

Levi Pennington

People

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## Levi Pennington to Errol Elliott, August 10, 1965

Levi T. Pennington

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August 10, 1965.  
Errol T. Elliott,  
Earlham School of Religion,  
Earlham College,  
Richmond, Indiana.

Dear Friend:--

How I wish that I deserved all the good that has come to me during nearly ninety years now; and especially the kindness and love of friends in these days. I do appreciate sincerely your words of appreciation of what I have tried to do and to be, even though I have to realize, as even my closest friends cannot do, how far short I have fallen of my own ideals.

Present prospects are that there will be quite a house party of my relatives at 1000 Sheridan Street on the date when I become 90 years old for the first time in my life. Both my daughters and their husbands; two granddaughters of the second order (I have three kinds of granddaughters); a favorite niece from Detroit; a nephew and his wife and perhaps their oldest son and his wife from Ann Arbor; a cousin and his wife from Rolling Hills, California; and another one or two or more relatives from distant points might drop in. (I do not have many relatives in this part of the country; my daughter Mary and her husband from Greene, New York will be from the greatest distance, so far as I know.)

And though I have not had any "official" information, I know that the local meeting and the college folks are planning a much larger gathering in Pennington Hall on the afternoon of the 29th; and the Rotary Club program chairman has told me that I certainly am not to be absent on a certain Wednesday noon.

I could appropriately say to all these folks, as a certain young fellow used to say when I was on earth the first time, "W'y y'u suh good to me?" (I never expected him to be president of the United States, and he never was.)

Now about your prospects, seeing that you have retired and have nothing to do -- except work. I'm glad that you have been selected to write the story of "The Westward Movement of Friends in America." I had no voice in making that choice, though I cannot think of anybody who could do it better, or as well. I don't envy you the research that will be required, for as a researcher I am a poor checkers player; but I know that to some folks research is meat and drink, the breath of life, the great exploration expedition, the work for pleasure in the gold mine or the diamond mine, with the certainty of finding rich treasures. I hope you may find this task delight and not drudgery.

And I wish that I could help in it, but I don't see any reason to suppose that I can. Wish I could finance two full time secretary assistants for you, to do some of the things in the way of digging up facts and figures, checking information, copying material and all that sort of thing. If I had enough money, I'd do it; as it is I do not have enough money to employ a secretary to

write the replies to the kind letters of congratulation that are already coming, with that birthday nearly three weeks in the future, to say nothing of the big job of typing that somebody must do if I am ever to complete "Random Recollections of Ninety Happy Years."

You ask if I have written down reminiscences. Well, when I was 70 years old I started what I called "Random Recollections of Seventy Happy Years". I don't know how far past the first hundred pages I got, and then I never touched it again for more than fifteen years. I have recently taken it up again, and I have written another mass of material that is in part like the earth was "away back when" it was "without form and void." At least some of this that has been written is without form.

For nearly forty years I have kept all of my personal correspondence, every letter that I received and a carbon copy of every letter I have written, and this latter has meant from 1000 to more than 1500 letters a year. I knew that I'd probably never need one letter out of ten again, perhaps not one out of a hundred, but how could I tell which one I might need? Sometimes it has been a letter that I'd certainly have destroyed if I had kept only those letters that I would have supposed I might need. Well, I am now going through those dozens of apple boxes full of letters, burning nine out of ten of them or maybe more.

My brother, who has not been associated with as many interests as I have, recommended that I take the tens of thousands of letters out and burn them all, in one vast bonfire; but I have found material in every year's correspondence thus far that I have felt should be preserved, either because of some historic interest or for the sake of my children or grandchildren who might be interested. It has been a murderous task to burn up thousands of letters that meant so much when I received them, but which would mean nothing to anybody else after I am gone. Maybe I've burned letters that should have been preserved, but if so, nobody will know what posterity has lost.

There are things that have already been written in these Random Recollections that have to do with Oregon Yearly Meeting, the Five Years Meeting, Pacific College, to mention no others, that have required a lot of reading of college catalogues, yearly meeting minutes, etc. It will be important in your work to record official facts; but if I ever get my writing done it will deal at least in part with backgrounds, with "behind the scenes" activities, with things that never get into official documents.

And here I face the perpetual question, "Shall I tell this, or would the telling of it do more harm than good? Shall I mention names and occasions, or leave out names, with suspicions then attached to folks who were not guilty of some things that are not to the credit of anybody.

These questions, and others of like general character, are particularly pressing in dealing with what I have to say about Oregon Yearly Meetings relationship with The Five Years Meeting, The American Friends Service Committee, the hounding of Emmett Gulley out of the presidency of Pacific College with a loss to the institution of half a million dollars or so.

To be a bit more specific about some of these things:

In connection with Oregon Yearly Meeting's withdrawal from The American Friends Service Committee, should I tell of the way in which preparation for that action was made, intentionally or unintentionally, by the statement of A.C.S. when he asked that the name of Kirby Page be eliminated from my peace report because, as he declared, "Kirby Page is a communist; he admitted it in Boise, Idaho, where he was hooted out of town; and he is supported by funds from Moscow." Shall I tell that this same pastor declared that "The American Friends Service Committee is spiritually rotten; it does not have a thing that we can use." Shall I tell that he declared in a meeting that settled the policy of the yearly meeting toward the AFSC that any young Friend who entered the work of the AFSC would do it "at the peril of his immortal soul"

In the matter of Oregon Yearly Meeting's withdrawal from the Five Years meeting, should I tell, giving names and stories both, such things as these? -- L.I.H. declared that the bible gives no ground for any ecclesiastic organization or authority beyond the local meeting; that over-organization is the sin of Nicolaitans, which God hates; that Friends were in the divine order when they established monthly meetings and quarterly meetings and even yearly meetings, but "when the local yearly meetings united to form the Five Years Meeting they became guilty of the sin of nicolaitanism. (Local Yearly meetings -- during the Forward Movement when we directed letters to all the pastors in the Five Years meeting, we directed to seven different states to reach all the pastors in Kansas yearly Meeting, and Indiana Yearly Meeting had meetings in Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Washington state and Mexico, a longer stretch than from Arabia to Spain, Paul's compass if he actually reached Spain, as he hoped to do.) His conclusion was "The Five Years Meeting is a thing which God hates", and he urged Friends to get out of it by yearly meetings if possible, if not, by quarterly meetings, if not, by monthly meetings; and if even that was impossible, to get out of it by individuals. Shall I tell such things as these?

Shall I tell, in connection with certain fights against the college, that the yearly meeting superintendent carried about in his pocket a statement sworn to before a notary that I required a girl student of the college to serve intoxicating drinks? Shall I tell of a time when a man who held an M.A. degree from Earlham College circulated a petition in the yearly meeting asking that I be dismissed from my position as president of the college? Shall I tell of the years when my monthly pay check was \$57.50, with two Decembers in succession without a pay check at all? (Merry Christmas!)

Well, you can see that I face numerous questions as to what to include and what to exclude.

And now excuse me for this long eruption of words. Best wishes for the complete success of your book, which will be a lot more important than anything I shall write in the way of an autobiography, or rather Random Recollections.

I'd certainly like to call on you at your new residence in Richmond, but I see no real prospect of my getting east of the Rockies again. But who can tell? I did not get to an Earlham commencement from 1910 to 1960, and then I was there for three commencements in succession. Whether I get to Richmond again or not, I do appreciate your invitation, and the many kindnesses you have shown me in the past.

With kindest regards to you both,

Sincerely your friend,