Sylvia Hortense Bliss (1870-1963)  
Papers, 1868-1984  
Doc 236, 240, 430-432, MSA 160

Introduction

The Sylvia Hortense Bliss papers, 1868-1984, consist of her correspondence, diaries, notebooks, published and unpublished writing (both poetry and prose), as well as photographs, genealogy of the Bliss, Parker, Marsh, and Whitney families, and a memorial scrapbook gathered by her sister-in-law, Lou Whitney Bliss. Sylvia H. Bliss (December 13, 1870-March 14, 1963), a writer, accomplished musician and amateur botanist, lived in her ancestral East Calais, Vermont, home for most of her life. Her later years were spent in Rochester, Vermont.

The collection came to the Vermont Historical Society in 1983 from Forest K. Davis, Bliss’s biographer. In 1955 Davis of Calais, Vermont, a retired professor from the Binghamton Unit of Empire State College (New York), began a lengthy correspondence with Bliss. During the course of their correspondence, Bliss transmitted her papers to Davis. After Sylvia Bliss died in 1963, Davis corresponded with both Lou Whitney Bliss and her daughter, Barbara Bliss Rice. Davis eventually donated all the papers he had acquired to the Vermont Historical Society (ms. acc. no. 83.43) where they are housed in 5 document boxes and 1 flip-top box; they occupy 5.5 linear feet of shelving.

Biographical

Sylvia Hortense Bliss was the oldest child of Elmina Marsh (d. 1935) of East Calais, Vermont, and Warren Earl Bliss (1840-1930) of East Calais and Woodbury, Vermont, who married January 25, 1866. Sylvia (December 13, 1870-March 14, 1963) and her siblings, Clifford Earl (August 29, 1875-April 9, 1962), and Grace Marsh (1877-1922), were born in Toledo, Ohio. In 1885, the family returned to the East Calais farm where Elmina Marsh Bliss had been born.

Sylvia Bliss studied music in Iowa and was a student of music at Syracuse University under private teachers for two years. Apart from several sojourns in Boston, brief summer holidays, and winters in Florida in her later years, Bliss lived in East Calais with her parents and, in her final years, with her brother and sister-in-law in Rochester, Vermont. Bliss taught piano lessons and was a church organist; she read widely and was a self-taught botanist. Her four hundred specimen herbarium which she gave to Montpelier’s Kellogg-Hubbard Library was lost in the 1927 flood.

Bliss’ early published writings were short-stories in the Vermont Watchman and State Gazette and The Vermonter: The State Magazine. By the 1930s she was a regular contributor of poetry and short prose pieces to Driftwind, a literary journal, published and edited by Walter J. Coates, in North Montpelier, Vermont.
Between 1909 and 1918, Bliss sought medical treatment for a speech handicap with Boston neurologists Dr. Morton Prince and Dr. James J. Putnam. It was during this period that Bliss researched and published several articles in the *American Journal of Psychology* and the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* on subjects that interested her as a layperson.

Bliss published two books of poetry: *Quests, Poems in Prose* in 1920 and *Sea Level* in 1933. A second edition of *Quests* with excerpts from the first was issued in 1965 with an epilogue by Forest K. Davis. In 1990, her work was collected and published under the title *Uncut Leaves*, with an epilogue and notes by Davis. The latter is the nearest we have to a complete bibliography of Sylvia Bliss’ work; however, it does not contain all of the work she contributed to *Driftwind*. A bibliography of the latter is included in Doc 236:0 of the Bliss Papers.

Bliss’ invalid sister, Grace, with whom Sylvia had an uneasy relationship, died in 1922. After her parents’ death Bliss made her home with her brother, Clifford, and his wife, Lou Whitney Bliss (February 20, 1885- November 26, 1964). Their daughter, Barbara Whitney, was born in Northfield on April 19, 1915. Barbara Whitney Bliss, widow of A. Harlow Martin, married Gerald L. Rice and they have a son, Gerald L. Rice, Jr.

Sources of biographical information about Sylvia Bliss and her family, in the VHS library collection include:

• Forest K. Davis’ *Bird of Utica: Life, Thought and Art of Sylvia H. Bliss, 1870-1963*. (VHS B B619)

and in the Sylvia Bliss Papers:

• typescript of a talk given by Forest K. Davis in 1984 about Sylvia Bliss at Montpelier’s “The Club” (MSA 160:8)
• Bliss, Parker, Marsh, and Whitney genealogy compiled by Lou Whitney Bliss (Doc 432:1)
• obituaries of Sylvia Bliss, and Clifford and Lou Whitney Bliss (Doc 432:27).

