

A Legacy of Old Letters

By Louise Walsh

Several years ago while cleaning out the North Texas home of my recently deceased aunt, I stumbled upon a box in the back of a closet marked simply, “Mother’s letters.” I was surprised to discover that the box contained hundreds of pieces of correspondence saved by my grandmother, Early Walton Price, during the years 1904-1909, almost a century earlier. She and her friends had been the sons and daughters of the founding families of Georgetown, Texas, and they studied at Southwestern University. All of them had traveled extensively throughout Texas in the early 20th century. Sifting through this incredible find, I became convinced that it held historical significance not only for our family, but also for Georgetown, the university, and the state of Texas.

Opposite: This Price family photograph, circa 1910, was taken at their home in Georgetown. All images courtesy of the author.



Townpeople are shown waiting for a parade in Georgetown during the early 1900s.

I decided to take the letters home and transfer their contents to the computer in order to create a book for my mother's 90th birthday the following year. If the story was as interesting as I suspected, I would order copies for our immediate and extended families. With the Internet capabilities of today, this should not have been a difficult endeavor—or so I naively thought.

Organizing hundreds of letters by postmark date, I began to grasp their wide-reaching scope. The dispatches were not just from Georgetown but from all across the state: Austin, Dallas, Mount Vernon, Waxahachie, Talpa (now a ghost town), and other places, along with prolific correspondence from Chihuahua, Mexico, a city where Texans had begun seeking their fortunes before the days of the Mexican Revolution. Bringing to life the events depicted in the correspondence were telegrams, newspaper clippings, photographs, postcards, social event invitations, Southwestern University memorabilia, and an array of mementos that a young woman might have saved for a scrapbook to be assembled at a later time.

Many of the letters were fragile and crumbling, their words faded and flowery, but as I read them, I was transfixed by the story of the Price family. Mail was the way that people stayed connected back then, and they communicat-

ed with each other just as often as we do now by email or text. It wasn't unusual for many letters to be sent or received each day. How else would this early 20th-century generation know what was going on in the lives of their friends and family? Now the thoughts of my ancestors were being read by a relative in the next century—a veritable journal of the lives of people who had been known previously only as a name or photograph in a dusty album, a comment in family tales throughout the years. The endeavor, for me—the consummate snooper—was exhilarating.

Sometimes I would get up in the middle of the night to read what happened next. I discovered family secrets, like the five-year love triangle between Early Price and her two suitors—one of them my future grandfather. I learned of the close relationship that existed between Georgetown and Southwestern, of the goings and comings of Texas citizens both privileged and ordinary, and of their births and deaths, often at an early age. My grandmother's collection also revealed some of the historical events of Texas towns, Mexican outposts, and the nation a hundred years ago. I was mesmerized by the treasure that had come into my possession.

While compiling this unwieldy document, I embarked on a fact-finding trip to Georgetown to research the archives of libraries, museums, the county courthouse, and even the

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cemetery. Surprisingly, there was very little personal history recorded in that time period in Georgetown, and none of it involved a graphic panorama of “society” the way that the Price letters did. Understanding that letter-writing as a social custom today has all but disappeared only strengthened my resolve to preserve my grandmother’s correspondence for future generations

After several months of dedicated work, the letters were, at last, entered in to the computer. Supporting documents were then inserted into their appropriate places in the story. With photographs and ephemera provided by other family members, I continued to build the story that, when finally finished, became the intended vision: a pictorial memoir told in the words of a very real family making its way across the colorful stage of Texas history.

The first book took more than a year to complete and was printed by a company specializing in family history publishing. I gave it as a gift to my mother as planned and offered copies to other family members and friends. The birthday came and went, but the Price story had just begun.

While visiting Southwestern, I had met Dr. Bill Jones, professor emeritus and former vice president of the university, who had recently written a comprehensive history of the school. I decided to send him a copy of my book as a complement to the work he had done, not realizing that this simple act of friendship would start a chain of events in my life that endures even

