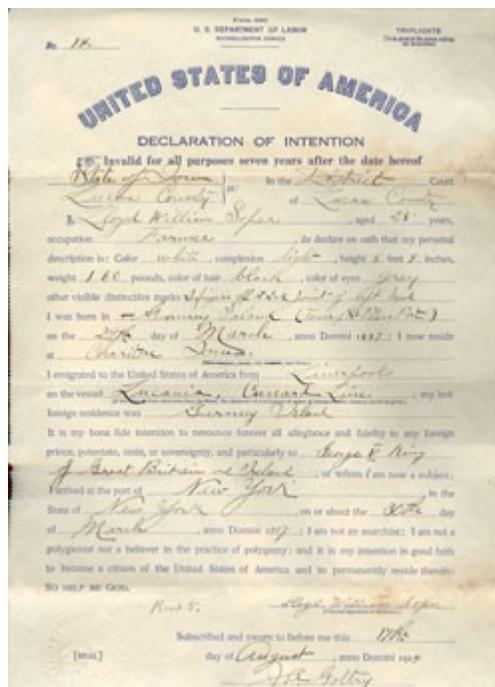


THE SOPER FAMILY LETTERS: WORLD WAR I COMES TO IOWA

To read all the letters written during WWI by this family see the website at :
<http://archives.luther.edu/soper/index.html>

In 1907, Lloyd Soper left his home on Guernsey, in the Channel Islands, made his way to Liverpool, England, and boarded the ocean liner Lucania. He was bound across the Atlantic for Iowa, where he would begin his new life as a farmer near Chariton, in Lucas County.

There he met and subsequently married Edith Vawter in February 1914.



The couple began their short life together. Their daughter Alice, born in August, 1916, gladdened their hearts, but their happiness was marred by Lloyd's persistent tuberculosis and declining health. Less than a month after their baby's birth, Lloyd sought treatment for his illness in Des Moines, staying at the home of the Ozannes, relatives from England. He writes on September 9th to reassure his worried wife at home and closes his letter with a string of kisses, adding a postscript: "P.S.: give one to Alice for me."

As he waits to be admitted to the Davenport Sanatorium, where he will be charged \$15 a week, Lloyd confers by mail with Edith about the hiring of a farm hand and the sale of their furniture to meet his medical expenses. He has several teeth extracted while he stays with the Ozannes, but reports that he enjoys the kind attentions of his hosts, and takes pleasure in their "\$75 Victrola." By Sept. 17 he is in Davenport, reporting to Edith on the daily regimen of care: "We have just had dinner & I am going to drop you a few lines but I've got to be back in bed at 1 o'clock we sleep 9 to 11 a.m. 1 to 3:30 & back to bed at 8 we have dandy sleeping porches & food has been good so far...."

But shortly after this letter he reports that he is feverish at night, and growing lonely and homesick for his family: "...I wish we could go out where Uncle Hiram is & if we had a hut out there where I could have a room to myself as I ought to rest most of the time anyway, we could live lots cheaper & if I don't get along as well as I should at least I'd be near you, I'm afraid I can't get much benefit here just on that account I must be where I can see you...." They will find a hired girl and send for groceries from Sears and Roebuck: "I understand pretty well the way these people treat tubercular subjects & I believe that you & I could do as much good out there together as anything of earth for me but I know its no use me trying this far away because those I love & all thats dear to me is to far away now I must close & dearie do write me back an hopeful answer with the best of love to you & my baby from your affect husband Lloyd."

But it is not to be. At the end of October, the Soper family at their home, "Hillstead," in Foulon, Guernsey receive the sad news they have anticipated with dread. Lloyd has died of tuberculosis.

When Luther College acquired the letters, a gift from Soper descendents, the moving story of a family divided by distance and the war became accessible to interested readers. Lloyd's family in Guernsey longed to see their daughter-in-law and baby Alice, but had to content themselves with their correspondence and frequent exchange of gifts. Annie Soper, Lloyd's mother, praises Edith's unstinting devotion and love for Lloyd to the end: "There is so much I want to know, tell me all you can dear, Did our letters reach you near the end, Was he ever disappointed when none came. Did he speak



of us? Was he able to see his dear little daughter? Not much I fear, as his disease was so contagious and himself so ill." The Sopers are plunged into grief at their son's death: "Oh, how hard to speak of our dear Lloyd in the past tense, you and your sweet babe are all that is left us of our Lloyd. We long to see you both, and would love for you to come & spend six months with us, and shall hope for this," a sorrowing Annie writes to her Iowa daughter-in-law.