**Scope and Content**

The Bliss Papers, 1868-1984, are a comprehensive collection of the papers of Sylvia Hortense Bliss assembled for the most part by her biographer, Forest K. Davis, prior to Bliss’ death. The collection includes not only information about her personal life and copies of almost all of her literary output (often in the original format) but it also reflects her intellectual curiosity on subjects as diverse as botany, philosophy, psychology, and music. The papers include her correspondence, diaries, notebooks, her published and unpublished writing (both poetry and prose), and fragments of her literary work as well as reviews. Information about Bliss’ life includes photographs, genealogy, and a memorial scrapbook compiled by Lou Whitney Bliss after Sylvia died.

The collection consists in large part of Sylvia Bliss’ letters. She wrote to her family during the periods she was away from home studying music and undergoing
medical treatment in Boston, and later in her life while on short vacations from the East
Calais, Vermont, farm.

The most voluminous correspondence is that of Forest K. Davis and Bliss
between 1956 and 1962. During this period, Bliss answered Davis’ queries about her life
and literary work and sent him envelopes stuffed with her papers. Davis’ arrangement of
the envelopes has been retained: chronological by the date of Bliss’ response. The
contents of the envelopes are miscellaneous and Davis’ notes on each envelope are a
convenient inventory of the contents.

The portion of the collection related to Forest Davis is relatively small and
consists of his letters to Sylvia Bliss between 1954 and 1962, as well as his
correspondence with Lou and Barbara Bliss after Sylvia’s death. Also included are
typescripts of Davis’ biography of Bliss, the 1964 edition of *Quests*, and correspondence
and reviews of the latter.

**Organization**

The collection is organized in two series:
I. Sylvia Hortense Bliss papers, 1870-1962
II. Forest K. Davis papers, 1941-1984

**Related collections**

Books by Sylvia H. Bliss:
(811 B619s)
*Quests: Poems in Prose*, with an epilogue by Forest K. Davis. Montpelier,
Vt.: Capital City Press, 1965. (811 B619q)
*Sea Level.* North Montpelier, Vt.: Driftwind Press, 1923. (811 B619s)
*Uncut Leaves, the Poems and Prose of Sylvia H. Bliss.* Adamant, Vt.:

Other work by Bliss:
A complete set of *Driftwind: A Tramp Magazine Issued For the Love of
Literature*, published by Walter J. Coates in North Montpelier, Vt.,
from 1926-1948. (d.s. 805 D831). Bliss’ poetry and prose appeared
this magazine between 1927-1947.
Five short stories that appeared between 1903 and 1908 in *The Vermonter:
The State Magazine* are analyzed in the VHS catalog (R974.30 V598).
Bliss’ poems *The Cloister* and *The Falling Snow* appear on pages 161
and 162.
Two essays: *Camel’s Hump* (917.43 C144b) and *Vermonters in Art and
Music* (920.0743 B619v).
Series Description

I. Sylvia Bliss Papers

The arrangement of the Sylvia Bliss series is: her correspondence, diaries, notebooks, her writing (both published and unpublished), photographs and other family information, and miscellaneous items which include a collection of her clippings.

A. Correspondence

The correspondence which occupies a substantial part of the collection consists of family letters which she began as a young girl, letters to particular friends, and her lengthy, voluminous correspondence with Forest K. Davis. Bliss’ letters to her family, which she began in 1875, are the oldest items in the collection. They continue until 1953 and she wrote them on those occasions when she was away from home: studying music, staying in Boston for medical treatment, enjoying rare holidays with friends, and in later years, spending winters in Florida.

Letters to friends include a lengthy correspondence from 1922 to 1941 with Mrs. H. C. Allen, a friend who shared her musical interests and with the Rev. Mary Andrews Conner from 1918 to 1922, an active Universalist, who, with her husband, summered in Vermont. It is in a March 23, 1928, letter to the latter, that Bliss writes of the Kellogg-Hubbard Library’s loss of her herbarium in the 1927 flood.

