

The Filson Historical Society

**Belts-Sherman family
Papers, 1861-1906**

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Size of Collection

.33 cu. ft.

Location Number:

Mss. A B453

Belts-Sherman family Papers, 1861-1906

Scope and Content Note

This collection documents the courtship and marriage of Ellen M. "Nellie" Sherman (1840-1914) and Conrad Welch "Will" Belts (1837-1920). A school teacher in Marietta, Fulton County, Illinois, Nellie corresponded with Will while he served in the Union army in 1861-1862. Will's letters to her during this period describe his service with the 29th Illinois Infantry in western Kentucky. Following his discharge, Will settled in Prairie City, McDonough County, Illinois and wooed Nellie by letter until their marriage in 1866. Their correspondence focuses primarily on their relationship and love of literature with occasional references to the Civil War on the home front. In a letter dated 22 Feb. 1865, Nellie highly disapproves of Will's sympathy for "Enoch Arden" the main character in Tennyson's epic poem and also declares her support for the noted Abolitionist and Women's Rights advocate, Anna E. Dickinson (1842-1932). (fld. 2)

Nellie also corresponded widely with relatives, friends, and Fulton County men who served in the Union army. In a letter from Prairie City dated 7 July 1863, an unidentified woman writes Nellie, "I wish you had been here Wednesday night (when) the news that our boys had taken Vicksburg was affirmed." She reports, "they illuminated the city (and) during the evening there were five or six speeches, firing of the cannon (and) music of the fife and drums & singing." (fld. 6)

Charles Norcott (1846-1887) of the 132nd Illinois Infantry wrote Nellie in the summer of 1864 describing his service in the guerrilla infested region around Paducah, Ky. Following his return on leave to Fulton County in early 1865, Jeremiah M. Cramblett (1834-1909) wrote Nellie from his station at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis, Mo. In a letter dated 22 May 1865 he writes, "I expect to come home before long...I want to get to be a Citizen Once more." He declares, "how glad I am that I have lived to see the end of this war." (fld. 5) In a letter from Elyria, Ohio dated 19 April 1862, Nellie's childhood friend, Myrtilla "Tillie" Galpin Bevin (1842-1921) writes, in apparent reference to the recent carnage at Shiloh, "Nellie do you hear the war news (?) Isn't it dreadful how our brave soldiers have been cut up!" She adds, "Oh that I may live to see our victory." (fld. 6)

The vast majority of the content of these letters relates to local affairs, social customs and activities as well as family matters. There are frequent references to members of the Belts, Sherman and Hicks families of Ohio and Illinois. In a letter to Will dated 2 October 1863, Nellie refers to the death of her cousin, Pvt. John C. Hicks (1832-1863) of the 35th Iowa Infantry who died of disease at Vicksburg. She writes that her uncle "has returned from the South bringing the saddest of intelligence." She adds, "I am going to Canton (Ill.) tomorrow with the friends of him who we have loved and lost." (fld. 3)

The collection also includes an apparently unrelated letter from Henry C. Smith to Nancy L. Harrison (1844-1934) of Cornwell, Litchfield County, Conn. Dated 19 January 1865 from Bermuda Hundred, near Richmond, Va., Smith, who apparently served in the 8th Connecticut Infantry, writes from a military hospital. He relates that he was struck down by fever shortly after his exchange from a Confederate military prison but was now, "able to sit up." (fld. 7)

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Biographical Note

Ellen M. "Nellie" Sherman (1840-1914) was apparently a native of Elyria, Ohio and possibly the child of one Peter Sherman who died there in 1844. By 1860 she was living in Illinois with her mother, step-father (a Mr. Fuller) and other relatives. With the outbreak of the Civil War she was a school teacher in Marietta, Fulton County, Illinois. She occasionally traveled to nearby Canton to visit her Hicks relations.

Although often chided for failing to write more often, Nellie maintained a wide ranged correspondence with her friends, family and suitor, Conrad Welch "Will" Belts (1837-1920). He was the son of John Belts (1797-1851) and Mary Welch (1798-1861) of Dansville, Steuben County, NY. By 1860, he, his brother, Albert J. Belt (1841-1929) and an unidentified sister had settled in Illinois. Employed as a merchant's clerk in McDonough County, he enlisted in the 29th Illinois Infantry in 1861 and served with the regimental band. Following his discharge in 1862 he resumed his business practices and wooed Nellie by letter until their marriage in 1866.

The collection also includes two letters written by Albert J. Belt and his wife Sarah E. (1847-1933) in 1868 and 1906 respectively. In the latter correspondence Sarah shares family news with Albert's nephew, Claude Belts (1869-1943). The son of Jacob M. Belts 1836-1895) and Sarah Lavina DuBois, Claude resided with his wife in Urbana, Illinois.

There is no evidence of any connection between the Belts or Sherman family and Nancy L. Harrison (1844-1934), the daughter of William Hopkins Harrison and Mary Amelia Catlen of Cornwell, Litchfield County, Connecticut. Her soldier correspondent was apparently Henry Cole Smith (1845-1918), the son of Marcus DeForest Smith and Harriet Cole, who joined the Union army in Cornwell in 1861.

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Folder List

- Folder 1 Will Belts Correspondence to Nellie Sherman, 1861-1863.
- Folder 2 Will Belts Correspondence to Nellie Sherman, 1864-1866.
- Folder 3 Nellie Sherman Correspondence to Will Belts, 1863-1866.
- Folder 4 Correspondence between Will Belts and Nellie Sherman, undated.
- Folder 5 Union Soldiers' Correspondence to Nellie Sherman, 1864-1865.
- Folder 6 Miscellaneous Correspondence to Nellie Sherman and Will Belts, 1862-1865.
- Folder 7 Henry C. Smith Letter to Nancy Harrison, 1865.

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Added Entries

American literature - 19th century
Belts family
Belts, Conrad Welch, 1837-1920
Bevin, Myrtila "Tillie" Galpin, 1842-1921
Courtship - Illinois
Cramblett, Jeremiah M., 1834-1909
Dickenson, Anna Elizabeth, 1842-1932
English literature - 19th century
Family life
Fort Jefferson (Wickliffe, Ky.)
Fulton County (Ill.)
Harrison, Nancy L., 1844-1934
Hicks family
Illinois - History - Civil War, 1861-1865
Illinois - Social life and customs
Kentucky - History - Civil War, 1861-1865
McClellan, George B. (George Brinton), 1826-1885
McDonough County (Ill.)
Norcott, Charles Ellison, 1846-1887
Paducah (Ky.) - History - Civil War, 1861-1865
Sherman family
Sherman, Ellen M., 1840-1914
Shiloh, Battle of, Tenn., 1862
Smith, Henry C., 1846-1917
Teachers - Illinois
United States - History - Civil War, 1861-1865
United States - History - Civil War, 1861-1865 - Campaigns
United States. Army - Military life
United States. Army. Connecticut Infantry Regiment, 8th (1861-1865), Company E
United States. Army. Illinois Infantry Regiment, 132nd (1864), Company E
United States. Army. Illinois Infantry Regiment, 29th (1861-1865), Band
United States. Army. Illinois Infantry Regiment, 72nd (1862-1865), Company I
Vicksburg (Miss.) - History - Siege, 1863
Young women - Social life and customs