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Retrospect

News from the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections at Winthrop University

December, 2008

Volume 4, Number 4

“I’ll Be Home For Christmas, If Only In My Dreams . . .”

In the papers of Major Eleanor Roberts, there are many letters to and from the members of the Roberts clan of York, S.C. In 1944, Women’s Army Corps (WAC) lieutenant Eleanor (known as Ellen) had four brothers and one sister in military service. Their letters are a testimony to the duty felt by and the ties that bound many families during World War II. Following are excerpts from a couple of letters to illustrate these sentiments.



Somewhere in Italy 7 October 1944

Dearest Lil, [Ellen’s sister]

. . . ‘Twould be nice if we could all spend Christmas together this year but since we can’t maybe in a year not too far away, we can really have a super celebration—not made up of overseas boxes and letters wishing someone a Merry Christmas. . . .When the war is over and I have time, I am going to write a book for my own enjoyment on my life in the Army. It will be longer than “Anthony Adverse” and much more amusing. Of course, every WAC is going to write a book, they say. . . .

Much love,
Ellen

Somewhere in Italy 21 December 1944



Dearest Lil,

The impossible finally happened. Jumbo came down and spent a day and a half with me. I have never experienced such an emotion. Of course, it had been nearly 29 months since I had seen him. . . He looks about the same only very tired. His hair isn’t any grayer than it was. He isn’t quite as thin as he was when he left for the Army. At times he seemed a little bitter but I guess that is natural after being on the front for about 19 months. It was almost impossible to get him to talk. The two boys with him look after him like he was a baby. They said though that he was the most dependable man in the section. . . . [After a day and a half] They had to hitch back so wanted to leave very early to have a better chance of getting a ride. I fixed a pile of cheese sandwiches for them and loaded them down with candy, cigarettes, chewing gum, and sardines. I got Jumbo some sox and a wool scarf at Officers PX for his Christmas. . . . Jumbo really hated to leave me right at the last. . . . I have never been so tied up in knots. Now that he has gone back, I realize how dead tired I am. But I did everything in my power to make him and the boys have a good time. . . . He landed at Salerno when he came to Italy and later spent weeks at Anzio. They all admitted freely that they had been scared to death many times, and that it was only by the grace of God that they were alive. Said that being in a heavy weapons company had been in their favor. They came down to Rome on a five day rest and are supposed to have a couple months training before going back into action, but they didn’t believe they actually would. I certainly hope so. . . . As for cigarettes, I get 8 packs a week and that is sufficient. Don’t bother to send me any. The boys at the front get the same. Jumbo smokes but not to an excess except when the shells are falling. He takes a drink, too, on such occasions but he never gets drunk and probably never will. I had to laugh yesterday to see the two of us sitting over a bottle and both mellowing up. The boys said that he led the cleanest life of any of the fellows in the battery. . . . The only fly in the ointment was that he couldn’t stay for Christmas since it was so near. I have a little tree in my room with all the gifts piled around it waiting for Christmas. This is about all. I’m dead tired but thought you would be interested in the meeting of the youngest Roberts daughter and the oldest son. With God’s help maybe this war will soon be over.

My love to you,
Ellen





Pres. D.B. Johnson's Speech on December 22, 1920

Every year, just before the Christmas holiday, Winthrop president D. B. Johnson would give a speech before the student body to give them instructions for an orderly dismissal and to wish them a Merry Christmas. Following is the speech he gave on December 22, 1920.

"The Agent of the Southern Railway will sell tickets here today, Wednesday, beginning at nine o'clock. Transfer tags will be sold at the same time and place at ten cents for transferring trunks, suitcases and boxes to the depot. You should all secure Winthrop College trunk tags to put on your baggage. Place on it your name, the number of your room, floor, and dormitory. This is important! Upon your return do not give your trunk check to any one who may ask for it. Keep it until you get to the College and then give it to the matrons. This is the only way to avoid confusion and loss of baggage. It fixes the responsibility.

The warning bell for the early train tomorrow morning will ring at 1:15 to give time for all who expect to leave on it to make preparation for leaving. The train will be standing back of the College heated and lighted at 1:45 AM, ready for you to board at any time after that hour so that you will not have to stand in the cold. This train will leave at 2:00 AM. To make you as comfortable as possible, the heat will be kept on the buildings all night tonight. The train on the 3 C's Road going toward Blacksburg at 6:00 AM and toward Camden at 7:10 AM will stop back of the College for Winthrop students. With the special train leaving here at 2:00 AM there will hardly be need of any one's using the other morning trains (5:55 or 8:22 AM) on that road except to go beyond Columbia toward Savannah. There is no objection to any one using these other trains, if they prefer to do so, but let me warn those who wish to stop at stations other than Chester, Winnsboro, and Ridgeway between here and Columbia not to take the through train which leaves here at 8:22 AM. It will not stop at these places.

The housekeeper will give an early breakfast at 5:30 o'clock tomorrow morning for all who wish to leave on the 6:00 AM train for Blacksburg and the 7:10 AM train for Camden. The regular breakfast will be given at 7:30 and the warning bell will be rung as usual at 7:15. Those students leaving on the 2:00 AM train for Columbia will have a lunch given them tonight for use in the morning. Those who will want this lunch should give their names to their respective matron's this morning.

All are to be back here without fail on January 5th ready for work on January 6th. You should not take any chances with the trains which are always irregular during the Christmas holidays. If you should return on the 8:22 AM train on January 6th you would be too late. The rule published in the catalogue states that 'those who fail to return at the required time after the holidays, if re-admitted, shall be required to matriculate again, and pay the fee of five dollars.' It is our duty to enforce that rule. It shall be fully and clearly understood before you leave for home. Vacant places in the dormitories will be filled on January 6th with students desiring to enter the college. I sincerely hope that every student will be back on time January 5th for work on January 6th. The schedule for classes for January 6th will be the regular Thursday schedule. To return from Columbia, you should come, if possible, on the special train for Winthrop students, leaving there at about 4:00 PM and arriving here at about 7:00 PM. You would be saved time and trouble and money by taking that train especially now as the street cars are not running. It comes up to the back gate of the campus. If that train is not used more generally it will be taken off and all students will have to take the regular train with all the inconvenience and delay attending it at this end of the line. I hope you will remember to be as considerate tonight of each other as you proved yourselves to be on the same night last year. But I shall leave such questions as quiet in the dormitories tonight, good order on the trip home, etc., to your Student Government Association and you are asked to remain for a few moments this morning for a Student Government meeting. All are to wear the uniform going home and returning. Be loyal and law-abiding in this matter.

I hope you will all keep well and enjoy the Christmas holidays to the fullest. I hope you may have the true Christmas spirit. I have just heard a story indirectly which will illustrate what I mean and which I rejoice to hear. I have heard of some of our girls who when learning that a widow with several small children living at one of the mills was sick and had said tearfully that she would have to tell the children there was no Santa Claus this Christmas, made up their minds that she would not have to tell the children this sad thing, and succeeded in arranging that there shall be a Santa Claus this Christmas for those little fatherless children. That is the true Christmas spirit. The spirit of Him whose coming into the world the season is observed to commemorate. The spirit of service. He came to serve not to be served. He came to minister not to be ministered unto. The spirit of giving rather than of getting. The spirit of giving happiness to others rather than of selfishly seeking happiness for ourselves. But it is common knowledge that he who is concerned more in giving happiness than in securing happiness for himself secures the greater happiness for himself after all. He who selfishly seeks happiness for himself never gets it. I wish you all a merry Christmas and a happy New Year."



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