In Sylvia Bliss’ 1929 and 1930 letters to Will S. Monroe (author and traveler, best known in Vermont for his work with the Green Mountain Club), she questions him about her literary work and publishing; the latter are photocopies from the VHS manuscript collection (Doc 86). Several of his letters to her in 1932 and 1933 are original. (Doc 430:2). Other correspondents with Bliss on literary matters include Walter J. Coates, the editor of Driftwind, a magazine to which she was a frequent contributor; and Arthur W. Peach, a professor of English at Norwich University.

The letters which Bliss wrote to Forest K. Davis between 1956 and 1962 occupy the most space in the collection. In the course of their correspondence, Bliss transferred her papers to Davis. The folders containing this correspondence are arranged chronologically by the date of Bliss’ letter; however, the contents of the folders are miscellaneous. Although the folders are labeled “letters,” they contain all kinds of
papers, and Davis’ note, therefore, on each envelope is an important inventory of the contents.

B. Diaries
Most of the Sylvia Bliss diary entries are concise and the years are not consecutive. The earliest “diary,” 1871, has no entries, only childish scribbles.

C. Notebooks
The numbering of the Bliss notebooks assigned by Forest K. Davis has been retained. They are not chronological and in some instances the dates are unknown. Some entries are journal-like, others are unconnected thoughts or reactions to books the author had read; others contain drafts or fragments of her poems, essays and stories. Again Forest Davis’ notes on the cover of each notebook are a useful guide to the contents.

D. Writing
It is probable that a copy of each of Sylvia Bliss’ literary efforts, whether it was published or unpublished, is included the collection. Her unpublished works are arranged chronologically if the date is known; among them is an 1878 manuscript. Her manuscripts are often handwritten but in some cases the later ones are typescripts.

Her published work includes appropriate issues of The Vermonter, reprints from the academic psychological journals to which she was contributor, and the issues of Driftwind which contain her short prose pieces. Page proofs, or flats, of her work published between 1927 and 1947 in Driftwind are included. (Doc 432:16 and 17).

E. Family Information
Information about Sylvia Bliss and her family includes a memorial scrapbook gathered by Lou Whitney Bliss, genealogy of the Bliss, Marsh, and Parker families, obituaries of Sylvia, her brother and her sister-in law, and photographs. Although many of the photographs are in Doc 432:26, others are scattered in the 1957 Bliss-Davis correspondence (Doc 240:7-20). Sylvia Bliss is portrayed as early as 1890 and at various times during her life; there are several pictures of other family members and her home in East Calais as well.

F. Miscellaneous
Sylvia Bliss’ voluminous collection of clippings includes scraps of poetry, book reviews, and quotations or excerpts from her reading (Doc 432:32-36). A cassette tape that was made on September 30, 1957, of Bliss reading her poetry and playing the piano is in the VHS Library audio collection (M-46).

II. Forest K. Davis Papers
The series of the collection related to Forest K. Davis is relatively small. Apparently Sylvia Bliss saved his letters from 1954-1962 (MSA 160:5). Other correspondence includes letters from Lou Whitney Bliss and her daughter, Barbara, after Sylvia’s death as well as other business matters related to publishing the second edition.
of *Quests* in 1965. Davis read a paper at Montpelier’s “The Club” in March 1984 about the life of Sylvia Bliss (MSA 160:8).

**Inventory**

**I. Sylvia H. Bliss**

a. Correspondence

Doc 236:1  Letters from Sylvia Bliss, to her family, 1875-1898.

2  _____, _____, January-February 1909
3  _____, _____, March-April 1909
4  _____, _____, January-November 15, 1911
5  _____, _____, November 22, 1911-December 1911
6  _____, _____, January-April 1912
7  _____, _____, May-June, 1914
8  _____, _____, 1924, 1926
9  _____, _____, 1927
10  _____, _____, 1928
11  _____, _____, 1930-1931
12  _____, _____, 1932-1933
13  _____, _____, 1934
14  _____, _____, 1935-1940
15  _____, _____, 1952
16  _____, _____, January-February 1953
17  _____, _____, March-May 1953
18  _____, to Mrs. H. C. Allen, 1922-1926
19  _____, _____, 1927-1929
20  _____, _____, 1930
21  _____, _____, 1932
22  _____, _____, 1933-1935
23  _____, _____, 1936-1941
24  _____, to Mr. and Mrs. Preston Bassett, 1961
25  _____, to Mary Andrews Conner, September-December 1918
26  _____, _____, January-March 1919
27  _____, _____, April-December 1919
28  _____, _____, 1920
29  _____, _____, 1921-1924
30  _____, _____, 1925-1928
31  _____, _____, fragments, undated
32  _____, to Priscilla Davis Backman and Evangeline Davis, 1934-1962 [some are photocopies]
33  _____, to Miss Kent and Will Monroe, 1909-1930 [photocopies]

