

“Close together, though
miles and miles apart”:
Family, Distance, and Emotion in the
Letters of the Taylor Sisters, 1881-1921

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This paper analyses a web of correspondence that connected five sisters in three countries over almost 60 years. Born in Kingston, Canada West, between 1851 and 1861, Elizabeth (Lizzie), Anna, Caroline (Carrie), Jane, and Susanna (Susie) Taylor spent much of their lives on the move between diverse parts of North America. In 1882 Susie moved to Iceland, where she remained for the rest of her life. The letters she received from her sisters document the evolution of their relationships as time and distance rendered their separation permanent and provide insights into the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of female kin living in widely differing social and economic circumstances. The deeply personal nature of many of the letters suggest ways in which the sisters attempted to push at the edges of the medium available to them to preserve a sense of emotional connection.

L'auteur analyse ici les lettres que se sont échangées pendant près de 60 ans cinq sœurs établies dans trois pays. Nées à Kingston (Canada-Ouest) entre 1851 et 1861, Elizabeth (Lizzie), Anna, Caroline (Carrie), Jane, and Susanna (Susie) Taylor ont passé une bonne partie de leur vie à se déplacer entre diverses parties de l'Amérique du Nord. En 1882, Susie s'en alla vivre en Islande, où elle demeura le reste de sa vie. Les lettres qu'elle a reçues de ses sœurs rendent compte de l'évolution de leurs relations au fur et à mesure que le temps et la distance rendaient leur séparation permanente; elles donnent aussi une idée des pensées, des sentiments et des expériences de proches parentes vivant dans des conditions sociales et économiques très différentes les unes des autres. Le caractère hautement personnel de bon nombre de lettres laisse entrevoir les moyens par lesquels les sœurs ont tenté de repousser les limites du médium à leur disposition afin de préserver un sentiment de lien affectif.

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LATE ON A January night in 1901, with six of her seven children asleep in bed and the house finally quiet, 44-year-old Caroline Christopherson sat down to write a letter to her youngest sister, 39-year-old Susanna Briem. Carrie and Susie, as they called one another, were born in Kingston, Canada West, to a white Barbadian father and a Scots-Irish mother. Perhaps uniquely for two Canadian sisters of the period, both women had married Icelanders. They had met their husbands while living in New Iceland, a government-sponsored colony for Icelandic immigrants located along the southwestern shore of Lake Winnipeg in what is now Manitoba. Travelling as part of the household of their uncle, John Taylor, the Canadian government's agent in the colony, the sisters were among the original group of New Iceland colonists in 1875. After six eventful years in the colony, Carrie and Susie left New Iceland as married women, and from that point their lives followed quite different trajectories. While Carrie and her husband Sigurður, an enterprising and ambitious farmer, businessman, and local politician, thrived in their new home on the prairies of western Manitoba, Susie and her husband Halldór, an erudite Lutheran pastor, struggled to find a place for themselves in North America. Halldór frequently suffered through bouts of illness that made it difficult for him to carry out his pastoral duties. For a time it seemed as though he might not live. In 1882, with the hope of restoring her husband to health, Susie agreed to accompany Halldór back to Iceland. Although she imagined that this would be a temporary arrangement, the voluntary exile turned out to be permanent; Susie never returned to Canada. Carrie became the matriarch of a large and prosperous farm family, first in Manitoba and later in British Columbia, while Susie found a home in the literary and cultural life of Reykjavík, Iceland's capital, leading a genteel but economically precarious existence and raising only one son to maturity.



Figure 1: Susie Briem (far right) and her son Sigurður Valdimar “Siddie” Briem, Reykjavík, Iceland, 1900. The identities of the three other women in the photograph are unknown. Photo courtesy of Roy Christopherson.

When Carrie wrote to Susie in 1901, the sisters had not seen each other in the flesh for almost 20 years. However, they frequently exchanged photographs, and in her letter Carrie refers to one she had received showing a smiling Susie looking on as her son Sigurður (known affectionately as “Siddie”) dashes away from a posed group photo of Susie and her servant girls (Figure 1). The candid nature of the shot was particularly appealing to Carrie: “[I]t makes me feel that you really are living like the rest of us and that you are like Jane and I no longer a young girl. It does seem good to get a glimpse of you if even it is only an imperfect photo.”¹

