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Marriage and Gender: A History Through Letters

Victoria Kern

University of Rhode Island, victoria_kern@my.uri.edu

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Marriage and Gender: A History Through Letters

By:

Victoria Kern

University of Rhode Island Honors Program Project

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Helen Mederer

May 10, 2015

I. Abstract

Research on the evolution of marriage can be found quite easily, but the opportunity to see into the lives of married couples from the past is rare. Through the analysis of letters between my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents, I provide a glimpse of what being married has meant throughout the 20th Century for heterosexual couples. Societal ideas about what makes a marriage ideal have changed over time, but they have always been closely linked with gender expectations (Berk, 2013), so a feminist approach to the analysis of the evolution of marriage is used with my family's letters as a case study.

Throughout history, marriage has functioned in several different ways. Whether benefitting of society, the family unit, or the individual, the institution has been an instrumental part of American culture. The ways couples perform gender roles, express affection, and communicate are reflective of the particular cultural conceptions of marriage, and letters provide a way to enter the lives of couples and see first-hand what it was like to be married during the last 100 years (Cherlin, 2010).

In order to examine how marriage and gender have changed throughout history, I analyze letters between my paternal great-grandparents, paternal grandparents, and parents. Each couple consists of a man in the military and a woman who corresponds with her husband from home. The letters of focus are the ones written within the two years before and after each couple's wedding (1917, 1951, and 1985) because those letters are the most likely to reveal societal views of gender and marriage. Using the tool of textual analysis of letters, I use a sociological lens to examine the ways marriage and gender have transformed not only in my family's history but also in United States history.

II. Introduction

Throughout my childhood, I was made aware that much of the men in my family had been in either the navy or the army, but there was never much conversation as to the specifics of each of their experiences. My great-grandfather, grandfather, and father all served in the armed forces during their lives and I grew up knowing each of them spent long periods of time away from their families, but I never truly understood how the separation influenced my relatives' relationships. Furthermore, I did not realize how sociologically interesting my family was seeing as there were three generations of married couples who were separated by war during significant historical time periods.

As a young undergraduate at the University of Rhode Island (URI), I was introduced to the concept of the social construction of marriage, which states that marriage evolves over time as other social institutions, such as the economy and laws, evolve over time. At the same time I was learning about how marriage changes over time, my grandfather passed away. While my family sorted through boxes of his belongings, I could not pull myself away from two sets of letters my grandfather had saved: one, a set of correspondences between his parents and the other a set of correspondences between my grandparents – both while the couples were newlyweds and separated by war. To my surprise and delight, I found out my parents had a collection of letters of their own just like the other two sets I had found. When I read through the letters and applied the conceptual tools I had been learning in sociology, gender studies, and honors courses, I realized what my honors project was going to be. I decided to analyze the letters in the hopes of discovering how they illustrated the culture in which they were written with a particular focus on the changing social norms regarding marriage during three different times in history.

IV. Gender and Marriage

There are many important societal structures that seem to be set in stone but are actually social constructions. As citizens of society, people have the ability to influence the organized factions that bring structure their lives. These social institutions like the economy, religion, education, and the family have been reconstructed time and time again throughout history as societies become more complex. The family is one social institution that gets overlooked because it is often thought of as naturally occurring and constant. It is possible to think of families as a group of people unaltered by their surrounding culture, but doing this would overlook the radical transformations that have been made within the context of family life in America. Central to these transformations has been changing conceptions of gender.

One of the ways to investigate the changes in families over time is to observe how the function of marriage has altered because matrimony has been the pillar of family life for so long. Historically, legal marriages have taken place between a man and a woman and have indicated that the woman would be “given” to the man, the couple would engage in cohabitation, and together, through a strict division of labor, would bear and raise the next generation of citizens. It is important, then, to discuss how the roles of the members of a marital union have transformed over time. One vital component of marital roles is the way each member of the marriage acts in relation to their assigned gender roles of their time period. Feminist scholars have claimed that “the most revolutionary aspect of contemporary women’s history” is the “refusal to accept gender-role divisions as natural” (Downs, 2004). Once it is understood that gender, like marriage and family, is a social construction, one can look at gender through a well-informed sociological lens.

In this study of marriage and gender, observing how spouses play out gender roles of their time is a way to gain insight into the institution of marriage.

Public ideas about what makes an ideal family are closely linked with what characteristics are attributed to a “good husband” or a “good wife.” In order to analyze the changing concept of marriage, then, gender must be addressed because norms about marriage have always relied on gender norms (Berk, 2013). There are certain ways women and men feel they are expected to act based on their gender, and this means gender roles have been assigned to them in their society. Gender is not something people are born with; rather, gender is learned. More than anywhere else, one learns gender at home from their family members who model the characteristics of masculinity or femininity. Although children learn what gender is from the media and at school, their constant exposure to gender roles in their families is most influential (Berk, 2013).

Historically, adhering closely to the gender roles spouses felt were placed on them made managing marital relationships clearer. Marriages were more likely to be stable if both partners knew what household and public duties were assigned to themselves. Over time, due to changes in other social institutions such as the economy and the government, there has been a changing of gender norms, and as a result gender is being discussed more often. As gender is discussed more often, people realize their gendered performances were not innate, but learned, and they could unlearn them if they wanted to. Once gender roles were questioned, it became easier to recognize the oppression that had existed for hundreds of years. Many women have gained more political and economic rights that have empowered them to assert their power in the private sphere, or their homes. For example, women are the main or only breadwinner in 40% of families today, which greatly increases women’s likelihood of having more autonomy in their families.

With their powerful role in the family, women are now more able and likely to point out how unfair it is that they are working all day in the public sphere and then working all night at home tending to children and housecleaning -- a phenomena known as the second shift (Hochschild, 2003). Aside from household duties, many women in history have gained more power and privilege as time has gone by. The changes in gender equality directly influence how marriage has evolved throughout history, and the correspondences between three generations of my family members show such changes quite well. Before exploring what the letters show, the lives of the letter-writers will be described in order to gain a context for the contents of the letters.

V. Biographic Information

Great-Grandparents

My great-grandparents, James William Kern Jr. and Nannie Britton Rousseau got married on July 29, 1917 and were separated for the entire two years following their marriage while my grand-grandfather served as an engineer in the United States Navy. James William Kern Jr. served in France building temporary bridges for the allied forces during World War I, which lasted from 1914-1918.

James William Kern Jr. was born in Fairfax County, Virginia in 1887. After graduating from Washington and Lee University, James William Kern worked for the Illinois Central (IC) Railroad as a Senior Manager and Division Superintendent. James began his work with the IC Railroad in 1905 and continued it intermittently for his entire life. The railroad took James all over Mississippi, Illinois, Louisiana, and Kentucky. In between his years of work with the railroad, he served as a Captain for the United States Army Engineers in France from 1917-1918. Finally, Kern settled in Paducah, Kentucky

in 1935 where he and his wife raised four children. James eventually passed away in Paducah on December 6, 1941 – the day before Pearl Harbor (Society, 1989).

Nannie Britton was born in Mounds, Illinois in 1895 and studied at University of Illinois. After marrying James William Kern Jr. in 1917, Nannie Britton lived in many states to accommodate for her husband's railroad job, but in 1935, Paducah, Kentucky became the place Nannie would call home for the rest of her life (Society, 1989). During the 51 years Nannie lived on Woodland Drive in Paducah, Nannie supported herself and raised her children while her husband was in the army for two years following their marriage. After being home for about 20 years, Nannie's husband passed away from a brain tumor and she was left to support the family on her own. Tragically, Nannie also lost her son James William Kern III at the age of 28 when he passed away from an incurable nervous disease he had been struggling with since he was 12 years of age. Additionally, Nannie's daughter Nancy passed away from cancer at the age of 43, leaving sons Thomas Dabney Kern and John Stage Kern as the only children who lived into late adulthood, both of whom served in the armed forces during their lives. In order to gain an income, Nannie rented rooms out to visitors, babysat local children, and baked specialty desserts. Nannie made meaningful connections with fellow townspeople and not only had eleven grandchildren of her own who knew her as "Nana," but also had numerous Paducah children who were like grandchildren to her. An avid member of the local Grace Church, Nannie was friend to many and spent her adult years visiting her children and grandchildren who lived all over the country. In the year 1986, Nannie Britton passed away after 90 full years of life (Society, 1989).



James William Kern Jr. Nannie Britton Kern (on the right) with her daughter-in-law

Grandparents

My grandfather, John Staige Kern, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1925 but grew up in Paducah, Kentucky after living in New Orleans, LA and Clinton, Illinois for a short period of time. After graduating from Tilghman High School as validictorian, John (who was known as Bud in Paducah) took “preporatory courses at the University of Louisville” before being appointed to the U.S. Naval Academy (Kern, 2011). John graduated in 1948 with an engineering degree from the Naval Academy in three years due to the demands of war and married Nancy Rousseau in 1951 shortly after entering the navy. Throughout his 31 years serving in the surface warfare branch of the navy, John earned a graduate degree from the Royal Naval College, served in the Vietnam and Korean War, attained the rank of rear admiral, and received several commendations including “the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star with Combat ‘V’, Vietnam Service Medal, and Vietnam Campaign” (Kern, 2011). After retiring “in 1977 as the Deputy Chief of Naval Operations, Surface Warfare,” John lived in Newport, RI where he directed a shipyard and St. Augustine, FL where he and his wife ran a bed-and-breakfast. John and his wife had five children and nine grandchildren, all of whom are still alive

today. In the later years of his life, John lived in Virginia and passed away of brain cancer in 2011 at the age of 86, 16 years after the passing of his wife, Nancy (Kern, 2011).

Nancy Hart Rousseau was born in 1928 to Judge Julius Addison Rousseau and Nelle Gertrude Hall in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina where she spent her formative years with her three siblings. Nancy went to college at Duke University in North Carolina earning a degree in Sociology, and she married John Staige Kern in her hometown in 1951. Nancy worked as a respiratory therapist in hospitals, ran a bed-and-breakfast with her husband, and raised five children practically on her own while her husband was away in the navy. Nancy was known for easily conversing with anyone and everyone and loved living in St. Augustine, FL with her family until her passing in 1995 at the age of 67. Both Nancy and her husband are buried in the beautiful Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia right next to each other (Alspaugh, 2011).



