles." He also spoke of exotic people. "There are several negros in Evanston, also a few Chinamen. Two or three of each go to the Academy. In another letter he writes, "I have met students from all over the world."¹⁶

His initial excitement living in the big city is perhaps best captured in this statement from an early letter to Elsie, "I am well, in fact unseasonably so, have got interested, somewhat in my books, am not home sick, in short, happy as a lark." The few times he complained, it was about the weather. "Cloudy and snowing," he wrote in mid-November, "snows nearly all the time here." Still, his comments at this juncture were almost always positive, at one time even including a poem that was fashioned along the lines of Carl Sandburg's later *City of the Big Shoulders*: "Our country 'tis a glorious land / With proud arms stretched from shore to shore / The proud Lake Michigan chafes her strand / She hears

the dark Chicago's roar."¹⁷ That Jimmy possessed this creative side sheds further light on why he might have wished to leave the more unsophisticated region of southern Illinois.

Early in the correspondence, Jimmy proudly wrote to his mother that he was "at the head" of his classes, adding, "I like the school. I do not have to study overly hard. All the boys are very nice and no toughs in the whole school." In another letter written to his sister, however, he seems to play down his school success, writing that he was "getting along O. K. in school and am having plenty to eat."¹⁸

Jimmy was apparently sensitive about any criticism from back home regarding his leaving. "If anyone asks any of you how I like it up here, tell them I like it fine, and don't say that I am homesick, for I am not." He ended the letter stating, "Please don't leave my letters laying around where the public can pick them up and note the content!"¹⁹ These two comments may have had something to do with a neighbor, Blanche Dees, a local girl and friend of the family with whom Jimmy also corresponded.

Whatever relationship Jimmy had with Blanche must have been rather stormy. An anonymous writer who began a letter to Jimmy with "Dear Cousin" wrote that he had heard that Blanche and Jimmy's relationship "had played out" and that some other suitor was "tickled about it. I heard she said you were mad at her," noted the cousin. This was at the end of September. Jimmy must have written Blanche in the meantime as she replied on October 15, "It is a little hard to forgive you but I will try and let bygones be bygones." Then she asked, "Who under the sun wrote and told you I said you was mad at me?" At the end of the short letter she wrote, "I will expect a letter soon."²⁰ Blanche



A photo, left to right, of siblings Jimmy Newell, Walter Raleigh Newell, and Elsie Newell taken around 1896. (Courtesy of Karen Mills Hales)

wrote often about trips she was taking and people she was visiting. She also inquired in nearly every letter when Jimmy would be coming home.

When Jimmy did not come home for Thanksgiving, Blanche began leaning on him to come home for Christmas.

"It won't be long until Christmas now. I guess you will be glad to get back in Egypt [southern Illinois]." When this hint failed to work, she became more direct in the next letter. "I hope you will decide to come home for Christmas. . . . I want you to come and take dinner with us Christmas day. We are going to have turkey so that ought to be some incentive towards getting you to come. Of course there will be other things."²¹

Apparently, Jimmy did not commit himself to coming home. He even indicated, although it was not true, that his family did not wish to pay the expenses for his travel from Evanston. Blanche wrote with a suggestion, "I think your family will be glad to see you Xmas. Just write them you are not feeling very well and may be they will send for you to come." Then she added, "I am going to expect a letter from you next week telling me whether you will come or not. I hope the former." After a major fire in November destroyed much of the small downtown, Blanche warned Jimmy in another letter, "If you don't come home before long there won't be enough of Waltonville left to tell where it was."²²

Jimmy's parents evidently approved of Blanche as a possible companion for their son. In a letter from early October, Ida advised Jimmy, "If I were you I would send Blanche a pretty souvenir postal card." Jimmy also wrote his sister to tell his father that he had "written Blanche" about the anonymous letter misunderstanding "and got an answer . . . so things are O.K. again." One interesting comment Blanche made in passing in

one of her later letters involved Jimmy's school progress, a subject he brought up less and less frequently as the term progressed. In mid-December Blanche wrote, "How are you getting along in school? You haven't told me for a long time."²³