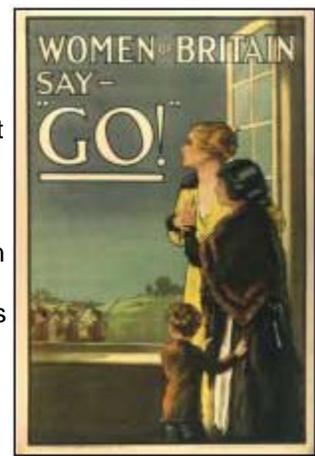
One by one the Soper daughters, Amy, Eva, Hilda and Nettie, write to Edith with affection, expressing their sense of loss and their sympathy. Eva is touched to learn that Lloyd remembered her birthday the day before he died. Amy, a lady's maid in London, is consoled by the letter Edith sent to Annie: "The thing we wanted to know more than anything, was whether he was trusting Jesus fully, & now both from you & from the Ozanne family, we know how simply & sweetly he was resting on his Redeemer's finished work; we cannot mourn as those do who have no 'sure & certain hope,' for we know that, in God's good time, we shall all meet him again." The family draws comfort from baby Alice: "I am so glad you have her: you say that she is like Lloyd: we are pleased to know that," Amy writes from Mayfair, in London.

The Soper family's desired meeting with Lloyd's young wife and baby Alice is not to take place for many years. Europe is in the grip of World War I, and the British-imposed blockade designed to put a stranglehold on Germany inspires retaliation, when German U-boats torpedo merchant and passenger vessels. Daughter Eva, working for a Guernsey family as a children's nurse, echoes her mother's fond wishes for a meeting: "You may always be sure on any occasion such as this that we are all thinking & speaking about you, so, though miles of land & sea divide us that will be a link between us. I dreamed one night last week that you & little Alice were here with us, and how I wish that was true, but we must wait patiently for that."



Still, the Sopers venture to send pinafores, dresses and crocheted bonnets for Alice. Annie regrets the restriction against sending photographs in the overseas mail during wartime, but encourages Edith to try an unmounted picture of Alice. When photos arrive for Edith and Hilda safely, Annie is overjoyed: "We are all delighted, how sweet she looks, and as you say the very picture of my dear dear Lloyd. I just wept over it, and felt I wanted to take her out of the picture and hug her. Her dear little arms look so inviting. Even the neighbors said, "How like Lloyd," and all say what a fine child for that age." Later they lament the loss of Alice's photograph for Amy and for Annie in the mail, and speculate that lost letters sent from Iowa might have gone down on the *Laconia*, a Cunard liner downed by a German sub in late February 1917. "The Mails have been most uncertain lately," Annie complains to her daughter-in-law. "Much care is needed, thro' those satanic submarines."

The Sopers' war-time correspondence provides a "window" into a vanished world, a primary source of information on how "The Great War" affected the lives of a Channel Islands family in dangerous times. The letters, many of them marked "Opened by Censor," describe their anxiety for friends and neighbors in military service. Amy tells Edith early in 1917 of her "special friend in Salonica." But by March 25, she has received bad news. He has been killed in action on March 7. Annie's letter of March 29th recalls Amy's thoughtful attentions to her friend: "Two parcels she had sent him, one of food, the other a shirt, socks, & cigarettes, were on the way, never to be received, she had sent parcels now and again ever since he went--in his last letter he said they were short of food, and he was hungry when he wrote. Oh--it is hard, His Mother and Sisters are heart broken."



But the wartime casualties continue. Sister Nettie, whose "sweetheart" is in Mesopotamia, consoles a friend when her fiance dies of malarial fever in East Africa. Letters from Annie reflect the losses of English brothers, sons and sweethearts: "How we long for this war to end, there are so many sad hearts and homes these days, so many young widows to be seen about,

some with their little babies, it is all very dreadful, and keeps the soldiers' relatives in constant anxiety, not knowing what the next news may be."

The Sopers feel the effects of the war at home too. They lament the "dearth of Sugar" (Annie has given up drinking it in her tea.) and the inflated prices of household goods ("... it must be awful for the poor," Eva writes at the beginning of April 1917, "as coals are nearly four times the usual price, and food is frightfully dear, in fact everything is."). Their letters testify to the daily challenge of running a home under new and trying conditions. Annie reports on the short supply of provisions due to the blockade: "So far we have not lacked for necessaries, but to-day could not get butter around here, one bread is now 1/-per 4 lb loaf, and the loaves are all to be made one shape to save labour."

Still, they take pleasure in the company of each other when they are reunited, gathering in the family home to do needlework and sew garments for the troops, sometimes singing "Will there be any stars in my crown" together. They enjoy the occasional respite from austerity: "I had more presents than I expected as no one is giving much during the war," Eva reports to Edith after Christmas 1916. "I had half a doz. stock collars, two muslin fancy collars, two photos in frames, a pair of blue satin bedroom slippers, a photo case, a pad of mourning paper & envelopes to match (which I am using now) a Devonshire china plate, and a case containing all kinds of needles, so I did very well. I had a gold brooch, too."