As Lenore Davidoff has noted, brothers and sisters are “life’s longest relationship.”² Even when time and distance intervene, the bond between siblings often endures. However, unlike many of the sibling relationships analysed by Davidoff, Carrie, Susie, and their three other sisters—Elizabeth Mehetabel “Lizzie” Lapham Carpenter (b. 1851), Anna Ballard (b. 1854), and Jane Hearn (b. 1859)—were separated from one another for virtually their entire adult lives (Figure 2). Lizzie, a teacher and seamstress, lived in Michigan and later Oregon. The second eldest, Anna, also lived in Michigan, where she and her husband ran a market garden operation supplying the growing city of Lansing. Jane, second youngest to Susie, was settler in Manitoba and Florida and later the animating force behind a furniture store and express delivery service in Toronto. The transnational web of correspondence exchanged among the sisters documents their attempts to maintain relationships formed during their childhood and adolescence, despite the fact that they lived so far apart from one another. Their surviving letters provide insights into the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of female kin living in widely differing social and economic circumstances across a vast swath of the North American continent on both sides of the international boundary. The deeply

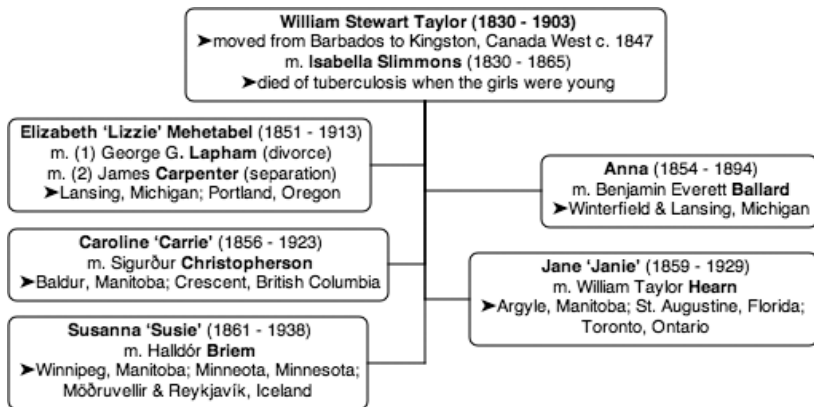


Figure 2: The five surviving daughters of William Stewart Taylor and Isabella Slimmons. All five were born in Kingston, Canada West.

- 1 Landsbókasafn Íslands [National Library of Iceland; hereafter Lbs], Bréfasafn Halldórs og Susie Briem [Halldór and Susie Briem Letter Collection; hereafter 34 NF], Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, January 19, 1901.
- 2 Lenore Davidoff, *Thicker Than Water: Siblings and their Relations, 1780-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 2.

personal content of many of the letters suggests ways in which they attempted to push at the edges of the medium available to them to preserve a sense of intimacy and emotional connection.³ The gaps, silences, ambivalence, and tensions evident in the letters indicate that the sisters in North America were only partially successful in maintaining their sense of connection to one another and to Susie in far-away Iceland.

A Unique Archive

This article is based on 70 letters that Susie received from Carrie and her three other sisters, Lizzie, Anna, and Jane,⁴ between 1878 and 1923. These 70 are part of an extensive collection of 1,817 letters, encompassing more than 210 different correspondents, preserved in the Halldór and Susie Briem Letter Collection at Landsbókasafn, the National and University Library of Iceland. Because Halldór and Susie often lived apart for extended periods of time—he taught school in the north of the country while she lived in Reykjavík in the southeast—approximately one-third of the collection consists of the couple’s correspondence with one another.⁵ Letters from family in North America account for a significant proportion of the letters addressed to Susie that were not from her husband. Authorship of the 70 “sister letters” is unevenly distributed among the siblings. The closer in age a sister was to Susie, the more often she wrote. There are only eleven letters written by Susie’s two eldest sisters, Lizzie and Anna, all before 1900. Middle sister Carrie was initially the most dedicated correspondent, sending at least 30 letters to Iceland between 1880 and 1903 and two more in 1921. Jane (sometimes called “Jennie” or “Janie”), who was closest in age to Susie, probably exceeded Carrie’s output; 27 letters survive for the period 1881 to 1921, but the existence of others beyond what is preserved in the archival collection is hinted at by two letters from Susie to Jane in 1929, the only letters from Susie to one of her sisters that are known to have survived.⁶ It is necessary to recognize that this collection, as extensive as it is, likely represents only a fraction of the letters from her sisters received by Susie Briem during her long residence in Iceland.