Doc 240:1  _____, to Forest K. Davis, August-October 1956

2  _____, _____, November 1956
3  _____, _____, December 1, 1956
4  _____, _____, _____
5  _____, _____, December 24, 1956
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<td>March 1, 5, 1957</td>
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<td>May 7, 22, 1957</td>
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<td>July 29, 1957</td>
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<td>August 25, 1957</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>July-December 1962</td>
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<td>undated</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>miscellaneous, 1948-1961</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>postcards, undated</td>
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Doc 430:1  Letters to Sylvia H. Bliss, from Walter J. Coates, 1933-1934

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<td>re: <em>Quests</em>, 1920-1921</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1922-1931</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>re: <em>Sea Level</em>, 1933-1945</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>re: <em>Quests</em> and <em>Sea Level</em>, undated</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>re: natural science, 1917-1960</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>from publishers, etc. 1885-1920</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>1921-1953</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>miscellaneous, 1908-1958</td>
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B. Diaries

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<td>15</td>
<td>Diaries, 1871, 1902-1903</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>1904-1906</td>
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</table>
17 _____, 1907-1909
18 _____, 1910-1911, 1913
19 _____, 1914-1915
20 _____, 1954
21 _____, fragments, 1900-1915

C. Notebooks
22 Notebooks, nos. 1-3, 1920s-1930s
23 _____, no. 4 (1930s), no. 5 (1877), no. 6 (undated)
24 _____, no. 7 (1912-1919)
25 _____, no. 8 (1912-1919)
26 _____, nos. 9-11 (undated)
27 _____, nos. 12-14 (undated and 1927)
28 _____, no. 15 (1920), no. 16 (1938-1941), no. 17 (1930s)
29 _____, no. 18 (1949)
30 _____, no. 19 (1948)
31 _____, nos. 20-22 (1940s)
32 _____, nos. 23-25
33 _____, no. 26 (1930), no. 27 (1920-1930), no. 28 (1930s), no. 29 (pre-1920)
34 _____, nos. 30-31 (undated)

Doc 431:1
2 _____, no. 32 (1928), nos. 33-34 (1930s), no. 35 (1918)
3 _____, no. 36 (1908-1913), no. 37 (1919-1920), no. 38 (1920)
4 _____, no. 39 (1920s), no. 40 (undated), no. 41 (ca. 1912)
5 _____, no. 42 (1911?), no. 43 (1930s)
6 _____, nos. 44-45 (ca. 1920)
7 _____, 1933
8 _____, ca. 1950
9 _____, undated

D. Writing
10 Early writing, 1878-1886
11 _____, 1890-1903
12 Miscellaneous prose manuscripts, 1898-1953
13 _____, 1907-1912
14 _____, undated
15 Poems, pre-1909
16 _____, after 1909
17 _____, 1910-1930s
18 Autobiography, typescript, 1841-1842
19 _____, letters to Forest Davis
20 _____, _____, April-August 1959
21 _____, _____, September-December 1959
22 _____, _____, January-March 1960
23 _____, _____, April-July 1960
24 _____, 1908-1919, written 1959
25 Higher Materialism, undated
25a *Inevitable West*
26 *Search for Truth*, 1950s
27 *Spirit of Truth*, ca. 1947
28 Travel impressions, 1909-1953
29 *Vermonters in Art and Music*, 1927 [photocopy]
30 Fragments, 1890s-1958
31 _____, undated
32 _____, undated

Doc 432:1 _____, Lou Bliss to Forest Davis, 1963

2 _____, _____
3 _____, _____
7 *The Question*. Driftwind Press, 1944.
9 *Driftwind*, May-June 1936-July 1942
10 _____, November 1942-July 1943
11 _____, September 1943-August 1944
12 _____, October 1944-May 1945
13 _____, August 1945-September 1946
14 _____, November 1946-May 1947
15 _____, July 1947-November 1947
16 _____, page proofs, 1927-1947
17 _____, _____, miscellaneous, undated
18 _____, S. H. Bliss’s poems, 1927-1945 [photocopies]
19 *Vermont Watchman*, 1890-1892 [photocopy]
20 *Vermont Magazine*, 1903-1904
21 _____, 1908, 1929
22 Review of *Origin of Laughter*, 1915
23 _____, *Quests*, 1920-1924
24 _____, *Sea Level*, 1930s
25 _____, _____, from *Driftwind*, 1930s