She proudly sends Edith her photograph: "Now I must tell you that when I first heard that Lloyd was ill I decided to have my photograph taken so as to send him one as I had not had it done for quite nine years, however, it was impossible to manage it in time so I thought I would send you one in a nice frame for Xmas, and now I find this is against the regulations, I am so sorry about it, but will see what I can do!! I will not be able to send you a properly mounted one anyway, but will do my best. Everyone says it is an excellent likeness so I would have liked you to have one." When the missing photographs sent from Iowa to Amy and Annie fail to turn up, Annie instructs Edith on strategies for the next attempt: "If you do have our pet taken again in

Amy's little dress it would have to be unmounted, and I should advise sending one at a time, with a chance of one at least reaching us."

For Amy, off in London, life has a different pace and rhythm. She describes her routine to the faraway sister-in-law she has never met:

"I attend a Congregational Chapel here in London, because I like the minister so much, he is a splendid man; otherwise I really belong to the Baptists. I did tell you, didn't I, that I am a lady's-maid to an elderly lady, who keeps a fully-trained hospital nurse to look after her? My duties are very light. I know I shall never get into such an easy place again. She gets up about 11:15 when I dress her & do her hair: when she is well enough to drive out, I put on her out-door clothes, at 3.0: then dress her for dinner at 8.0; undress her for bed at 10.30 between all those times, I am free to come & go pretty well as I like, as I have no dressmaking to do, & very few jobs of any description to do for her. On Sundays I don't see her from 11.45 a.m., till 10.30 p.m. I am very fond of getting about, & seeing people & places."

Amy's spirits are high in April 1917: "We had a great day in London on Friday: America having come in, at last, there was a dedication service at St. Paul's Cathedral: the King & Queen & Princess Mary, Queen Alexandra & various princesses went in semi-state to the service. The American Ambassador & his suite, went, & crowds of celebrities of all descriptions. I am never very far off when anything is going on, so, naturally, I was there, seeing all there was to be seen, not in the Cathedral, but outside: the Stars & Stripes were everywhere, even on me!" "Yes, my dear," she writes to Edith in a later letter, "the waters will be quite safe to travel on again some day, & we will hope that the day is not very far distant. If only America had come in to help us 18 months ago, think what she could have done by now; still, 'better late than never!' the German nation is not easily beaten, but it must be accomplished fact before the war can end." Life in London clearly offers her a chance to observe the wartime climate in a way her parents and sisters at home in Guernsey cannot: "Saturday I went to Hyde Park, where all our big functions take place, to see the King decorate 351 of our heroes, in recognition of the various brave deeds they have done. I have seen some of the American doctors, who have arrived here; they are smart men!" she writes to Edith in June 1917.

Younger daughter Nettie's life changes dramatically in January 1917. Annie proudly reports to Edith: "But I have not yet told you that dear Nettie is going to England. She has a post as waitress in a convalescent Hospital." By April, Nettie is settling into a purposeful round of activity in Pirbright, on the southern coast. She herself provides Edith with an account of her time, helping to provide meals for 166 soldiers at the camp, and anticipates with some enthusiasm the khaki uniform she will wear. Nettie grows acclimated to hardship and life away from home: "We sleep in huts, divided into cubicles which are quite decent for army life. In fact we are just like soldiers, get up at bugle call etc. We also have a Superintendent ... who is very strict & sarcastic. She is not like our late Super. was." But life at the camp is not without its entertainment: "Our Company gave a concert before the last leave, which was splendid & are having another soon." Nettie can attend church meetings in camp, and happily reports that she has Saturday or Sunday afternoon, and liberal weekday afternoons, free from responsibility.

As the war years drag on, the Soper letters convey anxiety for others as well as their weariness with daily sacrifices. "I grieve for many around here," Annie writes in the summer of 1917, "people I know intimately, who have been compelled to leave their happy homes, young wives & little children, get more training (all Guernsey men are trained) then leave for France and elsewhere, my nice Baker's man, and the Butcher amongst them. Our postman has lost half his left arm." The Sopers, as others have, learn to make do with less: "I am glad to tell you that we have been able to procure Butter all through although it was given out that none would be brought to the island, and the island supply tho' excellent, is quite insufficient. We are not yet restricted to War rations in bread, tho many families are limiting themselves, eating 3 lb a week each person, in fact making a hobby of it. Four pounds a week is supposed to be the limit, but poor Dad would go hungry. We are much relieved by hearing that an American vessel has reached an English port with an immense cargo of wheat. Good!! We want our poor troops to get a full supply They need it. I think the Americans are also doing wonders in subduing those vile submarines."