Ida's letters to her son most often reflected an overly concerned parent. In her first one, she told her son to write back often and "tell everything you can think of." Ida reminded her son in her next letter to clean his "feet good and be neat as possible." In another she wrote, "Your Pa thinks you ought to get some overalls to keep your pants clean and a peck of apples."²⁴

If her son failed to respond quickly enough, Ida chastised him as in this early letter, "We expected to get a letter from you this morning but failed and were very disappointed." Tempering the admonition, she added, "You have almost been gone two weeks but the time will soon pass. We will be real glad to see you but we want you to stay contented."²⁵

Sometimes, Ida seemed to be trying to stir up guilt in her son, such as in this letter, "We feel a little lonelier," and "We are lonely . . . just us three left, but we can get along if we can keep anywhere near well." In an earlier letter, she told of being "alone all day." In another, she wrote, "We have our washing done for this week. Missed you about that but we have gotten along better than I expected."²⁶

In these early letters, Ida also worried about her son's health and safety. The first concern was a realistic one, given the number of deaths in both Waltonville and Evanston from such common diseases as typhoid and pneumonia. She wrote, for example, "You must tell us if you are well and take care of yourself and not get sick." In another let-

ter, written as fall was turning to winter, she fretted, "You had better put on your heavy underclothing if you have not and when it gets colder, put thin drawers over the heavy ones. I do not want you to get cold and take pneumonia fever." The latter fear was mentioned again in a November letter. "Get anything you need to keep you warm and if you feel like being sick come home at once. Do you ever have sick headaches?"²⁷

Ida also told her son to quit going into Chicago, as he "might get robbed." Perhaps Ida was reading Elsie's letters from her brother. Earlier, Jimmy had written his sister that Chicago was such a big city, "I would be nearly afraid to go there by myself," and adding, "I know Evanston as well as I know Waltonville."²⁸

Ida's concerns often ended up in list form in letters to her son. "How are you getting along with your clothing? Did you get your collars laundered and how much did it cost? You must get your clothing washed when needed. Go to church and Sunday School and tell us all about it." In another list she wrote, "If you eat at the restaurant you must get .15 or .20 cts. for your dinner. Get beef steak or cheese. They would do you more good. . . . You must go to church and Sunday School. Dress accordingly to the weather and take good care of yourself. Pa said for you to get you some overshoes." Even Elsie sent advice, "If you get cool, put a night shirt on."²⁹

Jimmy tried to allay his mother's concerns and fears. He often wrote about the sophisticated church services he attended, stating, for example, "I went to church Thanksgiving morning. I was also at church this morning and heard as fine a sermon as I ever heard in my life." Regarding staying warm and eating well, he reported to his mother, "I sleep in a night shirt every night. . . .



Jimmy Newell in 1916

Probably you would like to know what I can get for a 20 cent dinner, a bowl of soup, Roast beef, a small dish of potatoes, another one of something else, cup of coffee, a piece of pie, and light bread, corn bread and crackers."³⁰

In addition to the many inquiries and instructions regarding Jimmy's eating habits and health, the apple story mentioned earlier in this article was an ongoing saga throughout the Newell family correspondence until late No-

vember. The narratives offer an interesting sense of the emotional importance of that particular barrel of apples. Jimmy had first written his sister about getting some apples from home, "Tell Pa apples are to[o] high to buy. . . . It would be cheaper to send some up here."³¹

Elsie must have passed along the information. In October, Ida told her son to expect a shipment of homegrown apples. "Raleigh is here and they are fixing a barrell of apples to send you. . . . Raleigh

took your apples down [to the train] this morning so you can look for it any time after you get this, will send you the bill of lading which you must take to get the apples." Weeks passed, however, and the shipment of Waltonville apples failed to appear. Ida stayed confident of their arrival, writing, "If you ever get the apples, once in a while, you could get you five cts of crackers and make your supper on apples and crackers, or ginger cakes. . . . They put one bushel of wine saps and two of Ben Davis in your barrell."³²

