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Levi Pennington

People

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### Burning Fifty Thousand Letters

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## Burning Fifty Thousand Letters.

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From time to time these days, as I am able to command the courage and the industry and the time and the energy, I am busy burning as many as 50,000 letters, and probably a good many more.

For more years than you'd believe, so I won't tell you, I have written from 1000 to 1500 letters a year; and while I have not received as many as I have written, the number received has always been a major fraction of the number I have written. And all these years I have kept ~~all the~~ all the personal letters received, and copies of all that I have written.

There are plenty of my friends and relatives who know that the piling up of this vast array of inconsequential correspondence is utter folly. One of my granddaughters has had considerable amusement in good natured ridicule of this habit of mine of preserving all these letters, some of them for more than half a century. And of course I have known that not one letter in ten was ever likely to be of any value, to me or to anybody else; perhaps not one in a hundred. But even if the latter figures were correct, I could not know in advance which letter might some day be of real value, to me or somebody else, and so I saved all of them.

But a man <sup>past the age of 90</sup> ~~in his 90th year~~ can be reasonably sure that he is not going to need any of these letters himself much longer; and to leave something like fifty apple boxes full of correspondence for somebody else to dispose of would hardly be fair to posterity. Something needed to be done about it.

My only living brother, two years and more my junior, has advised me to take the whole mass of letters and make one grand bonfire of them, and never think of them again. Reasonable as that looks to him, I have seen certain drawbacks to it.

For one thing, I have been associated more or less closely with a number of institutions, causes and persons of considerable consequence, and some of the correspondence might some day be at least a bit valuable from a historic standpoint. (Some of it would make very interesting reading just from the human interest point of view.)

Take educational institutions, for instance. I attended Earlham College for three years. (They would not let me stay any longer, for I had carried as many as 23 hours, with extra work out of class, ~~and~~ I was graduated at the end of three years, with the Haverford Scholarship, the highest award for a man graduate as the Bryn Mawr Scholarship was for a woman student.) Fifty years later I was awarded an honorary LL.D. degree by my alma mater. The University of Oregon gave me an A.M. degree, earned by correspondence except for a six weeks summer term; and later I was asked to consider a position on the faculty as head of a proposed department. Linfield College (formerly McMinnville College) gave me an honorary D.D. degree, and I had the good fortune to be in close and loving friendship with its long-time president, Dr. Leonard W. Riley, until his career on earth ended. And I was president of Pacific College for thirty years, and there was correspondence in connection with the work of those years, when I was in the president's office or at home doing the college correspondence on my own typewriter (the college for years after I became president did not own a typewriter),



or when I was away on some mission for the college, in Philadelphia, Richmond, Washington, New York or in England.

*Use this attitude* Then, among other institutions, there was The American Friends Service Committee, with which I was associated from its very beginning. (Once I was asked by its retiring secretary to consider becoming his successor, but it never got any farther than that, for I assured him that I did not feel that my work for Pacific College was done, and could not consider any other job till this one was done, or as nearly done as I could do it. I had taken the same position when I was asked to consider the presidency of other colleges -- I was considered for at least three others, believe it or not. And I was asked to become general superintendent of one yearly meeting, and maybe another, though my memory is a bit hazy on that one. Well, of all the organizations that I have had any dealings with, the American Friends Service Committee far outranks any of them in the floods of written and printed matter with which it loads the mails. *Use this*

why

But ~~when~~ pile up more than mere mention of the institutions with which I have been connected and in which there have been in the aggregate many thousands of letters? The Hifer Project (for overseas relief), of which I was president for the Pacific Northwest for a number of years; Near East Relief, for which I did a good deal of work with no official standing unless my love for and cooperation with J. J. Handsaker, its leader in the Pacific Northwest area, could give me such standing; the National Council for Prevention of War, of which I have been one of the vice presidents for more years than you'd believe; Friends Committee on National Legislation, with which I have worked ever since I was a member of the group that originated it; the Herbert Hoover Foundation, which restored to its former condition the house in which Herbert Hoover lived with his uncle and aunt, Dr. and Mrs. H. J. Minthorn -- I've ~~been~~ *been* honorary president and chief "chore boy" for that organization ever since its origin; the Association of Independent Colleges of Oregon -- I was president of that organization oftener than anybody else during my thirty years as president of Pacific College; but why go on? The list is too long. But these and all the rest of the organizations have meant a great many letters.