Nancy Hart Rousseau and John Staige Kern

Parents

My father, James (Jim) Addison Kern, was born in 1960 in Virginia and spent his childhood moving all around America with his four siblings and mother living on naval bases since his father had a career in the navy. Jim received a Bachelor of Science in

Business Administration and Master's Degree in Public Administration at the University of Rhode Island (URI). It was at URI that Jim met his soon-to-be wife Diane Elliott, whom he married in 1985 and with whom he had two children. Following his college career, Jim went to Officer Candidate School in Newport, RI and served as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy from 1985-1992. While in the navy, Jim was a surface warfare officer like his father was and worked on ships that patrolled the Persian Gulf and Middle East during the years leading up to the Gulf War. Since his time in the navy, Jim has played an important role in the governing of two Massachusetts towns as the Town Administrator of Swansea, MA and Town Manager of Dedham, MA (Guilfoil, 2014).

My mother, Diane Elliott Kern, was born in 1962 and grew up in a working-class family in Southeastern Massachusetts and Tiverton, Rhode Island. As the first person in her family to attend college, Diane worked her way through school at URI, earning Bachelors Degrees in English, Elementary Education, and Secondary Education. After completing her undergraduate studies, Diane continued her education and received a Masters in the Teaching of Reading and a Ph.D. in Education. Diane went on to be a public school teacher for fourteen years before becoming a lecturer and eventually a full-time faculty member in the URI School of Education. Diane has lived in South Kingstown, RI with her husband and two children for the last 25 years.



James Addison Kern



Diane Elliott Kern

VI. Theory: The Evolution of Marriage

Sociologists say that marriage is socially constructed, and by this they mean marriage evolves as other social institutions, such as the economy and laws, evolve. Since marriage is reflective of the time in which it exists, the cultural conception of what a good marriage is has evolved over time. The letters I analyze roughly correlate with three types of marriages included in the evolution of marriage – institutional, companionship, and individual.

Institutional

Institutional marriages were most common during the late 19th century and early 20th century when the country was just starting to industrialize and women had not yet gotten the right to vote. At this time, marriage existed for the function of serving society and was characterized by a formal legal union between husbands who possessed rights over their wives. As family researcher Stephanie Coontz wrote, “For much of history, marriage was not a relationship based on mutual love between a breadwinning husband

and an at-home wife, but an institution devoted to acquiring wealth, power, and property” (Coontz, 2006). During the time institutional marriages were most prevalent, gender roles were distinctly separate and marriage was viewed as a social obligation to society rather than a lifestyle choice. It was socially required of people to marry so that enough children were raised to be the next generation of workers. At the time, social welfare programs had not yet arisen and medicine was not as advanced, so the only way to have babies was within a marriage. Being a single parent was not socially acceptable and using a sperm donor to procreate was not yet commonplace, so people’s child-rearing choices were limited to procreation within marriage.

During the early 19th century, women did not have powerful roles outside of their families, so women’s sole responsibilities were to raise children and maintain their households. Within this social context, the emphasis in marriage was not on individual happiness but on doing well unto society. Additionally, emotional intimacy was not a requirement in the marriage, and many women found emotional connections from other women just as men did with other men or through extramarital relationships. Since institutional marriages existed for the benefit of society, there was an expectation that spouses would remain pleasant with one another so that the family could be stable and last throughout the life span. Bringing personal hardships into the marriage, then, was seen as burdensome and improper. Developing loving feelings for one another was viewed as a bonus that made the marriage more enjoyable and stable. With that said, the type of love most institutional marriages had was not as complex and personal as present-day couples might describe since love in an institutional marriage was about being kind to one’s partner and performing one’s marital roles well (Coontz, 2006).

Companionship

Companionship marriages, which described “good” marriages in the timeframe right after WWII and during the cold war era, were focused on keeping the family stable in a time where the world seemed extremely unstable with the threat of nuclear annihilation. At this time in history, the political philosophy was isolationist, so married couples felt the need to protect their own family members by being good partners and protecting and loving each other. Women’s roles became less rigid as women’s labor force participation increased and women realized attaining the right to vote in 1920 was not all that needed to be done to increase gender equality.

During the time when companionship marriages were most common, there was more equality between husbands and wives, but gender roles were still rigid with wives being seen as the “‘angel of the house’ and the husbands the ‘provider’” (Coontz, 2006). Advice columns during the time of companionship marriages would say good wives should not nag their husbands since the home was a haven from the cruel heartless wars men were dealing with outside of the home. Therefore, women were supposed to be grateful for being at home cooking, cleaning, and raising children, and men should be proud to be providers of financial support for their families (Coontz, 2006).

Individual

Individual marriages, which came to be in part because of increased gender equality and America’s shift to a service economy, focused on emotional intimacy and personal satisfaction and “began in the 1960s and accelerated in the 1970s” (Cherlin, 2010). In individual marriages, “both the wife and husband were expected to develop a separate subject self, to communicate more openly about their needs, and to have more flexible roles rather than the rigid breadwinner and homemaker roles of the 1950s marriage” (Cherlin, 2010). As women made strides in the labor force and education as a

part of the Third Wave Feminism Movement, marriage became more of a lifestyle choice rather than a social imperative. Since America transitioned to a service economy and the culture became more individualistic in nature, it makes sense that there was a focus on individual agency within marriages since all social institutions influence one another.

In comparison to the companionship marriage, individual “marriage was not just a partnership in which two functioned as one but also a relationship in which two people maintained their individual selves,” which was a significant social shift (Cherlin, 2010). Marital satisfaction began being measured “more in terms of self-development” than through “pleasing their spouse and raising their children” (Cherlin, 2010). With less pressure for spouses to sacrifice their personal happiness for the sake of their partner, “communication and openness and confronting problems” became not only more common, but also essential” to a “good” marriage (Cherlin, 2010). Overall, moving from companionship marriages to individual marriages meant shifting the emphasis from marital roles to self-fulfillment and drastically changed peoples’ experiences of marriage and family (Cherlin, 2010).

VII. Research Theory

Grounded Theory

The theoretical approach I used is called grounded theory and is characterized by a process of making predictions, looking to see the extent to which the data reflect those predictions, and then refining initial predictions to come up with a more nuanced theory. Grounded theory was the most appropriate theory for my content analysis because the letter-reading process greatly informed my theories, and the more refined my theories became, the easier it was to find evidence of my theories in the letters.

VIII. Methods

Phase of Marriage

Due to the overwhelming number of letters I have and time limitations, I focused on letters written within two years of each couple's wedding. This helped me reduce variables because each couple was either courting or in the newlywed phase and they were all physically separated by war while writing.

Themes

There are three themes that not only describe the experience of marriage but also expose the three types of marriage discussed in this study. I use the themes of formality, gender and power, and intimacy to compare each generation in order to illuminate how the couples were reflective of social norms about what made a marriage ideal at three different historical times. The themes, which are ways of describing marital interaction, are used to evaluate how social norms regarding marriage have changed as marriages move from being institutional, to companionship, to individual. The themes reflect cultural ideals, not necessarily personal beliefs, that people's lives have been measured in comparison to whether their lived realities aligned to them or not. Even when individuals' definitions of marriage deviate from the cultural ideals of their time period, their marriages are still related to cultural ideals because it is the society's view of what a "normal" or "good" marriage is that remains present despite deviant social behavior. Through the themes, I examine the extent to which each couple reflects the cultural standards of their time by observing how the couples have changed as the institution of marriage evolved.

IX. Theme One: Formality

The first theme used to analyze the evolution of marriage from institutional, to companionship, to individual is formality. As marriage evolves over time, spouses

generally move from being extremely polite and cordial to being more laid back and colloquial. A change from flowery language to more abbreviations and slang words can be observed and handwriting typically becomes less neat because the emphasis is on what messages words convey rather than how beautiful the words look. Additionally, as marriages become more independent, the extent to which spouses discuss negative emotions increases due to the heightened value placed on personal satisfaction rather than self-sacrifice. Another way changes in formality can be observed is through terms of endearment, which will be evaluated first.

Terms of Endearment

My great-grandparents, the couple closest to an institutional marriage, used formal terms of endearment that emphasized the marital position each spouse held, such as “husband” and “wife” rather than who the person was as an individual.

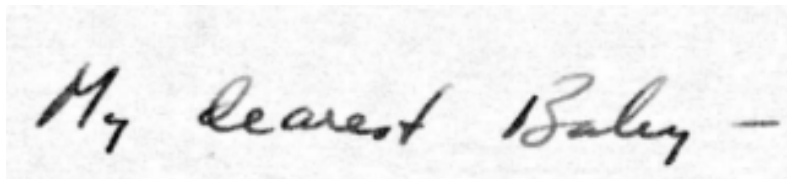
A photograph of a handwritten note in cursive script. The text reads: "My own precious, darling little wife -". The word "own" is underlined. The handwriting is neat and formal.

“My own precious, darling little wife”

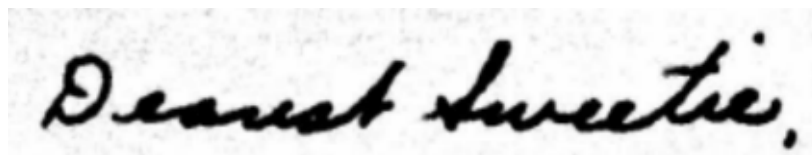
A photograph of a handwritten note in cursive script. The text reads: "My Own Darling Sweetheart Husband:.". The word "Own" is underlined. The handwriting is neat and formal.

“My Own Darling Sweetheart Husband”

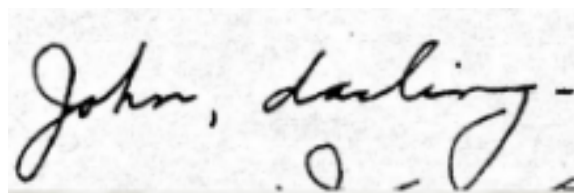
My grandparents, on the other hand, used a mixture of informal terms of endearment and each other’s first names, which shows a decrease in formality and an increase in personal connection.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads "My dearest Baby -".

"My dearest Baby"

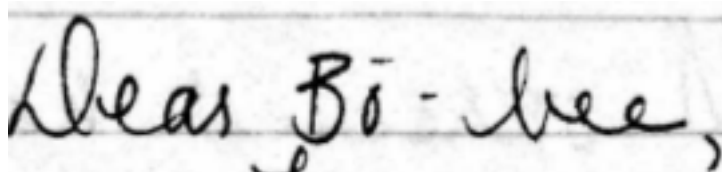
A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads "Dearest Sweetie,".