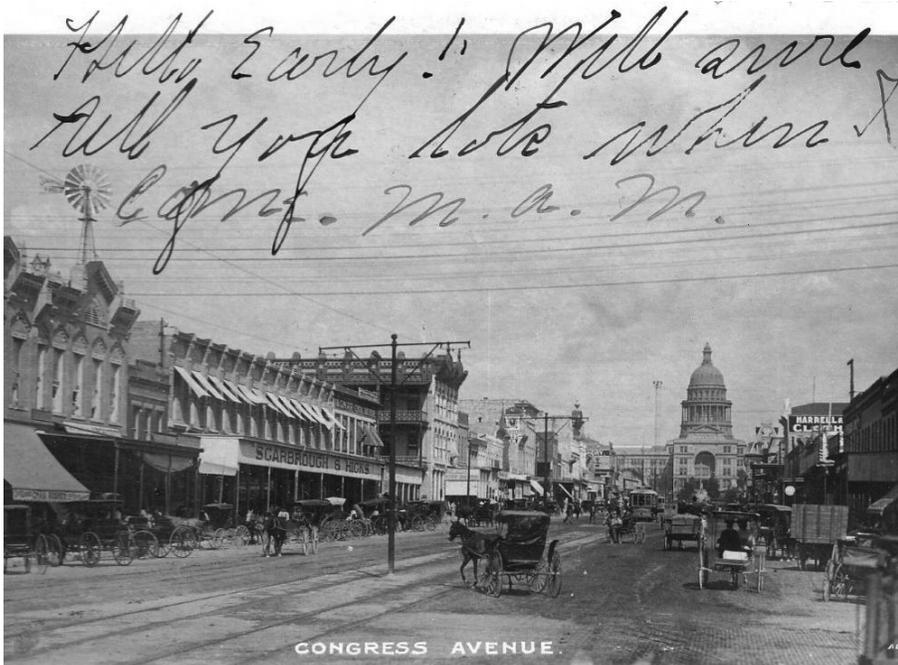
now. Dr. Jones ultimately invited me to Southwestern to tour the campus and meet with Georgianne Hewett, associate vice president of alumni; Dr. and Mrs. Benoit, prominent citizens who had known members of the Price family; and June Cody, a former owner of the Price house, which is still standing in the historical district of Georgetown. After Hewett read the book, she was surprised to learn that Early Price and her friends had participated in the first homecoming of the university in 1909. She and Ellen Davis, Southwestern University director of communications, were in the early stages of planning the 100th anniversary of that occasion and wanted to consider tying the book to the celebration. In fact, as

the planning unfolded, my grandmother’s picture was chosen to be on the cover of the event invitation, which was distributed to thousands of alumni across the state and nation.

With all this unexpected attention, I decided my little family book needed some modifications if it was to be placed in such a historical spotlight. This required revisions that changed the focus from family to a wider audience of readers. In the midst of it all, my mother passed away, and while going through her things, I found even more information to add to the story, all of which needed to be hurriedly edited and inserted before sending the book to the printer. The pressure was intense, but working with a larger overseas printing company, I was able



The author is shown at a 2010 book-signing event on Mother’s Day weekend in Round Rock, Texas.



Top: This photo postcard sent to Early Price depicts Austin's Congress Avenue (with the Capitol at the far end), circa 1906. Bottom: Early Price and friends pose at the Old West Bridge on the banks of the San Gabriel River in 1908.

to create a manuscript that, in the end, exceeded my expectations.

The revised book, *The Ties That Bind: A Georgetown Texas Memoir 1904-1909*, was released during homecoming weekend in November 2009. On that Friday, the Williamson County Historical Museum invited me to participate in a book-signing event where I dressed in period costume and offered a display of Early Price's collection. The next day, as part of

Southwestern's homecoming program, I spoke to the Georgetown Heritage Society where another book-signing and artifact display occurred. That afternoon, I presented my grandmother's sorority pin to the Alpha Delta Pi chapter at a reception celebrating 100 years of its founding—Early Price and her friends had been among that group's first members. Exhausted, but energized with excitement, I went on to participate in a cemetery tour given

by the Williamson County Museum, presiding at the tombs of my ancestors and telling their story to visitors. The next day at worship services in the Perkins Chapel on the university campus, "Blest be the Tie"—the song sung at the original homecoming and the one that had inspired the title of my book—resounded once again to mark the end of this historical milestone for Southwestern University and Georgetown.

First-person accounts can be powerful when ordinary people tell their own stories. They present a way to record factual information in an insightful way without the sense of inevitability that is inherent in books and other documents. Since that memorable weekend where my box of "Mother's letters" came out of its dark hiding place and onto the pages of Texas history, the book has continued to be relevant. It is now on the shelves of a large number of major high schools, universities, and public libraries in Texas. After two years, I continue to give talks and book signings at different venues in the state, taking along my display of Texas artifacts for authenticity and enjoyment. My intention of bringing this story to the people of Texas, especially in the Georgetown/Southwestern area, has succeeded and is a testament to what ordinary people can do to preserve the past. I hope that others will be inspired to do the same with their family documents.

In the words of J. Frank Dobie, one of Early Price's classmates at Southwestern, when asked what motivated him to write about the past: "The raw material of a uniquely American experience should not be allowed to perish." Only by this means can we keep this state's history alive for future generations. ★

Louise Walsh lives in Montgomery, Texas, where she spent two years compiling, editing, and preserving her grandmother's extensive collection of letters.