Numerous as have been the letters to institutions and organizations and causes, probably more than half of my correspondence has been with individuals. And a large proportion of that has been with relatives. My parents while they lived never had to be long in doubt as to where I was and what I was doing. After I began saving all my correspondence I had three sisters and four brothers to whom I wrote and from whom I received letters, ~~some~~ from some of them dozens of letters in a year, and from one brother probably an average of one every five years, whether I deserved it or not. And when I was across the continent from Rebecca and the two girls and later when the two daughters were no longer living with us, letters went back home from one to seven times a week -- seldom oftener than seven. Then there are nephews and nieces, cousins no end, grandchildren and great grandchildren, etc.

And people who were not of my kin, dozens of them if not scores, and in the past fifty years some of considerable distinction. This thing is stringing out too long. I'll mention only two of these, probably the two best known Quakers in the world. one was Rufus M. Jones, ~~long~~ one of the organizers and long the president of the American Friends Service Committee, for many



years professor of Philosophy at Haverford College and author of a whole library of books, world traveler and religious leader. The other was Herbert Hoover, with whom I have had correspondence ever since I first met him when he was Secretary of Commerce. I have burned none of my many letters from Herbert Hoover. (And I have burned none of the letters that Rebecca ever wrote to me. They are a treasure beyond price to me, though the mere thought of them brings a sense of loss and loneliness that.....)

There are a good many things in this mass of correspondence that have already gone into smoke and ashes, letters that would make ~~very~~ interesting reading to those especially who are interested in strife, wrong doing or misfortune. Here is the correspondence that developed when it became my duty to seek a reconciliation between a prominent Friend and four or five other men whom he considered deserters, traitors, "double-crossers", etc. The reconciliation was effected, and all the participants have ended their earthly careers. You'll never read that correspondence, for I was the only one who had it all, and now the smoke has been blown to the ends of the earth and the ashes have gone to decrease the acidity of my garden. Here was the case of the daughter <sup>of two ministers</sup> who had "borrowed" from public funds which were in her care as treasurer, and who wanted help to restore the "borrowed" funds, so that the officers and her husband would never know. (That was far from here, so don't be looking in this area for the folks involved in that long-ago difficulty.) Here was the case of the girl student of the college whose father -- well, the kindest thing you could think of him was that he was insane -- and what came to that girl because of that father -- only two people on earth know about that, and neither of them will tell you, and you'd not know where to look for the other man, whether in Oregon or thousands of miles away. Here was the minister whose wife -- no, I'm not going to tell a thing about that.....

Well, ~~well~~, there are a good many things that have to face the question, "Would it do any possible good if somebody in the future should dig this up; or might it do harm to have this known ten years or fifty or a hundred years from now?" If it might do harm, burn it.

It's a murderous sort of task, burning 50,000 letters. Many of them meant so much to me when they were written, but can mean little or nothing to anybody else, so into the fire they go, hundreds of them, <sup>for every year</sup> probably nine out of ten, maybe more, yes, more than 95 out of a hundred, most of the letters I have received, and nearly all of those that I have written. Occasionally a letter that might mean something to a daughter or a granddaughter among those that I have received; in rare cases a letter that I have written that has some significance; maybe some address that I have given that seems to have some significance. But not many men have the duty of burning 50,000 letters; and on the whole it isn't any fun.

*There are three colleges and one university that have asked for all of the correspondence that has escaped the fire and for the 25 bushels that I still have in full, 1940 to 1965. Not more than four of them will have to be disappointed, possibly not more than three; but that again is neither a threat nor a promise.*