Jimmy replied in early November that the apples "have not got here yet." He was afraid they would "be rotten" by the time he got them and lamented, "I don't know what could be done to find where they are." Probably wishing to allay his family's concerns, he also wrote in the same letter, "I have plenty to eat, namely, for breakfast, oatmeal and buttered toast (or anything else) dinner, all kinds of meats to order from. I did not really need the apples."³³

More time passed and the barrel of apples did not arrive. Ichabod went to the train shipping master at Waltonville, a Mr. Brunner/Bruner, and inquired about the missing shipment. Ida then wrote to her son, explaining, "Mr. Brunner said to . . . write to us if you had not gotten them he would try to hunt them up." In the next letter, however, Jimmy happily announced, "Finally got my apples . . . just a few moments ago!" Elsie wrote to her brother, "We were glad you got the apples. I expect they tasted pretty good."³⁴

Of particular interest are the letters written between Jimmy and his little sister, Elsie. Her first letter to her brother mentions how her new teacher said "hit" for the word "it." In another early correspondence she reports, "Our 50 little pigs are all right. Pa gave me one, cut its tail off so we can tell it from the rest." Mostly, however, Elsie reminisced

about all the good times they had spent together and how she missed him. In one letter she told her brother, "Today on the north side of the school I noticed 'J. P. N. 1906' and though[t] of you up at Evanston 'on the lake.'"³⁵

As time passed, Elsie seemed to grow lost without Jimmy around. "I wished you would come home Xmas. I get lonesome and never have any fun. I often think of how much fun we had last summer." Soon after this, she worried that her brother, after coming home from his first term, would "not be satisfied you will want to go back to Evanston but I hope not." As Christmas drew near, Elsie penned a long letter literally begging her brother to come home. In part, she lamented, "I dreamed last night that you came home Xmas you looked so different and said you went with a girl [named] Miss Evans I though[t] they named Evanston after her father, and I was so sorry you didn't want to stay home 'anymore'. (but I hope it is not that way). do you go with any girl? Oh! I think you ought to come home Xmas. we will forget how you look. . . . Pa says tell you he thinks you had better come home."³⁶

Speaking of the honey produced in the family's beehive, she told him, "We are saving the honey for you." At the letter's end, she added two sad refrains: "What is home without a brother[?]" and "The sun shines bright in your old Illinois home." She also declared, "You must answer our letter, especially mine." In a letter written by Ida a week later she states, "Elsie wants you to come home so bad."³⁷

Jimmy's sentiments about being away from home begin to change around mid-November as evident in his letters home. There was less information about Chicago, Evanston, and the lake and more questions about things

at home. Perhaps an October letter to Elsie foreshadowed this. "The lake is very pretty especially when it is still, but of course a person will get tired of it after [a]while." After receiving the news of a devastating fire that consumed much of Waltonville's downtown as well as stories about several local deaths, Jimmy wrote to his mother, "I persume [*sic*], when I get home, I won't know the place, and the people that I once knew will all be dead." In late November he explained to his mother, "I get a letter now and then from other people in Jefferson County. I always like to get letters, for I am getting pretty tired of being penned up in this man's town." Jimmy also wrote to Elsie that he now wished "to drop in some day and see how everything looks, and also hunt quails." He asked his sister, "Have you taken out any more honey[?]" By early December, as the weather grew much colder in the Chicago area, Jimmy was writing to his family, telling them, "I would like to spend a few days in the old country again with a good dog and gun."³⁸ He also spent more time in his letters inquiring about his father and brother and work on the farm.

Then, in mid-December, two contradictory events occurred. First, Jimmy sent a rather curt letter to his mother, stating, "I am going to stay until about the middle of Feburary [*sic*], so you need not worry about me comming home for Xmas."³⁹ Next, unexpectedly, Jimmy returned home before the end of the term. Despite the nostalgic bent of his recent letters, however, becoming homesick over homegrown apples may have had little to do with his return.