"Dearest Sweetie"

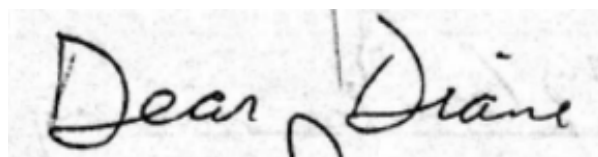
A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads "John, darling -".

"John, darling"

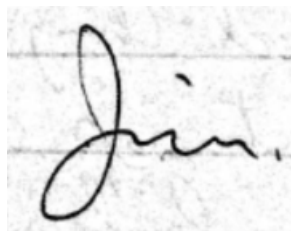
By the time my parents were married, the way spouses addressed each other was much less formal as shown by personalized nicknames, the common use of first names, regular use of informal terms of endearment, and the occasional use of marital positions (i.e. "wife") as personal identifiers.

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads "Dear Bo-bee,".

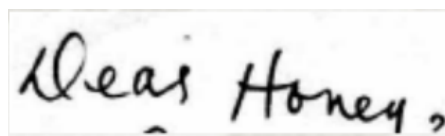
"Dear Bo-bee,"

A photograph of a handwritten note on lined paper. The text is written in a cursive script and reads "Dear Diane".

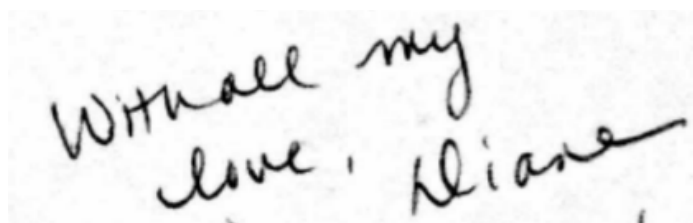
"Dear Diane"

A close-up photograph of a handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jim." The signature is written on a piece of lined paper.

"Jim,"

A close-up photograph of a handwritten note in cursive script that reads "Dear Honey,". The text is written on a piece of lined paper.

"Dear Honey,"

A close-up photograph of a handwritten note in cursive script that reads "With all my love, Diane". The text is written on a piece of lined paper.

"With all my love, Diane"

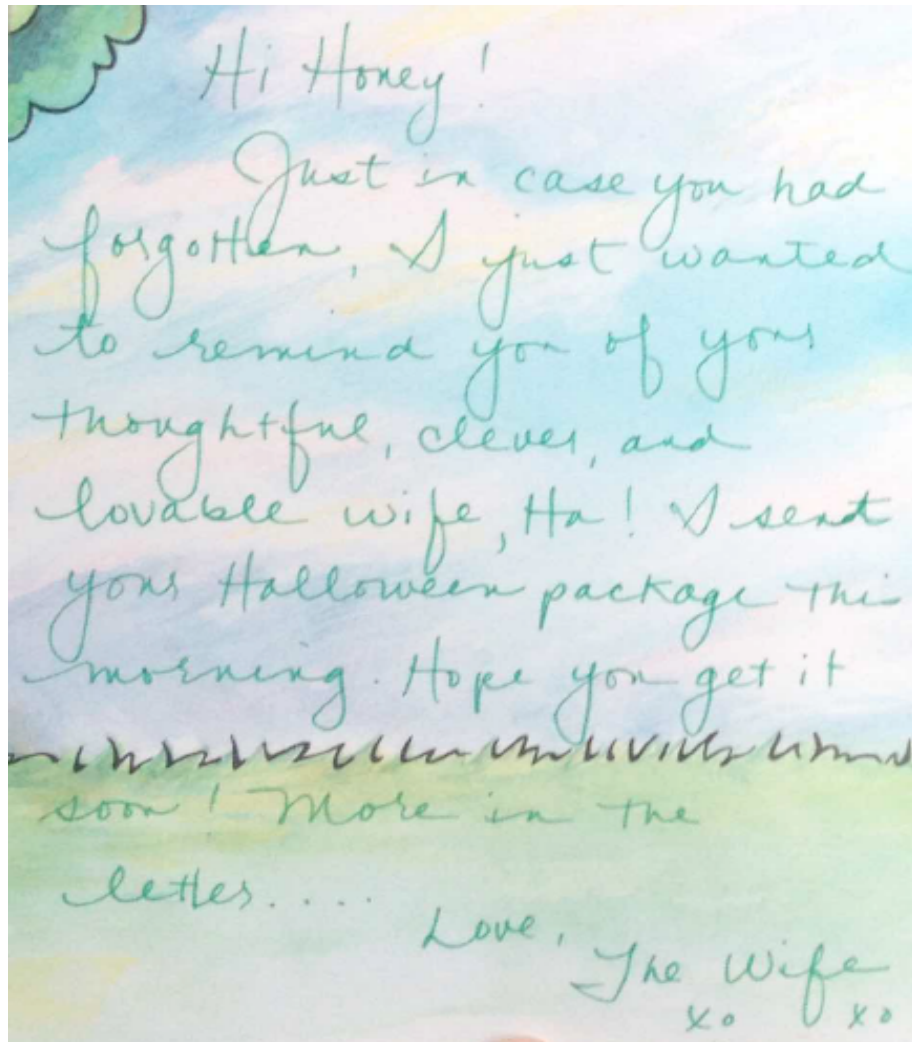
In addition to being more colloquial with the way they address one another, my parents were less polite. In the following quote, my mother joked with my dad about the times when he did not pay attention to her. Her joking was characteristic of an individual marriage because it shows how she maintains her confident and funny personality within their partnership and was not afraid to be informal.

I do miss my honey,
 though. I'm glad I thought
 to write this stuff though
 as I pretend I'm really
 talking to you and I
 imagine you watching sports
 instead of listening! No
 sir, I'm just joshing!
 I hope all is going well
 for you on the ship & I
 can't wait to hear your
 stories!

Love,
 Bobo!

"I do miss my honey, though. I'm glad I thought to write this stuff though as I pretend I'm really talking to you and I imagine you watching sports instead of listening! No sir, I'm just joshing! I hope all is going well for you on the ship & I can't wait to hear your stories! Love, Bobo!"

Another letter in which my parents show informality is the following one in which my mother wrote a short note to my father in a cartoonish card joking she did not want him to forget her. She does, however, still call herself "the wife," which shows she still thought her marital position to my father was important and romantic.



“Hi Honey! Just in case you had forgotten, I just wanted to remind you of your thoughtful, clever, and lovable wife, Ha! I sent your Halloween package this morning. Hope you get it soon! More in the letter... Love, The Wife xoxo”

Expression of Negative Emotions

As my family members’ marriages moved from functioning for the betterment of society to existing for the fulfillment of two loving individuals, the couples became much more apt to share how they were feeling when they were down, lonely, sad, or unhappy. My great-grandparents, for example, would not write to each other when they were feeling sad because they did not want to burden each other. My grandparents, however,

found it important for the sake of their partnership to be honest about missing each other. When my parents wrote, they were clear about how the distance made them feel because they wanted to be in touch with each other's personal emotions in their individual marriage.

I did not write you yesterday, or at my worst time last night - I could not for I would have reflected the sorrow - the agony that was in my heart - The

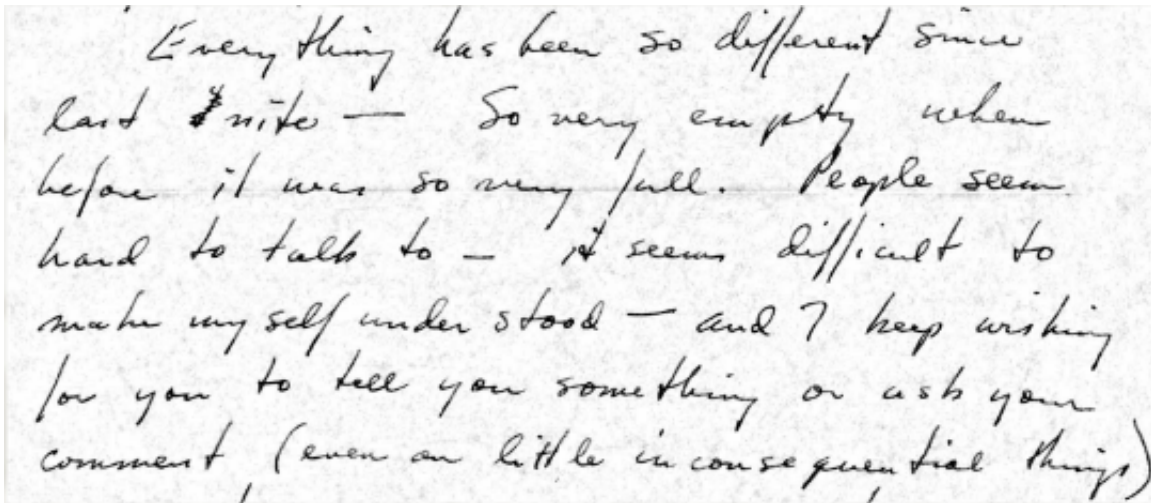
In reference to not having received a letter from his wife for a long time, my great-grandfather wrote, *"I did not write you yesterday, or at my worst time last night - I could not for I would have reflected the sorrow - the agony that was in my heart"*

My own precious little woman.
I did not write you last night - I had the blues so badly I could not; I began a letter to you, but I was that unhappy that I knew I could not keep it from my letter so I tore up the miserable attempt and went to bed to dream of you all night long - I had so hoped

The suppression of emotions can be observed again in the letter in which my great-grandfather wrote, *"My own precious little woman, I did not write you last night - I had the blues so badly I could not; I began a letter to you, but I was that unhappy that I knew*

I could not keep it from my letter so I tore up the miserable attempt and went to bed to dream of you all night long”

In institutional marriages, “good” husbands and wives were not supposed to bother each other with negative emotions, but in my grandparents’ companionship marriage, that was not the case.