The Taylor sisters’ letters add to the relatively thin corpus of personal correspondence written by nineteenth-century Canadian women that has been

3 For a discussion of the development and some of the key debates in the burgeoning field of emotional/affective history, see Nicole Eustace, Eugenia Lean, Julie Livingston, Jan Plamper, William Reddy, and Barbara H. Rosenwein, “AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 117, no. 5 (December 2012), pp. 1487-1531.

4 They also had three half-siblings from their father’s second marriage: William Henry (“Willie”), Herbert Stewart (“Bertie”), and Isabella (“Belle”). These three do not seem to have corresponded extensively with Susie; only two letters from this branch of the family, sent by an adolescent Bertie in the 1880s, have been preserved in the Halldór and Susie Briem collection.

5 There are 336 letters from Halldór to Susie and 260 from Susie to Halldór that cover the period from 1880 to 1907.

6 The two surviving letters are in the possession of Jane Hearn’s descendants in Ontario. Around 2000, Mary Hearn, the wife of Jane Taylor Hearn’s grandson William Rouse Hearn, transcribed Susie’s letters and included them in an unpublished, spiral-bound genealogy and family history, “The Hearn Family Story.” In 2007 Bill Hearn kindly provided me with a copy of the genealogy, which has been of immense help in piecing together the history of the Taylor family and their involvement with the New Iceland colonization project.

preserved in archival collections.⁷ Of the 71 archival collections of letters written by nineteenth-century British immigrants examined by David A. Gerber, women were the sole authors of only nine and the partial authors of five.⁸ Although Susie Briem was the overseas migrant in her family, the letters she received from her sisters share many similarities with the transnational correspondence of British migrants in North America with their kin at home analysed by Gerber, Bruce Elliott, Suzanne Sinke, Jane Errington, and others.⁹ One major similarity is that almost none of Susie's replies to her sisters' letters are known to exist. The collection therefore presents yet another instance in which historians reading the letters are, as Gerber puts it, "tuned in on a one-way conversation."¹⁰ The absence of Susie's voice in the conversation is partially addressed here through an analysis of the letters she sent to her husband Halldór that relay or reflect on information contained in letters from her sisters in North America. "I got a letter from Janie too and she told me that Auntie had lately been on a visit to them and that she Janie had given her a full set of false teeth. I imagine from that that they are getting on rather well as a full set of teeth cost quite a bit."¹¹ These references to family in North America are relatively rare in Susie's and Halldór's correspondence. The reader is therefore left to draw inferences about what the missing letters said based on how the recipient responded to a particular piece of news. However, unlike some of the collections studied by Gerber and others, extensive biographical information about the sisters is available to help reveal the meaning of passages that otherwise might have remained mysterious or seemed insignificant. For instance, Carrie's statement in 1893—"I was very pleased to hear the news that your letter contained and have no doubt but you will have much better health in the future. If all goes well as I hope it will."—takes on much greater significance when paired with the knowledge that Susie was pregnant with her first child at the time.¹²

Another similarity to immigrant letters is the fact that the subject matter of the letters is incredibly diverse. Most deal with quotidian matters: descriptions of weather, work, family life, prevailing economic conditions, and news about friends and relatives. As such, the letters provide a rich description of everyday life for the women at various stages of their lives. In 1889, then 30-year-old Jane reported on the outcome of dental problems she had been complaining of for several years: "I think I told you I had lost my teeth. Well, I have artificial ones

7 Jean Barman's analysis of the 500 letters to and from the McQueen sisters of Nova Scotia and British Columbia being one major exception. See Jean Barman, *Sojourning Sisters: The Lives and Letters of Jessie and Annie McQueen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

8 David Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 6.

9 See Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne Sinke, *Letters Across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Emigrant Worlds and Transatlantic Communities: Migration to Upper Canada in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

10 Gerber, *Authors of Their Lives*, p. 7.

11 Lbs, 34 NF, Susie Briem to Halldór Briem, September 24, 1898.

12 Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, February 3, 1893. See also the published Briem family genealogy, Eggert P. Briem, *Briemsætt: Niðjatal Gunnlaugs Guðbrandssonar Briem, sýslumanns á Grund og konu hans, Valgerðar Árnadóttur* (Reykjavík: Sögustein, 1990), pp. 276-277.