Both of Jimmy's parents had been sick during his time away, and this may have been weighing on his mind. Also, as early as November Jimmy wrote to his mother about financial pressures. "I paid

my second month room rent and now I am about broke. I figured about how much money I would need till Xmas and it ran up to about \$40. So you had better send me that much by a P.O. order." However, it is his later report cards that strongly hint at what may have been the essential cause of his surprising return home. Jimmy's grades were woefully low in several subjects, including botany. Elsie alludes to this in December, writing, "We got your report card Monday and your grades were better than last month."⁴⁰

Jimmy never returned to school. Three years after his abrupt return from Northwestern, Jimmy's cousin, John Dodds, wrote Jimmy a letter and then a postcard from Colorado, imploring Jimmy to come out west. Jimmy did not go. Perhaps he had enjoyed his fill of adventure. When he returned to Waltonville, Jimmy went back to his former occupations of farming and rural mail carrying. He did not marry Blanche Dees. In 1911 he wrote a local girl, Malissa Kirkpatrick, asking permission to visit her, but this courtship apparently did not work out either.⁴¹ On November 26, 1913, Jimmy married Vera McPherson, a petite woman the exact size of Ida. Vera was a quiet, artistic young woman from a respectable Methodist family and lived at the edge of Mount Vernon, Illinois. The marriage would produce four sons and two daughters.

Throughout his life Jimmy was extremely active in the Methodist church. His youngest daughter, Faye, remembered, "He never missed a Sunday, unless he was sick. He walked three miles to get there, even in winter. Besides attending Sunday and Saturday worship services, he taught a Sunday school class. He went to Wednesday night prayer meetings and served as church treasurer, a job he took very seriously."⁴²

Examining the Newell correspondence helped me to better understand my grandfather's wishes for my mother and to appreciate my mother even more for standing her ground.

Jimmy's father died from a heart condition a few years after his son's return to Waltonville. Jimmy remained close to his mother. In 1923, shortly after Jimmy and Vera had moved to Mount Vernon, he wrote his mother a letter, telling her about the upcoming Methodist Conference meeting in Benton and how he continued working at the railroad car shops. In another letter that year, he spoke of sending his mother money and of her grandchildren's recent illness. "Maxey, Thomas and Dean are broke out with the measles, Orval having had them several days ago. They have also all had the chicken pox."⁴³ Ida died in 1934 after contracting typhoid while caring for a young neighbor boy who had taken the illness. She was seventy-five years old. My grandfather, James P. Newell, died in 1964 at the age of seventy-eight and was buried at the New Shiloh Methodist Church cemetery near Mount Vernon.

As noted, families often construct simple but long-lasting traditions about family members and family events. In the case of my grandfather Newell's family, a simple but powerful story was created to explain the reason behind his sudden leaving of Evanston and school and his return home. Many years later that story was reinforced by a children's story my grandfather told again and again to his grandchildren. It was about "the country mouse and the city mouse." In his version, a discontented mouse from the country goes to a big city where he runs around with a city

mouse and all but starves. Finally, the country mouse returns home, forever content. My grandfather always made a point out of how important it was for rural people to value and be content with their world. I always wondered, however, if my grandfather gave up on some portion of an important dream when he returned to southern Illinois. Reading these letters suggests that is a real possibility.

Writing this narrative using the Newell letters, placing the letters in their cultural time and place, and teasing out the central dramas in the correspondence has helped me understand that the long-standing story of my grandfather's growing homesick over a barrel of apples is, in fact, a more complicated story. On a deeper level, I think the letters indicate that my grandfather was haunted by and beckoned back home by the power of something a sociologist might call "place." In this sense, he may have identified with rural southern Illinois to the point that it was incorporated into his self concept.⁴⁴

In the early 1900s, a sense of place was more powerful than a sense of place is for most people today. The region in Illinois long known as Egypt possessed a strong and unique rural culture. Jimmy also had an extended family of multiple generations, a community, and a church calling him back home. But his un-lived dreams of college may not have completely died with his return to Egypt.

On December 3, 1927, Vera and Jimmy Newell had their first daughter,

Mary Alice, my mother. She grew especially close to her father. As a young child, Mary Alice was pleasant, made high marks in school, and never caused any problems. Her favorite teacher in grade school was her older cousin, Eleanor Hodge, daughter of Jimmy's sister, Elsie (Newell) Hodge. Mary Alice soon stood out as the one Newell child who might go to college and achieve a professional career, the lost hope of her father.

My grandfather placed extraordinary pressure on my mother to stay in college at Southern Illinois University in the late 1940s. He wanted her to become a science teacher or even a doctor. However, she rebelled and made her own decisions about her future vocation, that of becoming a housewife and mother.⁴⁵ Examining the Newell correspondence helped me to better understand my grandfather's wishes for my mother and to appreciate my mother even more for standing her ground.

It was my hope that reading and then writing about my Newell family letters would bring some degree of insight into how my life might have been touched by my mother's side of my family. This was of importance to me as my mother had come to live with my father's people after their marriage, leaving me less connected with her family culture. Also, as noted above, I was often told that I was more like her people than my father's.

In reading and then writing about this set of letters, I realized I did indeed possess many of the characteristics of



Grandpa Jimmy, shading his eyes from the sun, with Grandma Vera and several of their grandchildren. The story Jimmy enjoyed telling most to his grandchildren was "the country mouse and the city mouse," a tale perhaps justifying to himself his unexpected return to rural southern Illinois in 1906. The author is the three-year-old boy sitting on the edge of the children's car.

my Grandpa Jimmy. These characteristics include a tenderheartedness toward family, friends, and people in general, along with a restless curiosity about the world, and a deep connection to place and family. More important, however, these letters eventually came to help me better understand a life-changing event that occurred just after I graduated from high school in 1969.

I had been a decent basketball player in high school. Upon graduation, I received a few scholarship offers to play in local colleges in southern Illinois. My father wanted me to go to one of these schools and continue in sports. I also received a tuition-free academic scholarship offer to Southern Illinois University, the same school my mother had attended for a short while.

Because of the insistence of my high school counselor, I also reluctantly made a one-day visit to a small liberal arts college in Indiana. There, I halfheartedly took a test to see if I might qualify for any type of financial aid. At the time, I had no interest whatsoever in the out-of-state school. While being more like my mother's people had often made me secretly feel set apart from my father's large, rural, extended family and from the community where I grew up, I still felt more comfortable with the idea of living at home and commuting to school.

Then an unexpected event occurred. A letter arrived in April 1969 informing me I had received a tuition-free academic scholarship to the Indiana school. I showed the letter to my mother and

was surprised by her response. She seemed especially excited for me, but I told her I thought having to pay room and board would make it way too expensive. I did not tell her the thought of leaving home terrified me. Her next comment stunned me in its tone of finality.

"That's where you're going to school, Randy," she said.

And so I did, somewhat against my father's wishes and my own fears. It was a difficult journey at first. As my grandfather had discovered, I found that homesickness is a real and powerful force. My mother was the great champion of my hanging in there. In one of her typical letters of support she wrote, "I hope you try to get calmed down and relaxed this week. . . . Make yourself study, go to bed earlier and get up and eat. And get over the blues and being home sick! Just be like Paul (the Apostle)—be content wherever you are."⁴⁶

So I stuck with it and the longer I stayed, the more I discovered about myself. In the end, I would make Indiana, not southern Illinois, my home and academics, not farming, my vocation. Thus, my journey came to fulfill my Grandpa Jimmy's young dream.

Fergus Bordewich, author of a best-selling memoir, *My Mother's Ghost* (2001), recently told me about reading his mother's correspondence: "I was often affected by the complete 'gone-ness' of what I was reading, what my mother was observing, and all the people in her life, her early ambitions and much more. I repeatedly had the sensation of a whole life, hers', having flashed by in an instant. It was dizzying, in a very uncomfortable way."⁴⁷ I would agree with this disturbing assessment of what can happen when a person closely examines family letters. But it is still a journey that I believe is worth taking,

for it can lead to many interesting and perhaps even important understandings about one's self and one's family. In my case, writing about the Newell family letters has helped me to understand that family sagas are often generational in scope and that they hover just at the periphery of our consciousness, waiting to be discovered.