Everything has been so different since last nite — So very empty when before it was so very full. People seem hard to talk to — it seems difficult to make myself understood — and I keep wishing for you to tell you something or ask your comment, (even on little inconsequential things)

After being apart from my grandmother for only one day, my grandfather wrote, “Everything has been so different since last nite — So very empty when before it was so very full. People seem too hard to talk to — it seems difficult to make myself understood — and I keep wishing for you to tell you something or ask your comment (even on little inconsequential things)”

When my parents wrote to each other, they shared in detail how they were feeling, why they felt that way, and how they were coping with such feelings. The importance my parents put on being honest and open is reflective of their increased desire to be their true selves within their marital unit.

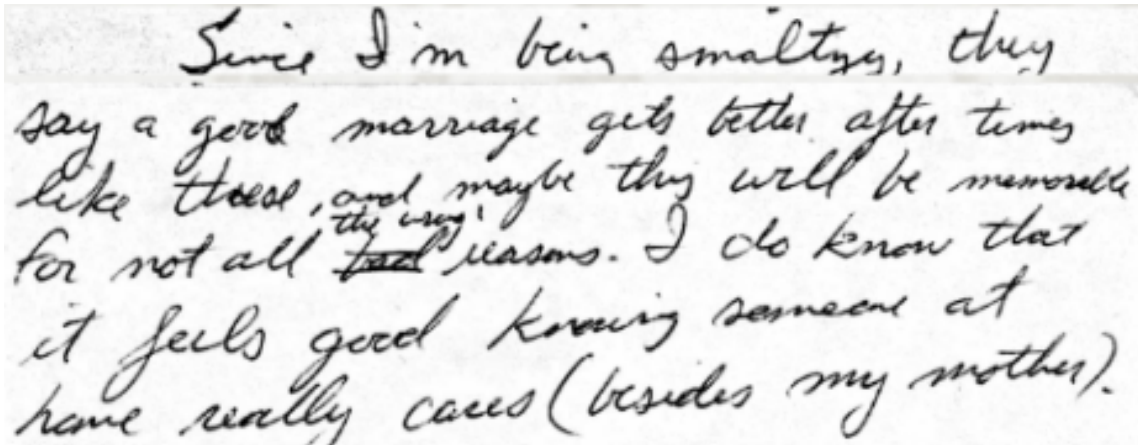
I got your great letter yesterday. You don't know how much (and how good it was to hear your voice as I read your letter (over & over & over again). Even if it's trivial stuff, I think we had better write often while you're out, because the happiness I felt was almost as good as you being here. Almost, but not quite.

I'm doing O.K. though. I'm just being honest about missing you. The week.

My mother wrote, "I got your great letter yesterday. You don't know how much and how good it was to hear your voice as I read your letter (over and over and over again). Even if it's trivial stuff, I think we had better write often while you're out because the happiness I felt was almost as good as you being here. Almost, but not quite. I'm doing O.K., though. I'm just being honest about missing you."

Although our anniversary is very special to me and this one is being made very memorable - for the wrong reason - today is just as special if

My father wrote, “*Although our anniversary is very special to me and this one is being made very memorable – for the wrong reason – today is just as special*”



Since I'm being smaltzy, they say a good marriage gets better after times like these, and maybe they will be memorable for not all ~~the~~ ^{the way} reasons. I do know that it feels good knowing someone at home really cares (besides my mother).

He continued saying, “*Since I'm being smaltzy, they say a good marriage gets better after times like these, and maybe they will be memorable for not all the wrong reasons. I do know that it feels good knowing someone at home really cares (besides my mother).*”

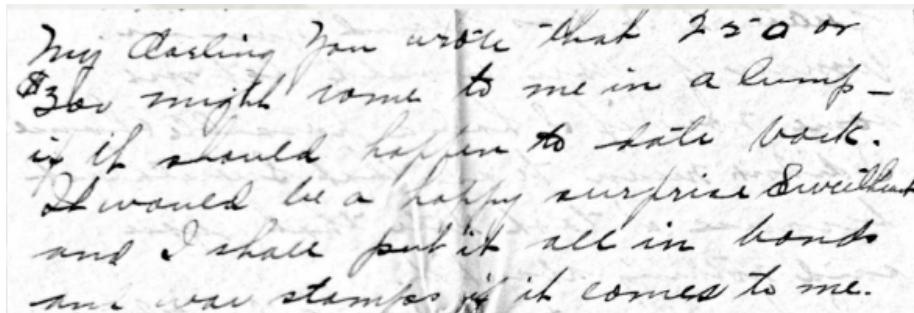
This quote shows the independent nature of my parents' marriage because my father said society “say[s] a good marriage gets better after” difficult times. When comparing my father's quote to my great-grandfather's strong efforts to keep negative emotions from my great-grandmother, it becomes clear how much marriage has changed. As marriages evolved over time, tough times came to be seen as opportunities for growth as opposed to being silenced for fear of their negative impact on marital stability like during institutional marriages.

X. Theme Two: Gender and Power

The second theme used to evaluate how marriage has evolved is gender and power. Aspects of marriage that fall under the gender and power theme are monetary control, gender roles, ownership, and the roles each spouse had societally, politically, and economically.

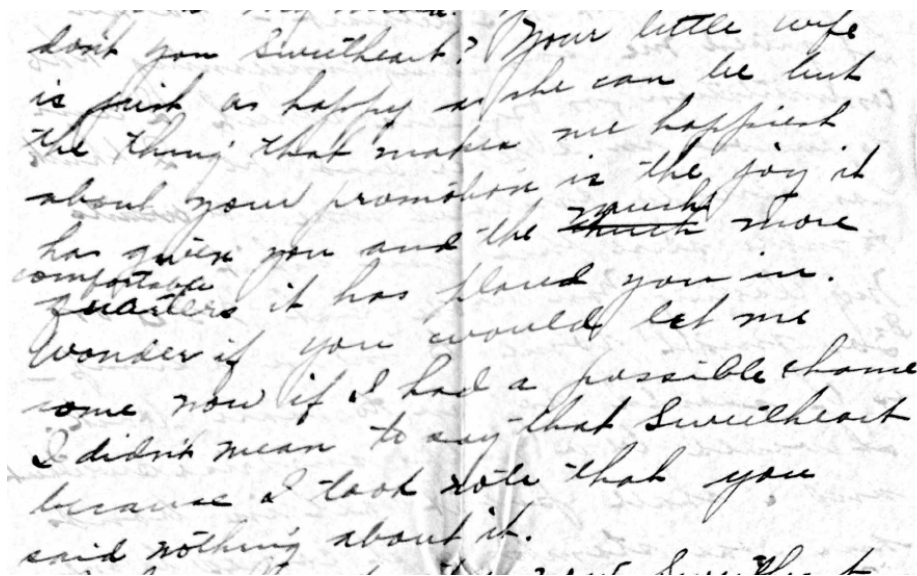
Financial Power

As marriage evolved over time, women's financial power and independence increased greatly. Even though my great-grandmother was highly educated and self-reliant, she was relegated to the house and seen as a mother before any other identifying factor. This gender stereotype held my great-grandmother back from engaging in society through the professions, so she did good for society by using her husband's money for the sake of the war and maintaining his home.



My Darling you wrote that 250 or \$300 might come to me in a lump - if it should happen to date back. It would be a happy surprise Sweetheart and I shall put it all in bonds and war stamps if it comes to me.

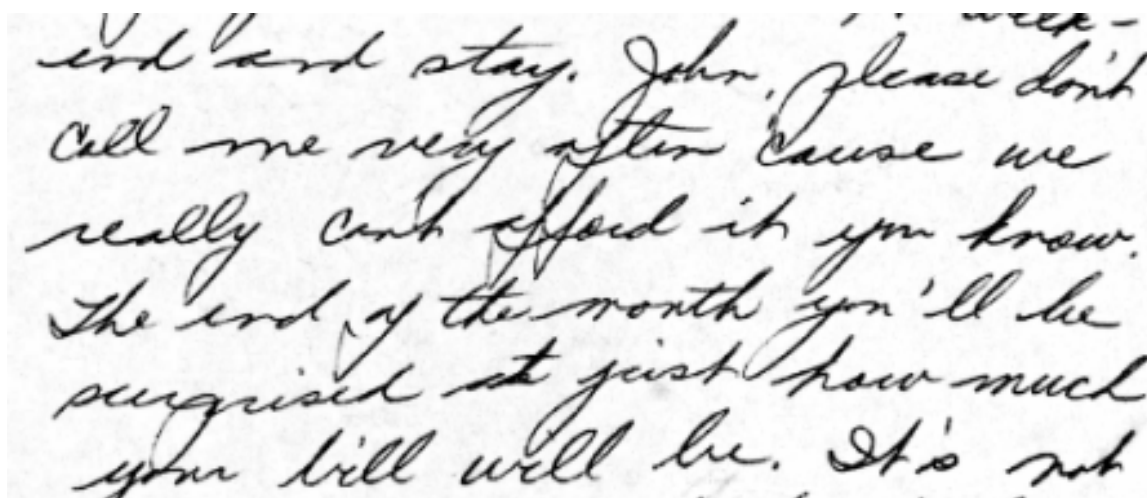
It is clear my great-grandmother had little economic autonomy and wanted to do good for society when she wrote, "My darling, you wrote that 250 or \$300 might come to me in a lump - if it should happen to date back. It would be a happy surprise Sweetheart and I shall put it all in bonds and war stamps if it comes to me."



Do you Sweetheart? Your little wife is just as happy as she can be but the thing that makes me happiest about your promotion is the joy it has given you and the ~~much~~ more ^{comfortable} ~~position~~ it has placed you in. Wonder if you would let me come now if I had a possible chance I didn't mean to say that Sweetheart because I took note that you said nothing about it.

“Your little wife is just as happy as she can be but the thing that makes me happiest about your promotion is the joy it has given you and the much more comfortable quarters it has placed you in. Wonder if you would let me come now if I had a possible chance. I didn’t mean to say that Sweetheart because I took note that you said nothing about it.”

The quote above illustrates how my great-grandfather tried to keep his wife from the horrors of war by not allowing her to visit him. Additionally, it illuminates how little say my great-grandmother had because she immediately rebuked her remark about visiting her husband after saying it so as not to upset him. At this time in history, it was the wife’s duty to be proud of her husband for his promotion, but not to say what she thought should be done as a result of the promotion. Even though my great-grandmother thought it would be nice to visit her husband in his new living quarters, she immediately regretted suggesting such an act because disobeying her husband’s wishes was a breach of gender and marital roles of the time.