E. Family Information
26 Photographs, 1890-1961
27 Genealogy, 1960-1963

F. Miscellaneous
28 Memorial scrapbook, 1964 [photocopy]
29 Mary Donnet, “Meet the lady,” 1960s [photocopy]
30 Letters, Earl Bliss to sister, Sarah Bliss, 1868
31 _____, to Elmina Bliss from her mother, Sophronia Marsh, 1885-1891
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<td>32</td>
<td>Clippings, ca. 1920-1960</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>_____, 1950s</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>_____, local, 1928-1959</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>Poetry etc., collected by Sylvia Bliss, 1897-1949</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>Quotes, misc., undated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio M 46</td>
<td>Readings by Sylvia Bliss from her own work and Ms. Bliss at the piano, cassette recorded by William A. Bassett in Rochester, Vermont, September 30, 1957.</td>
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<td>MSA 160:1</td>
<td>Programs, performances, etc., 1892-1930s</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Morton Prince, misc., 1910-1929</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>James J. Putnam, reprint, 1912</td>
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<td>Miscellaneous, 1887-1961</td>
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II. Forest K. Davis (1918-)

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<td>5</td>
<td>Letters from Forest Davis, to Sylvia Bliss, 1954-1962</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>_____ to Forest Davis, from Lou and Barbara Bliss, 1962-1963</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>_____, from Lou Bliss, 1964-1967</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td><em>Quests</em>, typescript, 1964</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td><em>Quests</em>, epilogue, typescript, 1964</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Correspondence, re: <em>Quests</em>, 1963-1964</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>Philosophy of Knowledge</em>, reprint, 1958</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Miscellaneous, 1941</td>
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Priscilla Page

Spring 1997
Works of Sylvia H. Bliss published in *Driftwind*

“Camel’s Hump.” v.1, March 1927.
“Mountains in Vermont.” v.2, no. 1, June 1927.
“Gardens, Biddeford Pool, Maine.” v. 2, no. 3, November 1927.
“Deer and I; an Encounter” and “The Newly Dead.” v. 3, no. 3, November 1928, p. 129.
“A.D. 1928” and “Christmas.” v. 3, no. 4, January 1929.
“Burden of Desire.” v. 4, no. 6, May 1930, p. 28.
“Development of a Humanitarian.” v. 11, no. 2, September-October 1936, p. 62
“I Light a Fire.” v. 16, no. 6, December 1941, pp. 222-224.
“Discoveries.” v. 17, no. 5, November 1942, pp. 236-238.
“Other Side.” v. 17, no. 10, April 1943, pp. 535-537.
“A Consideration of the Lilies.” v. 18, no. 1, July 1943, pp. 8-10.
“Man Writing.” v. 18, no. 3, September 1943, pp. 140-141.
“Dizziness: a study.” v. 18, no. 9, March 1944, pp. 496-497.
“Enter an Orchid.” v. 18, no. 11, May 1944, pp. 604-605.
“Words.” v. 19, no. 4, October 1944, pp. 188-189.
“Literary Relationships.” v. 19, no. 6, December 1944, pp. 310-313.
“Spring-tail (order Collembola).” v. 19, no. 9, March 1945, p. 523.
“Inevitable West.” v. 19, no. 11, May 1945, pp. 620-622.
“Prayer of a Modern.” v. 20, no. 2, August 1945, pp. 76-77.
“November Walk.” v. 20, no. 5, November 1945, pp. 296-297.
“Speedwell Trail.” v. 20, no. 9, March 1946, p. 565.
“Moonlight and Dawn.” v. 20, no. 11, May 1946, p. 703.
“Overheard.” v. 21, no. 1, July 1946, pp. 8-9.
“Time”. v. 21, no. 3, September 1946, pp. 140-141.
“Wood Adventure.” v. 21, no. 9, March 1947, p. 516.
“Rosemary for Remembrance.” v. 21, no. 11, May 1947, pp. 634-635.

Undated poem: