

9-6-99

Lost Pen Pals

The idea of a pen pal intrigued me from the first time I heard the words. My first pen pal was a cousin of sorts, a girl my age who lived in Brownsville, Tennessee. Mother and Daddy had visited her family when they made a trip to the East Coast when I was eight or nine. Her snapshot showed a girl squinting into the sun, wearing a slightly too-long light-colored dress that emphasized her thin tallness, an illusion further heightened by the long-handled handbag which extended to the top of her dark, plain oxfords. That thin tallness was further emphasized by the substantial, white, two-story frame house that towered over her in the background.

Brownsville is not far east of Memphis, but Mother and Daddy were impressed with the fact that she had never been to Memphis or more than ten miles from her home. She was an only child with a collie her only companion on the family farm. All I heard about her made me want to learn more about this new relative in my life, as I began my first pen pal correspondence. I learned a good bit about her restricted activities around the farm and with her friends on surrounding farms. Early childhood health problems had forced her activities to be restricted, but she seemed not to be unhappy about her quiet life. We wrote often of our desire to see each other, but the limitations of the depression made a visit impossible during our teen years.

I started my married life in Portland, Oregon, and thereby missed Mary Elizabeth's one visit to Dallas when she was following her Navy husband to Southern California during World War II. My family was very much impressed with her as a charming young woman. Unfortunately, with her preoccupation, and my own, with our new lives, our correspondence dwindled until it ceased soon after her parents died. The link that could have kept us in touch with each other disappeared. It's been years since I've heard from her, and the letters I sent to her Brownsville address were returned. I wonder how she fared through World War II and where she may be today. Unfortunately, no family connections survive to keep us in touch.

But Mary Elizabeth was not my only pen pal. Miss Walters, my fourth-grade teacher, had traveled to Hawaii and visited a family in Lahaina, Maui (and what a time I had learning to pronounce those two names). One day after school she asked me if I would like to write to a little Hawaiian girl she had met. The facts that she lived in exotic Hawaii and that her name was Mary Elizabeth were a double incentive for me to start another pen pal correspondence. The Maui Mary Elizabeth sent me a picture that was strangely familiar -- a tall, thin girl standing in front of her home, holding a long-handled purse that dangled to her ankle. Unlike my cousin, she was not pale but showed her Hawaiian ancestry in her darker complexion. Of course, her home in the background had tropical plants like a tall palm tree and a brilliant red hibiscus, but that difference was no deterrent to my desire to become friends with a different Mary Elizabeth. (I can't help wondering why I remember all that color; there were no color snapshots at that time!) Her lifestyle contrasted vividly with that of my other Mary Elizabeth. In the city of Lahaina she had lots of friends nearby and was proud of the fact that she was learning to surf. I was especially intrigued that, when the fleet was in port, she was not allowed to leave her yard without an adult to accompany her. We exchanged letters for several years, comparing our different ways of living and hoping that some day we'd be able to meet, preferably, to me, in her home in Hawaii. Unfortunately, the beginning of World War II

hostilities in the Pacific served to put an end to our correspondence. In my moving about the United States, I have lost her address.



So, World War II intervened in my connections with two Mary Elizabeths from far different environments from my own. I think of them occasionally and would like to know in what ways their lives have changed, as mine has. They certainly served to broaden my horizons, from the suburbs of a big city, to a Tennessee farm, to a Hawaiian city in the tropics.