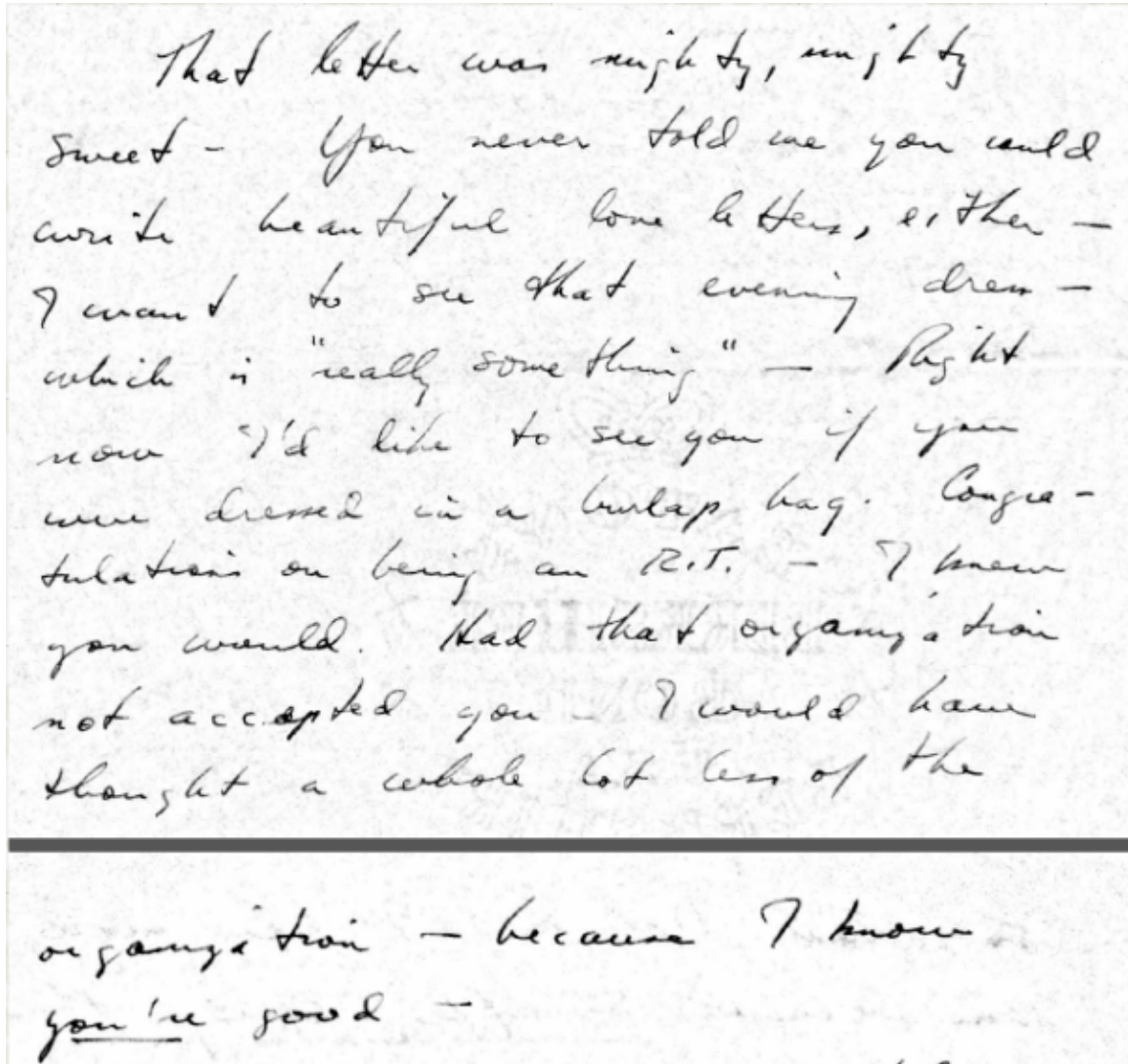


*... and stay. John, please don't
call me very often 'cause we
really can't afford it you know.
The end of the month you'll be
surprised at just how much
your bill will be. It's not*

My grandmother clearly has more of a say about financial matters as evidenced by her quote, “John, please don’t call me very often ‘cause we really can’t afford you know.

The end of the month you’ll be surprised at just how much your bill will be.”

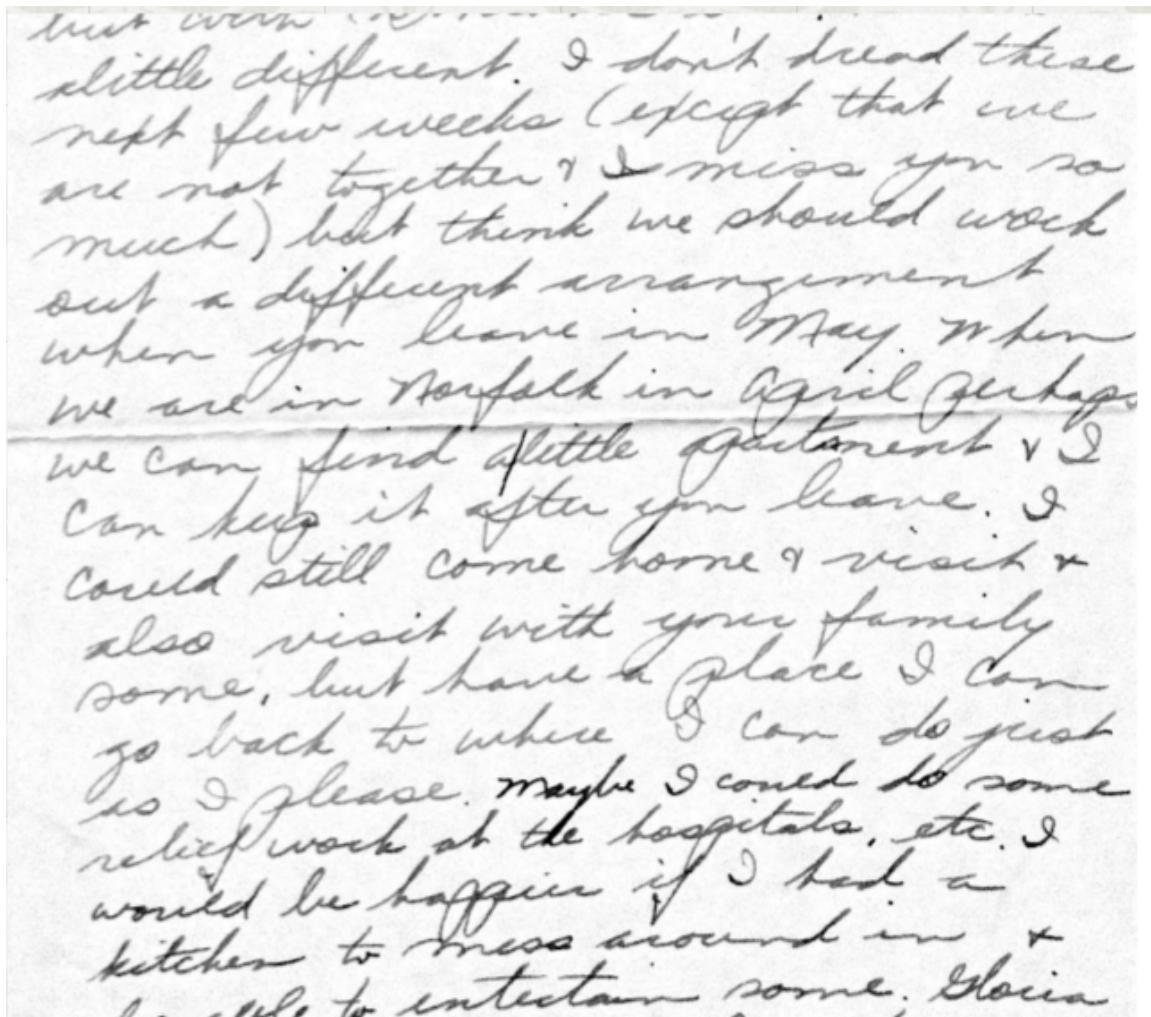
Although the bill was still not in my grandmother's name, she said the family could not afford a lot of phone calls, so she asserted herself for the betterment of the family, which shows the companionship nature of their marriage.



That letter was mighty, mighty
 Sweet - You never told me you could
 write beautiful love letters, either -
 I want to see that evening dress -
 which is "really something" - Right
 now I'd like to see you if you
 were dressed in a burlap bag. Congra-
 tulations on being an R.T. - I knew
 you would. Had that organization
 not accepted you - I would have
 thought a whole lot less of the
 organization - because I know
 you're good -

My grandmother's financial independence is shown when my grandfather congratulated her on her new position as a respiratory technician at a local hospital. His letter reads, "That letter was mighty, mighty sweet - you never told me you could write beautiful love letters, either - I want to see that evening dress - which is 'really something' - Right now I'd like to see you if you were dressed in a burlap bag. Congratulations on being an R.T.

– I knew you would. Had that organization not accepted you – I would have thought a whole lot less of the organization – because I know you're good – ”



but even
 little different. I don't dread these
 next few weeks (except that we
 are not together & I miss you so
 much) but think we should work
 out a different arrangement
 when you leave in May. When
 we are in Norfolk in April perhaps
 we can find a little apartment & I
 can keep it after you leave. I
 could still come home & visit &
 also visit with your family
 some, but have a place I can
 go back to where I can do just
 as I please. Maybe I could do some
 relief work at the hospitals, etc. I
 would be happier if I had a
 kitchen to mess around in &
 be able to entertain some, Gloria

Again, my grandmother showed her authority by explaining where she thought she and her husband should live in the future saying, “I don't dread these next few weeks (except that we are not together + I miss you so much) but think we should work out a different arrangement when you leave in May. When we are in Norfolk in April perhaps we can find a little apartment + I can keep it after you leave. I could still come home + visit + also visit with your family some, but have a place I can go back to where I can do just as I please. Maybe I could do some relief work at the hospitals, etc. I would be happier if I had a kitchen to mess around in + was able to entertain some.”