Annie continues to hope for the war's resolution, an expectation she shares with Edith in the summer of 1917:

"Altho nearly three years of awful warfare has passed, yet surely it cannot go on a great while longer, I am thankful the Americans have come forward so (s)plendidly! That fine, brave man, Lord Kitchener, said--Three years--I trust his forecast may be realized. But on; the slaughter & suffering & seperation (sic) of those three years. Only yesterday I received a photo of one of the dearest lads, who was killed on June the 9th, He had been away over two years, and was home on leave about Xmas time, he came with his Mother & Sister (all dear people) one afternoon, after tea; Nettie played and he sang, such a nice voice, He was a Christian lad, belonged to the Baptist bible class, Now he is gone. I wrote to his mother, who is broken hearted, and said our boys had passed all suffering, and were both safe, At Home, Entered in to the Joy of their Lord. Sweetest comfort. I heard of another lad yesterday, who was engaged to a girl in the Foulon, but I didn't really know him, he too, killed. the flower of our country are being swept away."

Annie grows used to the privations at home, and her resourcefulness prevents her from feeling sorry for herself: "It seems that week by week, things are a half penny or penny more. It must make it hard living where there are a lot of children, and really I have learnt several economies since the war, one has to, but we have had sufficient, and enjoyed it with thankful hearts. We economise mostly in meat, for it is very scarce (The troops need it) and the price more than double. Bacon--green they call it, is 1/8 per pound. I have bought it at 6 or 8. I am keeping a few rabbits. I told you the early potatoes were rather a failure, but it seems they were very late & needed more time, for now they are yielding very fine tubers. And the tomatoes are a splendid crop, fetching excellent prices, Many say they never taste tomatoes like those which Dad grows, he is well up to his work & knows just what dressings to use, then they are so fine & abundant." Relatively safe in their island retreat, they are mindful of danger elsewhere, as the German zeppelin raids on London continue: "Amy sent us a wire, 'All safe here' as it was in the best part of London where she lives. The West-End. I felt most thankful to know," Annie reassures Edith.

These family letters "bridge the distance" between Edith and her husband's English family and, in Annie's words "bring us very near each other." In their communication they can share their grief and find mutual solace. By November 1917, Edith, who has been living with her parents since Lloyd's hospitalization shortly after Alice's birth, sells the house she shared with Lloyd. The next year sees even more changes for the family: the war ends in November 1918, and Nettie is "demobilised," returning home to Guernsey; in 1919; Annie travels to London to see her cousins, spending time with Amy visiting Westminster Abbey,

and taking tea at Selfridge's department store; Lloyd's father, Charles, is taken ill and must give up working. The Christmas photograph of Alice wearing her pretty dress and sash, a tiny ring on her finger, brightens the Soper household. But at the end of February 1920, Charles Soper dies. Just before his death, he chooses a Bible to send to little Alice, now a little more than three years old, as Annie recounts:

"I am so pleased, he really chose it himself & handled it, only the day before he died,... "I will get my friend Mr. Brodie, to print our darling Alice's name in it from Grandpa Soper, & put the date of his death, & send it to you for her as soon as this sad time is over. I know you will take care of it until she is old enough to value it, but let her see it from time to time so that she may remember the dear Grandpa, who so loved her dear daddy, and who thought so much of you & our one & only little Granddaughter. He has been so proud of her photos & liked me to show them to all the friends who came."

Finally, in October 1920, Annie writes in response to a letter announcing Edith's decision to marry again, a prospect she accepts, characteristically, with open heart: "I am sure Mr. Ashby will have a good wife in you dear, & I hope little Alice will be quite happy, but she will miss the friends & the busy household at first and I am (sure) your parents,..."

The Sopers knew they were living through a historical period of great significance and human interest, as well as one marked by great change in their personal lives. They saw the world around them altered, and they recorded those events, large and small, with insight, fortitude, and considerable narrative skill. But they could not have known that the letters they wrote to a bereaved Iowa widow and her baby more than 85 years ago would have value to people researching the war years at Luther College today. When Alice Soper Shaw acquired the letters sent to her mother and saved them, perhaps she was acknowledging the gift of affection her grieving English family extended to her. Her gift to future generations of researchers is the letters' living testimony to the thoughts and aspirations of people surviving World War I with courage, dignity, and no small share of curiosity. Thanks to Bob and Becky Shaw of Des Moines, and John and Kate Shaw (who carefully transcribed the letters) of Denver, Colorado, researchers can use the original documents in the Luther College Archives. Readers will be surprised at how well emotions and perspectives from the early twentieth century communicate to us today, how close the currents of our lives still run.

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