

Levi Pennington

People

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Pennington to Parker Pennington, May 20, 1948

Levi T. Pennington

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May 20, 1948.

Dear Brother Parker:--

Your letter of the 17th. has just arrived, with a lot of others that the postman brought, and I'm glad indeed you can enjoy some of the verses in "All Kinds of Weather." The press out here have been very kind to the book. Ben Hur Lampman wrote a decidedly interesting editorial in the Oregonian about it, and much of that was copied in the Graphic this week -- last week the local paper used the foreword that Prof. Root wrote. (Did I tell you who he is? He's professor of English at Earlham College, poetry editor of the American Friend, the best known Quaker poet in America, yes, in the world, today, and called by some critics the best imagist poet in America. I was especially glad to have his approbation.)

The two Otises did not get their vacations at the same time, as they had hoped to do. Otis Knight and his wife Mary arrived in Newberg day before yesterday, at four o'clock. I met them at the stage depot and brought them here for dinner. Bertha May had come up from Portland to stay until today. After dinner I took them out to the coast, and they are spending some days at El TeePee -- I don't know how long, nor do they. We were sorry no end that they could not stay right here for some days, and then Rebecca and I go out with them to Woods and spend whatever time they wanted to spend at the two places and traveling about the state. But Rebecca just was not well enough to have them here for even one night. When they get ready to move on north, I hope that I shall be able to go over and bring them in. They want to go up the Columbia Highway, to visit Portland and perhaps Seattle, and maybe go even farther. Otis Knight is in the chemistry department of the Naval Ordnance Testing Station in the desert in Eastern California, and he has a full month's vacation each year.

Otis and Golda left Birnamwood Monday, I suppose. I had written them of conditions here, and told them that they might not be able to stay with us here at Newberg, but were welcome to El TeePee, and we'd do the best we could for them, depending on conditions when they arrived, if they decided to come on anyhow. A letter this morning from Otis says that they are coming, to arrive about June 18, with the knowledge that they may not live at 1000 Sheridan Street at all. But they want to see us, if only for a little while, and they want to see Oregon. Otis Knight and Mary are trying hard to induce them to come on and see them in California.

Sorry that Cora had not been so well when you wrote. How hard it is for folks who have heart difficulties to take as good care of themselves as the doctors advise. (O yes, I know.)

You ask about the marriage of Father and Mother, and I'll tell it to you as well as I remember it. First you ought to know, and perhaps you do, the background of the requirements that Friends made so long in regard to marriage.

Quakerism arose in England after the long war between

Protestants and Catholics. The Reformation, which had so stirred continental Europe, had affected England very little, until the pope refused to let Henry VIII divorce Catherine of Arragon -- the pope could hardly countenance even an annulment with Spain so powerful in the Catholic world. Failing in his effort to get rid of Catherine so that he could marry the much younger and prettier Anne Boleyn, he separated the English church from the Roman, and he himself (Blessed saint or cursed old swine and devil, according to the point of view) became the head of the English church, which was much like the Roman except that it had such a different head. But plenty of things were found to fight about, though they needed only this one thing, that the English church had rebelled, and the rebellion ought to be put down, for the salvation of the souls of everybody concerned.

Well, sometimes things went in favor of the Catholics, and they burned the leading fanatics at the stake; sometimes they went in favor of the Church of England, and they burned Catholics at the stake -- fire seemed to have the same effect on either. But presently the Church of England became permanently in the ascendancy, the Catholic cathedrals, abbeys and monasteries were going to ruin, and the Church of England became an example of intolerance for all the world in all ages.

Everything outside the Church of England was outlawed. The Quakers, for instance, could not even hold a silent meeting without being subject to arrest, imprisonment, heavy fines, and such treatment that many of them died under it, and at times it took five figures to write the number of Quakers who were in prison, sometimes for meeting for worship outside the Church of England, sometimes for refusing to pay the tithe, the tax that went to the church, some of whose clergymen were no more fitted for spiritual leadership than the ordinary postmaster under the old "spoils system." (It was the fact that these men were appointed to their "livings" by secular authority and were often so devoid of qualification for spiritual leadership that made the Friends rebel against a "hireling ministry.")

Well, this is too long an introduction. But it was supposed to lead up to an understanding of the fact that since marriage was for those folks a religious function, and since nobody could legally perform a marriage except a priest of the Church of England, and since these dissenting Quakers could not be married by a Church of England priest, no Quaker marriage could be strictly legal, and no Quaker children could be legitimate.

But these early Quakers, who were giving the world its best lesson in religious and civil liberty, hoped that England would some day return to sanity; they knew that no civil power and no ecclesiastic power had the right to tell all Quakers that they must not marry; and so they worked out their own code of marriage, to make everything right when England did again become sane, as the country later did. They tried to surround marriage with every safeguard, and to have every marriage so well attested as regular and proper that some day everything about the Quaker marriage would be legally recognized.

And so the proceeding was worked out for Quaker marrying Quaker -- and they did not approve of a Friend marrying any one outside the Quaker fold.

The men and women worshipped together, though they sat on opposite sides of the house. But when the meeting for worship ended at the time of their monthly business meetings, the shutters between the two sides of the house were drawn, and they had their business meetings separately.

Well, when a young man and a young woman had decided to be married (so far as they made the decision), the young man would get up at some monthly meeting, and with some older man who had been chosen, went into the women's meeting, and sat down (due notice having been given in advance as to what was to occur.) After a proper interval, the young man and the young woman would go together to the front of the house and say in unison, "We intend marriage with each other." Then later the young woman would go with an older woman into the men's meeting, and the same procedure would be gone through. So now the secret is out -- these two young people intend to be married.