... even been to the doctor since you left... amazing. I'll work every day this week and 3 so far next week so mega \$ will be rolling in. I spent a few on blue pansies and pine bark for the garden. I'm excited to dig in

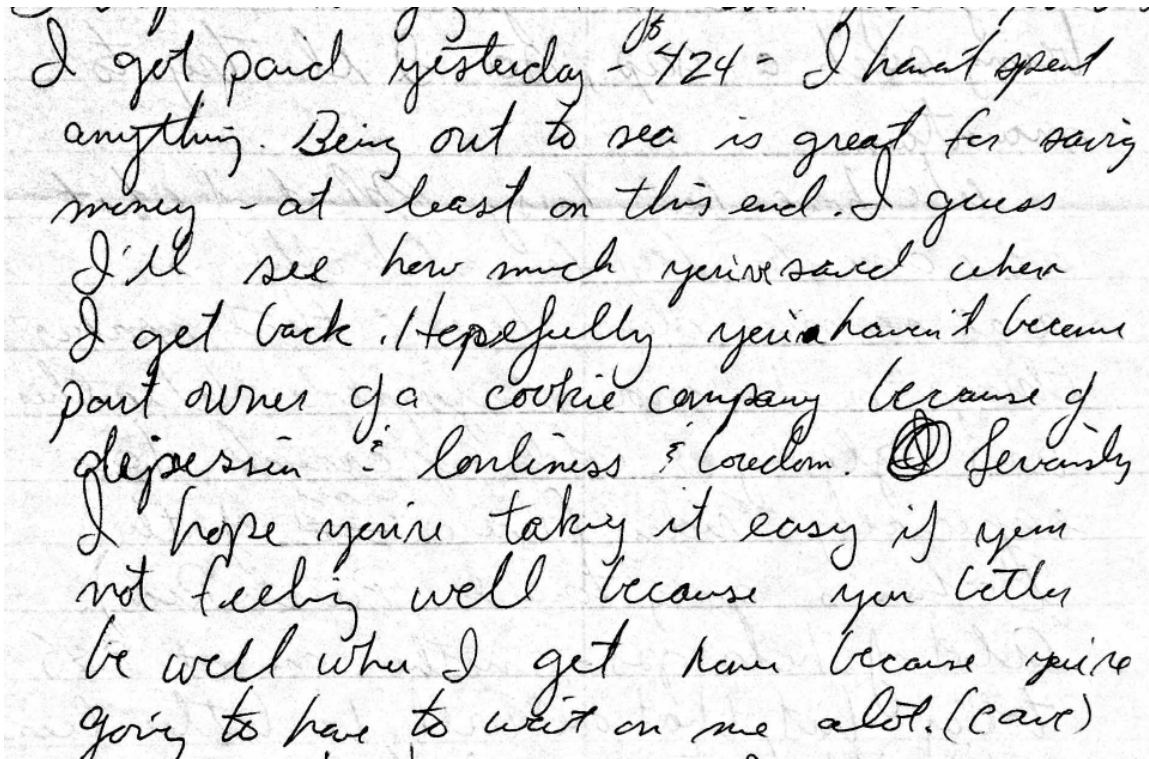
for O, my
pay the day before flights. I also reserved a flight from Green Airport to Jax April 12th for \$142. in order to assure a way home if I don't go to Halifax. Jahannah called and expressed her continued in-

A stark difference in financial autonomy can be seen in letter from my mother to my father. While my grandmother and great-grandmother did have jobs at times in their lives, my mother had a career and took it seriously. On the left, my mother wrote, “I’ll work every day this week and 3 so far next week so mega \$ will be rolling in. I spent a few on blue pansies and pine bark for the garden. I’m excited to dig in” and continued on the right saying, “I also reserved a flight from Green Airport to Jax April 12th for \$142 in order to assure a way home if I don’t go to Halifax.”

practicing more muffin recipes - they're getting better! I think I was spoiled having you to myself for so long. I've been dreaming up career changes for you - all in which you stay home and I work - who needs money! Sue & I had Ragtime chicken wings Fri. night and tomorrow the waldson-chicks will get together at The Clapps! I got paid today \$315 - my first paycheck - save, save! Forget save, we got our "discovers" card today!!

My mother joked that she wanted to be the sole breadwinner of the family, which was still seen as laughable and not a possibility. Her remark is telling of what society saw as acceptable in terms of families, gender, marriage, and economic power for women. She wrote, “I think I was spoiled having you to myself for so long. I’ve been dreaming up

career changes for you – all in which you stay home and I work – who needs money! Sue & I had Ragtime chicken wings Fri. night and tomorrow the wardroom chicks will get together at The Clapps! I got paid today \$315 – my first paycheck – save, save! Forget save, we got our “Discover” card today!!”



I got paid yesterday - \$424 - I haven't spent anything. Being out to sea is great for saving money - at least on this end. I guess I'll see how much you've saved when I get back. Hopefully you haven't become part owner of a cookie company because of depression & loneliness & boredom. Seriously I hope you're taking it easy if you're not feeling well because you better be well when I get home because you're going to have to wait on me alot. (easy)

My father expressed his hopes for my mother and himself to save up their money when he wrote, “I got paid yesterday - \$424 – I haven’t spent anything. Being out to sea is great for saving money – at least on this end. I guess I’ll see how much you’ve saved when I get back. Hopefully you haven’t become part owner of a cookie company because of depression & loneliness & boredom. Seriously I hope you’re taking it easy if you’re not feeling well because you better be well when I get home because you’re going to have to wait on me alot. (easy)”

again. No, I (we) do not own a cookie company but we do own a garden shop. I've been spending time and \$ on our yard. Better to burn those calories than to ingest 'em! (Hefty!)

My mother retorted, "No, I (we) do not own a cookie company but we do own a garden shop. I've been spending time and \$ on our yard. Better to burn those calories than to ingest 'em! (Hefty!)" showing she was in charge of how she spent her own money.

I'm sending the check for 400 and I'm getting another for 200 - I changed my mind - I'll send the one for 200 in a couple days and I'll keep the 400 in case I see a rug or something in Pakistan. So, put the 200 in my account, so far I've written two

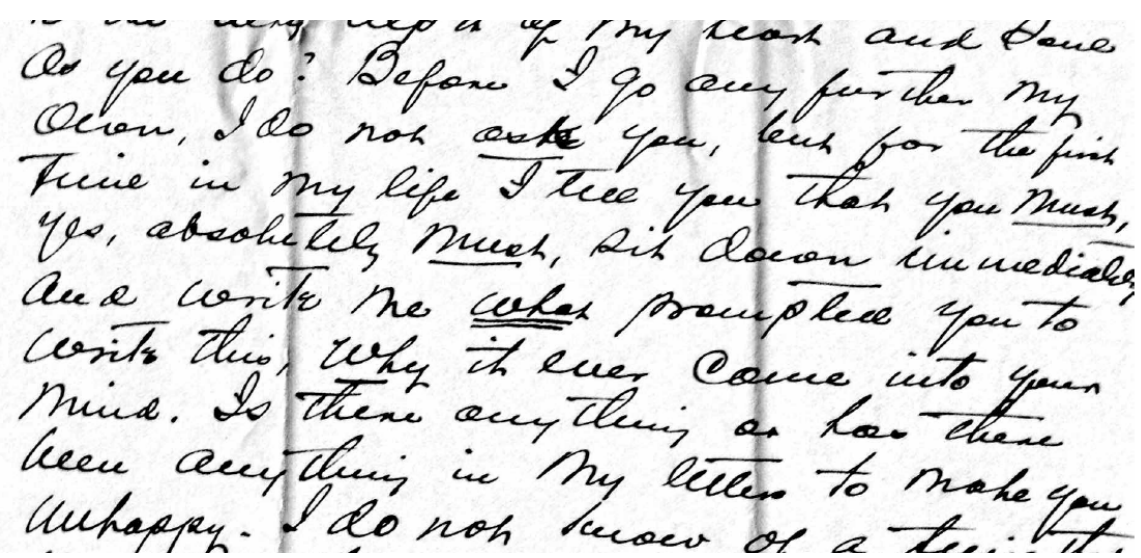
checks for a total of \$ 87.00. So my account should be getting bigger, is yes? I hope so, otherwise I won't get any Christmas presents when I get home. I don't know if I want a VCR after all; maybe I will get a nice piece of furniture.

In addition to joking about money, my father showed he wanted to use his money towards the family instead of himself when he wrote, "I'm sending the check for 400 and

I'm getting another for 200 – I changed my mind – I'll send the one for 200 in a couple days and keep the 400 in case I see a rug or something in Pakistan so put the 200 in my account, so far I've written two checks for a total of \$87.00. So my account should be getting bigger, is yours? I hope so, otherwise I won't get any Christmas presents when I get home. I don't know if I want a VCR after all; maybe we'll get a nice piece of furniture”

Ownership and Power Dynamics

One of the largest areas of difference among the three generations of marriage is in the way the husbands viewed their wives. With my great-grandparents, my great-grandfather had a strong sense of pride about his wife being his “own” and she was flattered by his sentiments. With my grandparents, there was a desire to belong to one another, but the expression of that desire was much less extreme than with my great-grandparents. As for my parents, my mother still signed letters saying, “Yours,” but clearly did not see herself as being owned by my father.