now. Everyone says they look so natural & are a great improvement to me.”¹³ The circumstances in which letters were written are often mentioned. “You must not criticize my writing because I hold baby and a book in one hand and write with the other,” explained Carrie in 1886.¹⁴

The Taylor Family: From West Indian Slave Owners to North American Settlers

For the Taylor family, keeping in touch by post was a regular feature of a decidedly transnational family life.¹⁵ Over the course of the nineteenth century the family moved frequently within and beyond the boundaries of the British Empire, travelling from the West Indies, to Britain, to Canada, and finally to the United States. Branches of the family remained in each of these locations, while others continued on the move. The Taylor sisters’ father, William Stewart Taylor (1830-1903), was born in England but spent his early childhood in Barbados, the youngest of at least 16 children born to Elizabeth Mehetabel Jones and Richard Taylor. William was one of only seven of the couple’s children to survive to adulthood, and only just barely; according to family lore, on two occasions in Barbados William was so ill that a coffin was made for him.¹⁶

The reason for the high rate of infant mortality among the Taylor children is unknown, but poverty was not a contributing factor; the Taylors lived on a 16-acre property called Enmore Cottage on the outskirts of Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados. They were connected to both the military and mercantile community of Bridgetown as well as the planter elite of the island. Richard Taylor held a variety of posts in the Office of the Deputy Commissary General in Barbados for more than 30 years,¹⁷ while Elizabeth Mehetabel Jones came from a prominent planter family who had been in Barbados since the early eighteenth century. Richard and Elizabeth Taylor do not appear to have been proprietors of any large plantations, but they did own slaves. The British government’s slave registers for Barbados in the period 1817 to 1834 show that Richard Taylor was slowly increasing the family’s slave holdings, in part by inheriting slaves from the Jones family. On the eve of Emancipation in 1833, all the members of the family had between them approximately 30 slaves who were mostly involved in domestic service and provisioning.¹⁸ This was quite typical of the more well-to-do urban slave-holders in Barbados.¹⁹ When slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834, Richard

¹³ Lbs, 34 NF, Jane Hearn to Susie Briem, December 29, 1889.

¹⁴ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, December 25, 1885/January 1, 1886.

¹⁵ For more on transnational and trans-imperial family connections, see Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta, eds., *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Laura Mitsuyo Ishiguro, “Relative Distances: Family and Empire between Britain, British Columbia and India, 1858-1901” (PhD dissertation, University College London, 2011); Adele Perry, *Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Hearn, “The Hearn Family Story,” p. 103.

¹⁷ *Barbadian* [Bridgetown, Barbados], July 1, 1840, p. 1.

¹⁸ National Archives of the United Kingdom [hereafter TNA], T71, Office of Registry of Colonial Slaves and Slave Compensation Commission: Records, Barbados, St. Michael Parish, 1817, 1820, 1829, 1832, 1834.

¹⁹ See Pedro L. V. Welch, *Slave Society in the City: Bridgetown, Barbados, 1680-1834* (Kingston, Jamaica:

Taylor received £600 compensation for his “loss of property,” and at least two of the adult children also received compensation for slaves.²⁰ This was slightly larger than the average for such awards, which was about £500.²¹

The Taylor family suffered a series of reverses during the 1830s and 1840s, including the deaths of several children, the destruction of the family home in a major hurricane, and, in 1840, the conviction and three-year imprisonment of William’s brother John for an abortive slave-trading venture in Texas.²² In 1839, as his son’s legal troubles mounted, Richard Taylor attempted to sell his property in Barbados. The family ultimately delayed the move until about 1847, when William, along with his parents and four siblings, relocated to Canada and settled at Ernestown in Lennox and Addington County.

William Stewart Taylor apprenticed as a carpenter and settled in Kingston. In 1851 he married 21-year-old Isabella Slimmons, about whom very little is known.²³ In 1865 the family suffered a profound tragedy that permanently altered their circumstances. Isabella died of tuberculosis at the age of 35, leaving William with five young daughters ranging in age from fourteen to four. The Taylor sisters’ letters make almost no mention of their mother. The one exception is a letter from Carrie to Susie in 1885, expressing concern for her sister’s health: “I was sorry to hear that you had much poor health. You do not say anything about what is the matter with you but I imagine I know. I am afraid you have that dreadful disease that took our own dear mother.”²⁴ Caroline Taylor later described Isabella Slimmons as “a bright and witty mother who met every challenge in making those about her comfortable and happy.”²⁵ This was undoubtedly quite a challenge for the young wife and mother, as she was frequently pregnant during the first ten years of her marriage to William, when all five of the Taylor girls were born. At least two other children, a boy named Richard and a girl named Martha, were also born during that decade but died young.²⁶

Ian Randle Publishers, 2003).