Notes

1. Larry Lockridge, *Shade of the Raintree: The Life and Death of Ross Lockridge Jr.* (New York: Viking Press, 1994), 36, 37, 39.
2. See Randy Mills, "Not Like your Father's People: Finding Personal Meaning in Family History Research," *The Hoosier Genealogist: Connections* 50, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2010): 80–89, for an exploration of this family practice; See Randy Mills and Karen Mills Hales, "Your Loving Father Jack: Southern Illinois Farm Life in the 1890s as Seen Through the Correspondence of the Jack Pierce Family," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 106, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 51–90, for how I used a set of letters on my father's side to gain personal understanding of that side of my family.
3. Lockridge, *Shade of the Raintree*, 37.
4. James Newell to Elsie Newell, October 27, 1906. All letters are in the author's possession.
5. James Newell to Elsie Newell, October 13, 1906; Elsie Newell to James Newell, October 21, 1906.
6. See Mills and Hales, "Your Loving Father Jack," for an academic discussion of such a relationship.
7. Cathy Shurtz Balsley, "My Aunt Elsie and Grandmother Newell," *The Prairie Historian: A Magazine of Folk History* 44, no. 2 (2009): 9–10.
8. *Mount Vernon Register News*, August 18, 1934.
9. Stephen Anderson and Dennis Bagarozzi, "The Use of Family Myth as an Aid to Strategic Therapy," *Journal of Family Therapy* 5, no. 2 (1983): 145–54; Kerry Daly, "Family Theory versus the Theories Families Live By," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, no. 4 (November 2003): 771–84.
10. Edgar F. Raines Jr., "The Ku Klux Klan in Illinois, 1867–1875," *Illinois Historical Journal*, 78 (Spring 1985): 20. According to most scholars, the southern Illinois region called Egypt includes the lower twenty-eight counties of the state. See Paul Angle's *Bloody Williamson: A Chapter in American Lawlessness* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), for a popular version of the theme of rugged frontier culture. For more academic treatments, see Richard Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture: The Impress of the Upland Southerners and Yankees in the Old Northwest* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1953); Baker Brownell, *The Other Illinois* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1958); and Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Robert Ingersoll letter to Ebon Clark quoted in Mark A. Plummer, *Robert G. Ingersoll: Peoria's Pagan Politician*, Western Illinois University Series #4 (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University, 1984), 37; *A History of Jefferson County, Illinois* (Dallas, TX: Jefferson County Historical Society and Taylor Publishing, 1978), 9. The letter in the Plummer book did not have a complete quote. Blending it with the letter copy in the Jefferson County Historical Society document enabled me to use a fuller quote.
11. *Chicago Tribune*, August 13, 1875, quoted in Raines "The Ku Klux Klan in Illinois," 20–21; Brownell, *Other Illinois*, 92.
12. Rev. Tommy Brewer, *Waltonville United Methodist Church* (N.p., 1992). Ida Newell was one of three new members added to the church roster after the building was moved to Waltonville from Williamsburg, Illinois, in 1895. Her husband, Ichabod, was elected to the church board of trustees shortly after the building and congregation moved. Ichabod's "untiring efforts and inspiration" to the church were especially recognized in this booklet, p. 3; *Minutes of the Sixtieth Session of the Southern Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, J. C. Kinison, secretary (East Saint Louis, IL: N.p., 1911).
13. Ida Newell to James Newell, November 10, 1906.
14. James Newell to Ida Newell, October 3, 1906; James Newell to Elsie Newell, October 13, 1906.
15. James Newell to "Dear Folks," September 6, 1906; James Newell to Elsie Newell, November 5, 1906.
16. James Newell to "Dear Folks," September 6, 1906; James Newell to Ida Newell, October 3, 1906, and November 17, 1906; James Newell to Elsie Newell, October 13, 1906, and October 27, 1906.
17. James Newell to Elsie Newell, October 27, 1906, and November 12, 1906; James Newell to Ida Newell, November 12, 1906.
18. James Newell to Ida Newell, October 1906, and October 3, 1906; James Newell to Elsie Newell, October 27, 1906.
19. James Newell to "Dear Folks," September 6, 1906.