*... in my rep of my work and have
do you do? Before I go any further my
own, I do not ask you, but for the first
time in my life I tell you that you must,
yes, absolutely must, sit down immediately,
and write me what prompted you to
write this, why it ever came into your
mind. Is there anything or has there
been anything in my letters to make you
unhappy. I do not know of a thing it.*

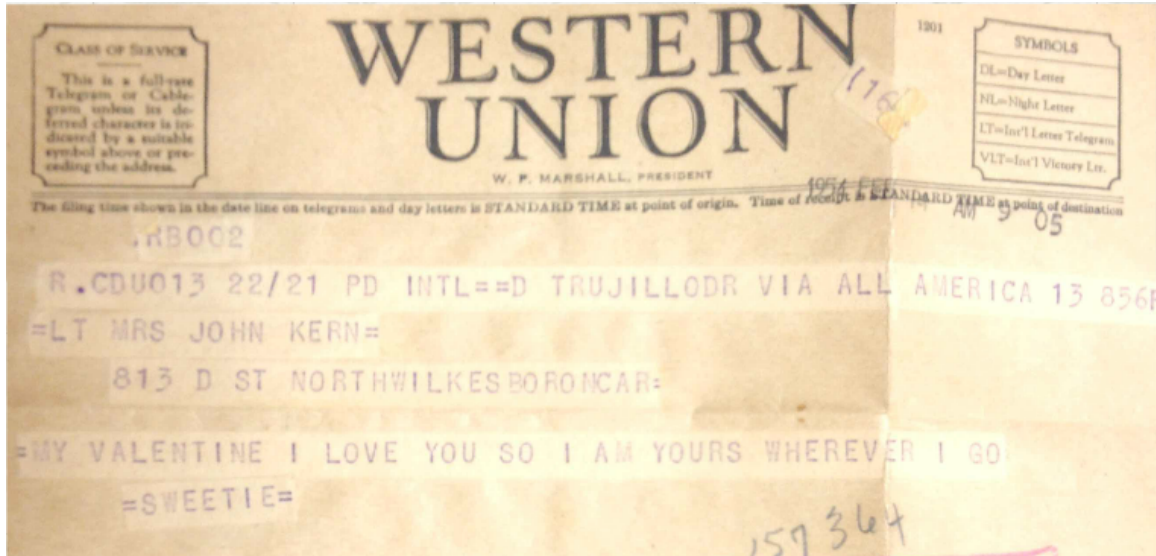
When my great-grandmother said she thought she loved my great-grandfather more than he loved her, he replied, “Before I go any further my own, I do not ask you, but for the

first time in my life I tell you that you must, yes, absolutely must, sit down immediately and write me what prompted you to write this, why it ever came into your mind. Is there anything or has there been anything in my letters to make you unhappy”

This quote is a good example of how deeply embedded the ownership of women was in the internalized culture of marriage. My great-grandfather called his wife “My own” and “my little woman” to show affection, but such remarks would be considered condescending today. When my great-grandfather questioned my great-grandmother’s ability to love him as much as he loved her and spent the time to set her straight about the matter and assert his dominance, he reflected the patriarchal culture in which he lived.

My great-grandfather wrote, “Who’s little woman are you? Mine, mine, mine, all mine”

A few days before my grandparents wedding, my grandfather wrote, “The idea that you are almost all mine – that you are except for technicalities – is much too unbelievable to accept”



“MY VALENTINE I LOVE YOU SO I AM YOURS WHEREVER I GO – SWEETIE –”

Interestingly, my grandfather said, “I am yours” to my grandmother, so the ownership notion applied to both husband in wife in their companionship marriage rather than only the wife being owned by the husband like in my great-grandparents’ institutional marriage.

“With love, Your Diane”

In contrast to my great-grandfather calling my great-grandmother “little”, my father said, *“I have to admit, as time has gone by you have surprised me by being more of everything I ever imagined, or at least more of everything I like in a girl. I hope you don’t mind*

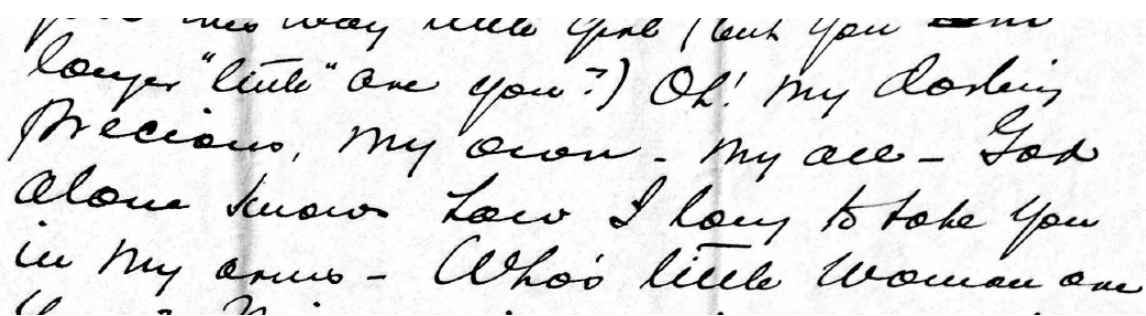
'girl.'" This shows there was more gender equality because the feelings of both spouses were valued and because of my father's respect for my mother.

XI. Theme Three: Intimacy

The third and final theme used to evaluate changes in marriage over time is intimacy. During the time period when institutional marriages were most common, physical intimacy was rarely discussed explicitly and was merely something that occurred when a couple was procreating. As time went by, couples became more open about their physical and emotional feelings and even began thinking of intimacy as a requirement for a healthy relationship.

Physical Intimacy

My great-grandparents did express desires to be physically intimate, but they did it in a way that was extremely polite and implicit.



no way will you (but you are
 long "little" one you?) Oh! My darling
 Precious, my own - my all - God
 alone know how I long to take you
 in my arms - Who's little woman are
 you?

My great-grandfather spoke of physical intimacy vaguely when he wrote, "Oh! My darling precious, my own – my all – God alone knows how I long to take you in my arms"

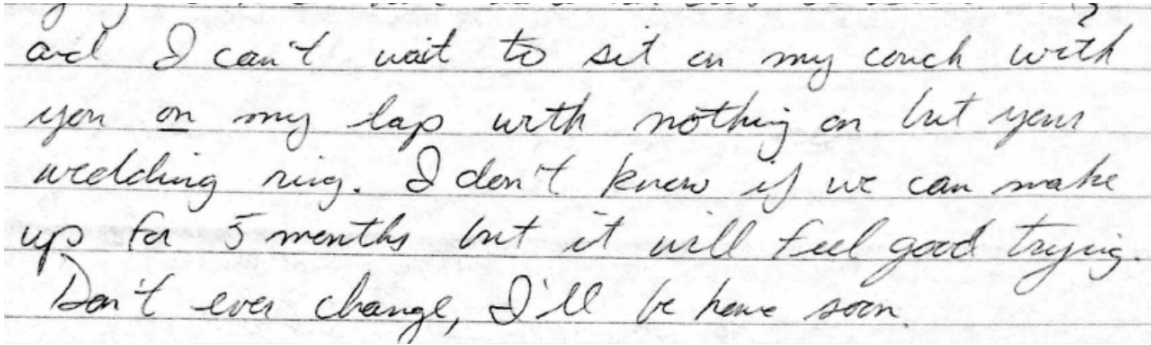
My Darling and Oh! How it makes
 my whole heart and being ache
 for a dear little one of my own.
 Sweetheart can you picture or even
 begin to know how happy this
 little wife would be were she now
 the mother of your little son.
 Oh! My Darling, my precious Husband!
 The thought alone is too sweet to
 think of. But I keep wondering
 when will it ever be. God grant
 that it may be some time, I shall
 never stop hoping, praying and
 living for it.

My great-grandmother did not talk about physical intimacy unless she was discussing her hopes to procreate – a married couple’s social obligation in an institutional marriage. She wrote, “Oh! How it makes my whole heart and being ache for a dear little one of my own.

Sweetheart can you picture or even begin to know how happy this little wife would be were she now the mother of your little son. Oh! My darling, my precious Husband! The thought alone is too sweet to think of. But I keep wondering when will it ever be. God grant that it may be some time. I shall never stop hoping, praying, and living for it.”

sleepy - but I'm not, I wish
 you were here for me to smuggle
 up to - just thinking about
 the idea does things to me - I

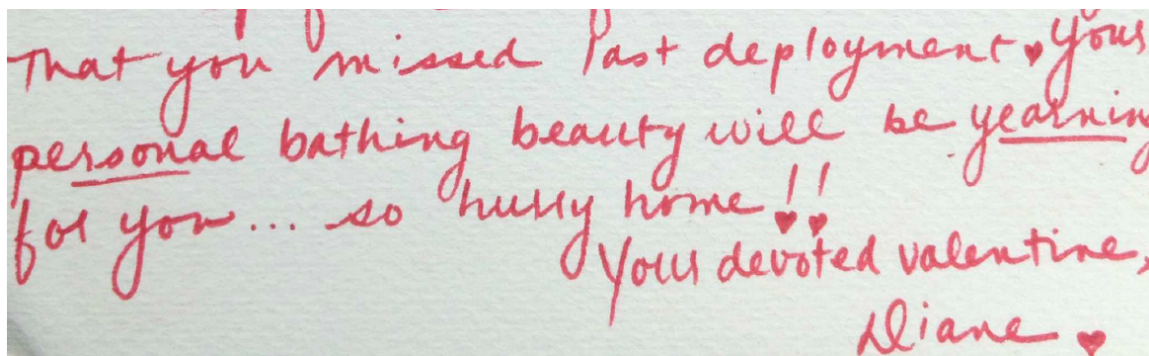
Progression towards being less vague about physical intimacy can be seen when my grandfather wrote, “*I wish you were here for me to snuggle up to. Just thinking about the idea does things to me,*” but he was still not exactly clear about what thinking about his wife made him feel.



and I can't wait to sit on my couch with you on my lap with nothing on but your wedding ring. I don't know if we can make up for 5 months but it will feel good trying. Don't ever change, I'll be home soon.

In anticipation of reuniting with my mother, my father wrote, “*I can't wait to sit on my couch with you on my lap with nothing on but your wedding ring. I don't know if we can make up for 5 months but it will feel good trying. Don't ever change, I'll be home soon.*”

My father was clear about his desire to be physically intimate with my mother, which would have been unacceptable and even disrespectful two generations earlier.

