Elaine and Robert Ransom
World War II Letters, 1918-2005; bulk: 1940-1946
MSB 93-96, MSA 694

Introduction

This is a collection contains the letters of Robert and Elaine Ransom of Rutland, Vermont, written to each other during World War II. They are a gift of the estate of Elaine Ransom. They came to the Vermont Historical Society in June 2013. They are housed in four flat archival boxes and one archival flip-top box. They consume 4 linear feet of shelf space.

Family History Note:

Robert VanNess Ransom was born on March 27, 1921, in Castleton, Vermont, son of Elihu C. and Ethel F. (McCarthy) Ransom. He enlisted in the United States Army on October 10, 1942, as a private first-class. Bob Ransom married Elaine Barbara Spencer on March 1, 1944, in Alabama. He returned to Rutland, Vermont, on February 4, 1946. He worked on the assembly line of the Howe Richardson Scale Co. during the day, and played his guitar in the Melody Makers Orchestra at night. The Ransoms lived at 3 Chaplin Avenue in Rutland for most of their married life. Robert Ransom died February 19, 1999, and Elaine Ransom died June 24, 2012.

Scope and Content

This collection consists of over 4000 letters written by Elaine and Robert Ransom, of Rutland, Vermont, between October of 1940 and January of 1946. The bulk of the letters were written after October 24, 1942, when Robert left Rutland by train as an Army draftee to serve in World War II. Throughout the war, the two young Vermonters shared their love for each other in twice daily letters. The letters mostly contain the feelings of longing that they felt for each other.

The collection documents the story of how young two Vermonters maintained a very intense relationship over five years and many thousands of miles through the written word. The letters begin in 1940, before Robert left for the service. He did not have a telephone, so they had no choice but to communicate through the mails.

Robert Ransom played in an Army band with the 98th Infantry stationed mostly in Hawaii. Just before the surrender of the Japanese he was part of the force preparing to invade Japan.

The letters, still in their envelopes, are bundled by month and year, totaling 87 bundles. Most of the envelopes have a written summary of their contents created by Elaine Ransom many years later; each bundle also has a contents summary.
An interesting element of the letters is that they contained coded messages, based on a system the couple had devised after marrying. In the code, common words that soldiers writing to their sweethearts would use stood for individual letters. “Good” would stand for the letter “L,” “love” would stand for the letter O, “paper” stood for the letter “V,” and “hon” would stand for the letter “E.” Evidently Elaine would recognize that a strangely worded paragraph warranted deciphering.

In 2001, Rutland Herald reporter Kevin O’Connor met Elaine Ransom who showed him one of the letters in her vast collection. O’Connor met with her every Wednesday at noon for the next several months and eventually wrote a 20-part series based on the letters called “In Love and War.” O’Connor subsequently wrote an article about Elaine entitled “Wednesdays with Elaine” (2004) and a year later wrote “The Week that Ended World War II,” based heavily on the Ransom letters. O’Connor visited with Elaine for over ten years.

In 2005, Andrew Carroll, the historian behind a best-selling book and the PBS documentary “War Letters,” told Elaine, “It’s probably the largest single collection [of World War II letters] I’ve ever seen.” Carroll pointed out that it is very hard to preserve letters in a war zone. Evidently Robert had found a way to save the letters from Elaine and had mailed them in packets back home to her.

Interestingly, the collection also includes five love letters to Robert’s father, Elihu, and one letter from him, written during World War I. Three of the letters are from Elihu’s future wife, Ethel McCarthy, and one is from someone named Margaret. There is a photographic portrait of Elihu in his uniform.

Other materials in the collection are diaries, autograph albums, Army Navy Report magazines, and correspondence written on Hawaiian letterhead.

Inventory

MSB 93 Letters, October 23, 1940-May 1943
94 _____, June 1943-August 1944
95 _____, September 1944-April 1945
96 _____, May 1945-January 1946

MSA 694:01 Letters from Hawaii, 1945 (separated from bundles above by Elaine, many on decorative Hawaiian letterhead)
02 Bob’s diary, 1945-46
03 Elaine’s diary, 1943
04 Bob’s “record” to Elaine, written before he boarded a ship to Japan, 1945 (this is apparently a letter enclosing a recording of Bob singing “The Anniversary Waltz.”)
05 Autograph albums, Elaine
06 “Radio Press News,” 1945 (photocopies of items perhaps in collection)
07 98th Infantry publications, 1942-43
Iroquois, Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky (souvenir history)
A Picture Parade of Camp Rucker, Alabama
390th Review, regimental newspaper for Camp Breckinridge, April & May 1943

08 Hawaiian cartoons & souvenirs
09 New Army-Navy Review: A Magazine for Service Men and Women in Hawaii, February (1 copy) and March (2 copies), 1945
10 Hawaii tourist information (ca. 1978)
11 Elihu Ransom (Robert’s father) World War I love letters:
   Letter, “Your own little girl” to “My dear Elihu,” 1918
   _____, Elihu Ransom to “My Dear Little Girl,” August 23, 1919
   _____, “Your loving little girl Ethel” to “My Dear Elihu,” February 17, May 7, and May 9, 1919
   Postcard, “Your little Margaret” to “My dear Elihu, December 1919 (?)
Photograph, Elihu Cook Ransom, WWI
   _____, soldier and horses stationed in Mercedes, Texas, WWI
12 Newspaper article, “In Love and War,” Rutland Herald, 2001
13 _____, “The Week that Ended World War II,” Rutland Herald, 2005
14 _____, “Wednesdays with Elaine,” Rutland Herald, 2004, and other newspaper articles

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