20. "Dear Cousin" to James Newell, September 29, 1906; Blanche Dees to James Newell, October 15, 1906. The "Dear Cousin" letter and the Blanche Dees–James Newell correspondence are in the author's possession.
21. Blanche Dees to James Newell, December 4, 1906, and December 13, 1906.
22. Blanche Dees to James Newell, December 13, 1906, and November 13, 1906.
23. Ida Newell to James Newell, October 8, 1906; James Newell to Ida Newell, October 21, 1906; Blanche Dees to James Newell, December 13, 1906.
24. Ida Newell to James Newell, September 25, 1906; September 28, 1906; and October 17, 1906.
25. Ida Newell to James Newell, October 3, 1906.
26. Ida Newell to James Newell, November 10, 1906; September 25, 1906; and October 3, 1906.
27. Ida Newell to James Newell, October 17, 1906; October 25, 1906; and November 11, 1906.
28. Ida Newell to James Newell, October 8, 1906; James Newell to Elsie Newell, October 13, 1906.
29. Ida Newell to James Newell, October 22, 1906, and October 3, 1906; Elsie Newell to James Newell, September 24, 1906.
30. James Newell to Ida Newell, December 2, 1906, and November 24, 1906.
31. James Newell to Elsie Newell, October 13, 1906.
32. Ida Newell to James Newell, October 25, 1906, and November 10, 1906.
33. James Newell to Ida Newell, November 1, 1906; James Newell to Elsie Newell, November 5, 1906.
34. Ida Newell to James Newell, November 10, 1906; James Newell to Ida Newell, November 12, 1906; Elsie Newell to James Newell, November 15, 1906.
35. Elsie Newell to James Newell, September 24, 1906, and October 3, 1906.
36. Elsie Newell to James Newell, October 21, 1906; November 15, 1906; and December 10, 1906.
37. Elsie Newell to James Newell, December 10, 1906; Ida Newell to James Newell, December 18, 1906.
38. James Newell to Elsie Newell, October 4, 1906, and November 12, 1906; James Newell to Ida Newell, November 1, 1906, and November 24, 1906; James Newell to "Dear Folks," December 2, 1906.
39. James Newell to Ida Newell, December 8, 1906.
40. James Newell to Ida Newell, November 1, 1906; Elsie Newell to James Newell, December 10, 1906. James Newell's Northwestern University Academy report cards are in the author's possession.
41. John Dodds to James Newell, January 7, 1909; Malissa Kirkpatrick to James Newell, May 11, 1911. Both letters are in the author's possession.
42. Author interview with Faye Newell Simpson, Oakland City, Indiana, 2013.
43. James Newell to Ida Newell, September 17, 1923, and March 18, 1923.
44. Claire L. Twigger–Ross and David L. Uzzell, "Place and Identity Processes," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 16 (1996): 206.
45. Author interview with Mary Alice (Newell) Pierce, Mount Vernon, Illinois, 2001; Randy Mills, "Dramatize Your Family Stories by Placing Them in Historical Context," in M. Teresa Baer and Geneil Breeze, eds., *Finding Indiana Ancestors: A Guide to Historical Research*, (Indianapolis; Indiana Historical Society Press, 2007), 37–46.
46. Mary Alice (Newell) Pierce to author, October 13, 1969.
47. Fergus Bordewich, Washington, DC, to author, July 30, 2013.

Randy K. Mills is a professor of history at Oakland City University in Oakland City, Indiana. He is the author of several books, including Jonathan Jennings, Indiana's First Governor, published by the Indiana Historical Society Press, and Troubled Hero: A Medal of Honor, Vietnam, and the War at Home, published by Indiana University Press. Presently, he is working on a story, based on family letters, of a Hoosier soldier who died in the Vietnam War.