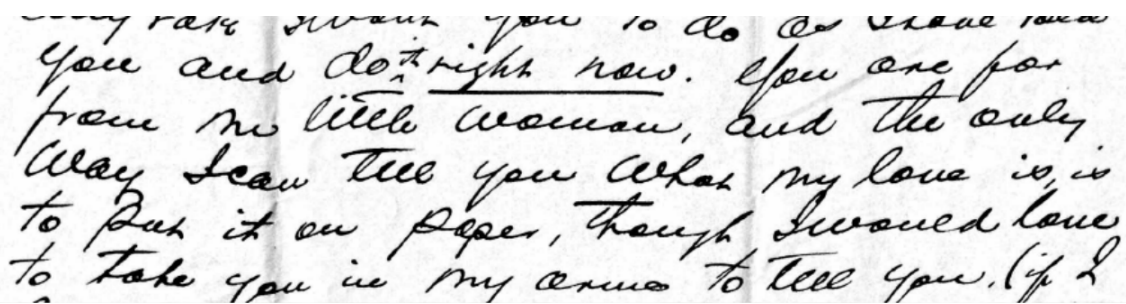


that you missed Post deployment. Your personal bathing beauty will be yearning for you... so hurry home!!
Your devoted valentine,
Diane ♥

My mother stated her desire for physical intimacy showing signs of being in an independent marriage when she wrote, “*Your personal bathing beauty will be yearning for you...so hurry home!! Your devoted valentine, Diane*”

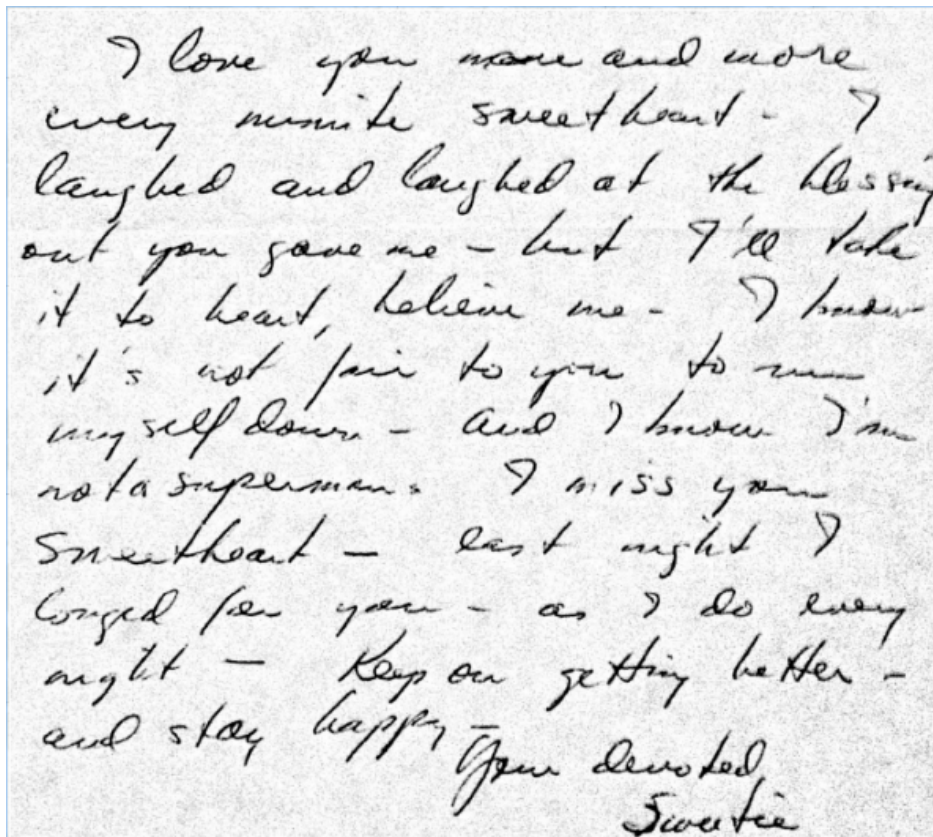
Emotional Intimacy

My great-grandparents expressed their love by writing to each other often and saying how much they loved one another many times. Over time, the sentiments of love became more personal and emotional, which can be observed in my grandparents' and parents' letter excerpts.



My dear sweet you to do as usual love
 you and do right now. You are far
 from me little woman, and the only
 way I can tell you what my love is, is
 to put it on paper, though I would love
 to take you in my arms to tell you. (if I

My great-grandfather wrote, "You are far from me little woman, and the only way I can tell you what my love is, is to put it on paper, though I would love to take you in my arms to tell you."



I love you more and more
 every minute sweetheart - I
 laughed and laughed at the blessing
 out you gave me - but I'll take
 it to heart, believe me - I know
 it's not fair to you to run
 myself down - and I know I'm
 not a superman - I miss you
 sweetheart - last night I
 longed for you - as I do every
 night - Keep on getting better -
 and stay happy -
 Your devoted
 Sweetie

My grandfather was less formal, more vulnerable, and more intimate when he wrote,
*“I love you more and more every minute sweetheart – I laughed and laughed at the blessing out you gave me – but I’ll take it to heart, believe me – I know it’s not fair to you to run myself down – and I know I’m not a superman. I miss you sweetheart – last night I longed for you – as I do every night – Keep on getting better – and stay happy
 – Your devoted Sweetie”*

*My Darling – I miss you awfully –
 (and I mean really) – And I love you
 more than any thing or any body in the
 world – I’ve been without you for a
 day – and am still living and breathing –
 but I figure I’m pushing my luck pretty far –
 and am not a bit sure about tomorrow –
 Much, Much more love than I could ever write –
 John*

My grandfather’s expressions of love were personal and detailed when he wrote, *“My Darling – I miss you awfully – (and I mean really) – And I love you more than anything or anybody in the world – I’ve been without you for a day – and am still living and breathing – but I figure I’m pushing my luck pretty far – and am not a bit sure about tomorrow – Much, Much more love than I could ever write – John”*

Baby-doll - I may not be able to find a Valentine before too late - They don't have them aboard - So I'm going to have to just use this, I guess. It's not much - but I love you with all my heart and want you to be mine forever and ever, no matter what happens or where ever we are -

My grandfather regretted not being able to send my grandmother something for Valentine's Day and said, *"Baby-doll - I may not be able to find a Valentine before too late - They don't have them aboard - So I'm going to have to just use this, I guess. It's not much, but I love you with all my heart and want you to be mine forever and ever, no matter what happens or where ever we are -"*

While my grandparents seem much more emotionally intimate than my great-grandparents, their reasons for loving one another are less particular than my parents' words are in the following letter. The following letter shows how personal independent relationships are expected to be in comparison to institutional and companionship marriages, which had the function of benefiting society and the family, respectively.

talk to you. I must have done something right
 because somewhere in my mangled mind today
 I realized that I am ~~so~~ infinitely ^{more} happy
 now ~~happier~~ than I was 6 mos ago, and
~~you~~ are the reason why. I realized how
 lucky I was to find a person that is not only
 everything I could ever want, (and I could list em
 here but that's mushy and I'll ~~probably~~ run out
 of paper as it is) but also, ~~of~~ for some strange reason,
~~appreciates~~ seems to appreciate me as much as
 I appreciate her. I don't think there's a better
 feeling in the world than ~~to~~ ~~as~~ that one. I
 really feel you have the ~~to~~ ~~ability~~ ability,
 knowledge, understanding, sensitivity, and love to
 appreciate this ~~top~~ guy. That feeling is especially
 strong in someone who thought of himself
~~as~~ oftentimes as pretty directionless and
 was beginning to think he was never going to
 find someone he could pull himself together
 with. A lot went into building this little
~~psyche~~ psyche and I can't tell you how
 much I appreciate being able to be myself,
 totally, ~~in~~ with a person I
 care so much about. I've never met anyone
 in all my worldwreck travels (HA!) that even
 comes close, and I mean that sincerely. You are
 truly a rare person and I don't know if
 you really believe me when I say that.
 Maybe you will now.

"I must have done something right because somewhere in my mangled mind today I
 realized that I am infinitely more happy now than I was 6 months ago, and you are the
 reason why. I realized how lucky I was to find a person that is not only everything I could

ever want, (and I could list 'em here but that's mushy and I'll probably run out of paper as it is) but also, for some strange reason, seems to appreciate me as much as I appreciate her. I don't think there's a better feeling in the world than that one. I really feel you have the ability, knowledge, understanding, sensitivity, and love to appreciate this guy. That feeling is especially strong in someone who thought of himself oftentimes as pretty directionless and was beginning to think he was never going to find someone he could pull himself together with. A lot went into building this little psyche and I can't tell you how much I appreciate being able to be myself, totally, with a person I care so much about. I've never met anyone in all my worldwide travels (HA!) that even comes close, and I mean that sincerely. You are truly a rare person and I don't know if you really believe me when I say that. Maybe you will now."

My father expressed how personally meaningful he and my mother's emotional connection was to him, which is reflective of the elements of an individual marriage in which personal satisfaction and being closely bonded are seen as vital components of a "good" marriage.

XII. Discussion

Letters, because of their formal nature, are often a great portrayal of cultural norms. In some ways, letters written during wartime and separation are especially reflective of cultural norms because people in these circumstances are often trying to be the best husbands or wives they can be to keep the relationship alive. The letters in this study illuminate the sociological theory that marriage is socially constructed because they show how one generation's "ideal marriage" is much different than another's. As predicted, the data show my great-grandparents' marriage is mostly institutional, my grandparents' marriage is mostly a companionship marriage, and my parents' marriage is

mostly an individual one.

With that said, I was able to observe some conditions under which particular marriages do not reflect the cultural norms of the time. In the case of my great-grandparents, there is a higher rate of love and affection than most institutional marriages. This could be because expressing love was imperative to maintaining a long-distance relationship. As for my grandparents, it is difficult to find evidence of a devotion to the family because they had not had children yet, but I can tell you they most certainly did show how family-oriented they were once they had 5 kids. In the case of all three couples, the fact that they were all financially stable and highly educated had a large impact on relationship dynamics in terms of how much gender equality was present. MY great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother all went to college, which made them more likely to have a voice in their marriage. Furthermore, each educated couple was financially stable, which could have made a difference with marital relations because there was less strife over economic difficulties. Future research could definitely be done on how gender equality has changed in marriages throughout history for couples of different education and socio-economic levels.

My family's letters are unique in that people in the military may not continue to correspond with loved ones through letters in the future because of the value of communicating face-to-face through video chats, and that is something that makes these letters very special. As the world of technology advances, it's hard to tell how marital communication will change in response.

One of the most important findings of my research is that marriage changes as society changes. My generation has the opportunity to change the trajectory of marriage and they are already doing it. Millennials are getting married later in life and the divorce

rate is going down because marriage is becoming more of a lifestyle choice rather than a cultural imperative. If the individual marriage model persists, will its benefits outweigh possible implications of its individualistic mindset? Since bearing children is no longer a social necessity, will couples be less stigmatized for choosing not to procreate? If childrearing is separated from marriage, will there be more single parents? In turn, how will other factions of society -- like the government and the workplace -- adjust to the changing needs of contemporary families? What will millennials' letters, videos, or electronic writings teach future generations about what a having a "good" marriage meant in our time?

It is not clear what marriage will be like in the future, but it is clear that it's up to us to create the social systems we want for ourselves, and if we have learned anything from the letters discussed in this study, it is that we are the authors of our own world.

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