

Reflections on a Life

George Matheson paints a picture of his grandparents' life through letters and diaries and memorabilia left in an attic so long ago



Wedding portrait from 1912 of Clifford and Catherine Loney, and portrait (right) from 1950. (Courtesy of author)

For as long as I can remember, a 1912 wedding photo has sat on the mantle. While I had always known that it was of my grandparents, I'd never grasped that this young couple was actually them. By the time I knew them, it was the 1950s; they were an elderly couple approaching the end of their life together.

It's just the way life works — generation follows generation — making it impossible for any of us to get to meet our ancestors as they were when they were young.

Illustrating a Life

When I was a boy, my grandfather was a well-respected Baptist

minister. I remember him as a wiry, dynamic man in a frock coat and stiff celluloid collar preaching hellfire sermons, saying grace at the table — always looking spirited and vibrant. My grandmother was simply the minister's wife. I remember her as a weary, squat, wrinkled woman working in the kitchen — cooking for the family or for unexpected guests my grandfather brought home.

She died in 1960 and, in 1966, he was buried beside her. I'd said my good-byes. But recently I had a rare chance to meet them again and, this time, to get to know them as they were back then — when their life together was just beginning.

Treasure in the Attic

That happened because my grandmother had carefully packed away, in the attic, her wedding gown, newspaper clippings about their wedding, her diaries from 1910, 1911 and 1912, memorabilia from their honeymoon trip (a trans-Atlantic voyage right after the Titanic sank), and the letters they'd written to each other, and to friends and relatives, during their courtship and around the time of their wedding.

Whether she'd kept it to preserve her own memories or with some premonition that a century later it would be found by a descendent in whose mind she and her beloved Clifford would come to life again as the passionate young people they once were, we'll never know.

But, perhaps it was not entirely by chance that, as their 100th anniversary approached, we came across all this material.

The Story

They met when my grandfather, Clifford Loney, became the young pastor of the church in the village of Stouffville, Ontario where she, Catherine Ratcliff, was the daughter of a prominent member of the congregation.

In 1910, Catherine, in her diary, makes her first references to Clifford:

*“stayed for tea”,
“was at prayer meetings,”
“brought me candies,”
“took me skating,”
“we went for a long walk.”*

On January 2, 1911, she writes: *“I am ashamed when I think of the jealous passion that took possession of me this morning as I saw M [her sister Margaret] with C’s arm around her...”*

A month later (on February 3, 1911) she writes: *“Wrote my first letter to Clifford.”* And that was the start of it — the correspondence between them, the 238 letters that allowed me not only to glimpse their everyday lives but also to listen in on their private conversations.

It felt strange at first to be imagining these two, with their conservative upbringing, interacting as besotted young people. Yet Clifford writes: *“...if you’ll just come into my arms and let me whisper into your heart by way of ear and mouth both at once, you would understand how I feel.”* And Catherine replies: *“O Darling, come and take me in your arms and love me to sleep.”* And later: *“I want so much to feel your arms around me. I just long for you every minute.”*

At times Clifford, like Catherine, has his fits of jealousy. As a private duty nurse, Catherine would care for patients in their homes. One patient, enamoured by her, asked if he might call on her and, because the young couple had promised to “tell each other everything,” she tells Clifford. He’s furious and intimates that she may have encouraged this or even been unfaithful to which she replies: *“I know you think your suspicions*

of nurses correct and I can never convince you of your mistake... I am sorry that one particular patient was so foolish as to care for me for I know that he suffered for it.”

At other times, her nursing experiences are recounted and accepted more lightheartedly: *“Well sweetheart, I have a peach of a patient. He just got through kissing my arm. Just by good luck it wasn’t my face. He could give you some lessons in lovemaking. He always calls us darling or Dearie and is just as apt to punch our face the next minute. He is clean crazy.”*

When their friendship moves from courtship toward engagement, Clifford must write to Catherine’s father asking for her hand in marriage. Several drafts show the importance he attaches to phrasing this request properly. He finally writes: *“I hereby take the liberty of writing to you in reference to a very important matter. You are quite familiar with the facts concerning the friendship which has existed between Catherine and myself for some considerable time. This most delightful friendship has been growing stronger and stronger until I have been irresistibly led to ask Catherine to share life with me which I am glad to say she has kindly and gladly expressed her willingness to do.”* In his lengthy reply, her father says: *“I certainly have much pleasure in granting to you my consent to such a union.”* In a separate letter her mother cautions; *“My only fear is that Bess (her nickname) will not fulfill your expectations. She is very reserved and very sensitive and gives herself and others needless trouble on this account.”*

As the wedding day approaches, Catherine expresses her love for Clifford both as a

man and as a preacher — promising to assist him in doing “God’s work.”

In her last letter to him before the wedding (June 24, 1912), she writes excitedly: *“... just the day after tomorrow Lover. I am not shaking yet, are you? Am anxiously awaiting your letter tonight. This will be my last to you and I guess the last to anyone under this name.”* And she signs it: *“Catherine Ratcliff.”*

On the eve of their wedding, Clifford replies: *“I was more than delighted to receive such a lovely letter from you yesterday. I have every confidence in the little girl who can write such a beautiful letter. I appreciate very much dear the expression of your confidence (in me.) I hope that you never have occasion to feel otherwise... I am glad that you are not feeling nervous over Wednesday. I am feeling a little that way today but hope it wears off before tomorrow. Just think of it as our last day in Single Blessedness...Just think of it Lover! Tomorrow night you’ll be... (provocatively left blank). And a week from today we’ll be an old married couple....”*

Two days later, they are married; he in his frock coat, she in her delicate, hand-sewn “gown of white Duchess Satin with pearl trimmings” made to fit a slender girl with a 20 inch waist. She was truly, as he liked to call her, his “little girl” and he was, as she often called her “little boy.”

Now, whenever I glance at that wedding photo on the mantle, I see them not only as ancestors, but also as young people in love and remember them that way. ■

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