Everything now waits for at least a month, and maybe a good deal longer. But some time later, at another monthly business meeting, the couple go through the same proceeding, except that this time they say, "We still intend marriage with each other." And now, since this means that they are ready to be married soon if all goes well, the monthly meetings, men's and women's, appoint committees to see whether there is any reason discernable why these shall not be married.

This investigation was no joke in the early days. If the health of either the prospective groom or bride was such as to suggest the inadvisability of marriage; if the young man had been playing around with other women and there was another engagement; if one of the parties was too much older than the other; if either had obligations that it would be impossible to fulfil if they were married (such as the care of a parent who was ill or disabled); or if for any other reason the marriage was deemed to be improper, the committee might recommend to the monthly meeting that the marriage be postponed, that it do not occur, or that all's well, and the marriage is approved. The monthly meeting usually acted in accord with the recommendation of the committee of investigation.

If the marriage was approved, then a committee was appointed to see that the marriage was properly performed, either at some regular meeting or at some special meeting appointed for that purpose.

(The proceeding was not always as simple as this. It might be that the prospective bride and groom did not belong to the same meeting, and they might be married in a still different meeting. In the case of Mary and Cecil, Mary belonged to a meeting in New York at that time, and Cecil to a meeting south of Salem, and they were married in this meeting. But some of the red tape of earlier days had been dispensed with by this time, even if the couple wanted to do it entirely regularly, as Mary and Cecil did.)

Well, when the day for the marriage arrived, the meeting for worship was held as usual if it were a regular meeting; and even if a special meeting had been appointed, there was the usual silence at the beginning, then any who felt "moved" to speak did

so, perhaps speaking with special reference to things matrimonial, though perhaps speaking as if no marriage was in prospect. But at some time in the meeting, usually at its close, I mean as it was nearing its close, the young couple would go to the front of the meeting house, join hands, and he would say, "In the presence of God and before these witnesses, I, John Smith, do take thee, Mary Brown, to be my wedded wife, promising with divine assistance to be to thee a loving and faithful husband until death shall separate us" (or as came to be the more pleasing form, "so long as we both shall live.") Then the bride made the same vow, with the proper changes in wording. And then they both signed a marriage certificate, the bride signing under her new name; and then all those present at the marriage signed as witnesses, that there might be a living witness until the last one at the ceremony was gone.

The marriage certificate was, whenever possible, a regular sheepskin parchment, and they took pains to engross it and to make a complete statement in regard to the wedding. "John Smith did then take Mary Brown by the hand, and said, "In the presence of God and before these witnesses" and so on, clear to the statement concerning the signatures of the contracting parties and of the witnesses.

Well, as I said some pages back, this was to furnish ample evidence when England's laws became again sanethat this marriage had been properly performed, even though the manner of it was for a time illegal.

Long before the marriage of our parents much of this had become nonessential from the legal standpoint, and they did not feel that it was necessary. They dreaded the rigmarole of "We intend marriage with each other", "we still intend marriage with each other", the "investigating committee", and all that sort of thing, including the public marriage. They saw no real reason for all of it, since by this time they could be married just as other folks were. So they just side stepped the "red tape", as so many were doing, and were married in the home of Grandfather Pennington as I remember it, because that was a more commodious home than that of Grandfather Cook, married by a Quaker preacher, who was not "dealt with", strange to say, married in the presence of the two families and just a few immediate friends, instead of being married in a public meeting in the awe-inspiring meeting house at Westfield (more awe-inspiring to them in those days and at their age than it would be to you in these days, and at your present age.)

Well, they had "contracted marriage contrary to the discipline, and they had to be "dealt with." (Many a monthly meeting minute-book of those days has many pages devoted to the complaints against and the disownment of those who were guilty of "marriage contrary to the discipline" and "deviation from plainness of dress and address", which meant failure to wear the Quaker bonnet and shawl and drab dress of the women or the broad hat, collarless coat, etc., of the men.)

Nobody really wanted Father and Mother "turned out of the synagogue", so far as I know; but the law had to be vindicated, and the overseers visited them. They were required to sign a statement (each one separately, for the documents were to

be presented to the two business meetings, men's and women's), each statement reading as follows: "I confess that I have contracted marriage contrary to the discipline, for which I am sorry, and I hope that Friends will pass it by and continue me in membership so long as my conduct shall render me worthy." Well, both of them signed, after they had crossed out the words, "for which I am sorry." Father declared that he was not sorry he had married Mother, and never expected to be, though I have no doubt that he knew perfectly well that it was the "contrary to the discipline" for which he was supposed to say that he was sorry. He was disowned, and Mother supposed she was. Later they joined the Wesleyan Methodists, and Father became a class leader in that church. But after a while they came back to Friends. Father was accepted back into membership; Mother found that the women had been charitable and had retained her as a member, even while she belonged to the Wesleyans for part of the time.

Well, that's the story, and I hope you took a time to read it when there was no pressing business on hands. "It is too long" said Polonius. "It shall to the barbers with your beard" said Hamlet.

You said that Willis was "building his airport." Wadda-yumean? Is he building as we used to build air-castles, or did the vote favor it, so that work is actually beginning?

I hope you "lumber-jackasses" (words quoted) will not suffer any evil effects from your strenuous logging operations, but if you had asked my advice -- I'd probably have been a jack-ass too, and worked with you; and I know that even if my heart were the best in the world, I have no business doing that sort of stuff unless I had a better pair of legs.

I've not got Willis's "special variety" of English walnuts off to him yet, but hope to get them on their way today or tomorrow.

I've been pounding this machine fifteen pages worth, and have a lot more yet to do, and I'd better end this.

With love from both of us to all of you,

Mr. Parker O. Pennington,
Interlochen, Michigan.