- 20 “Accounts of slave compensation claims; for the colonies of Jamaica, Antigua, Honduras, St. Christopher’s, Grenada, Dominica, Nevis, Virgin Islands, St. Lucia, British Guiana, Montserrat, Bermuda, Bahamas, Tobago, St. Vincent’s, Trinidad, Barbadoes. Mauritius, Cape of Good Hope,” *British Parliamentary Papers*, 1837-1838 (215), p. 171.
- 21 Nick Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-ownership, Compensation and British Society at the End of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 144.
- 22 For more on John Taylor’s turbulent career, see Ryan Eyford, “Slave Owner, Missionary, and Colonization Agent: The Transnational Life of John Taylor, 1813-1884” in Karen Dubinsky, Adele Perry, and Henry Yu, eds., *Within and Without the Nation: Canadian History as Transnational History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).
- 23 She was likely of Scots-Irish ancestry, but it is unclear whether she was born in Canada or migrated from Ireland or the United States. Her father, likely named John, may have been the proprietor of a foundry in Kingston.
- 24 Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, December 25, 1885.
- 25 Lára (Anderson) Christopherson, “Caroline (Taylor) Christopherson’s Diary,” n.d. This unpublished manuscript consists of notes made from a diary kept by Caroline Taylor during the 1870s. Lára (Anderson) Christopherson, wife of Caroline’s grandson John William Christopherson, made the notes sometime during the 1940s, while the diary was in the possession of Caroline’s daughter Sigurveig (“Veiga”) Christopherson Dawe at Crescent Beach, British Columbia. The whereabouts of the original diary is currently unknown. Bob Christopherson of Edmonton kindly provided me with a copy of the manuscript, along with other materials about the Taylor/Christopherson family in his possession.
- 26 See www.christopherson.net/genealogy/familytree/Taylor/TaylorWilliam.html (accessed March 27, 2015).

After Isabella's death William sent the girls to live with his childless brother and sister-in-law, John and Elizabeth Taylor, in Peterborough, Canada West. He then moved across the border to Lansing, Michigan, but returned to Peterborough in 1867 and married an Irish woman named Eliza McNeil. The oldest three girls, Lizzie, Anna, and Carrie, then rejoined their father and his new wife in Michigan. Neither Lizzie nor Anna saw Susie again after this separation.²⁷ Two years later, at age 18, Lizzie married Lansing city assessor George Lapham. In 1874, 20-year-old Anna married farmer Benjamin Everett Ballard and settled in Winterfield Township in central Michigan. For Carrie, a rapidly expanding public education system opened opportunities both to advance her education and to find work as a teacher.²⁸ Carrie was able to attend high school, and then briefly worked as a teacher in the Michigan countryside before quitting out of frustration with the difficult living and working conditions.²⁹ Jane and Susie remained in Peterborough to be raised by their aunt and uncle, whom they came to consider as their adoptive parents. In 1881 Jane wrote, "[N]o father or Mother could be kinder to us than they have been."³⁰ It is unclear whether Jane and Susie attended school in Ontario, but they would have received instruction from their uncle John, who had taught school in the vicinity of Kingston during the 1850s.³¹

The Taylors and New Iceland

In 1874 Carrie travelled from Michigan to Ontario to visit her younger sisters and aunt and uncle, who were by that time living on a homestead in Dysart Township, Haliburton County.³² On the journey, Carrie learned that a group of Icelandic immigrants settled at nearby Kinmount were suffering as a result of widespread unemployment in the region.³³ She brought their case to the attention of her uncle, who in 1875 wrote to Governor General Lord Dufferin asking him to intercede on behalf of the immigrants. Dufferin's staff directed Taylor's letter to the Department of Agriculture, who invited him to form an exploratory party to travel west to locate a suitable site for an Icelandic colony in Manitoba or the North-West Territories.³⁴ Taylor sent a telegram to his brother William stating: "I am on my way to the province of Manitoba or Red River with some Icelanders to [find] some block of land for settlement by them. Can you help me in putting up

27 Lbs, 34 NF, Lizzie Carpenter to Susie Briem, June 1, 1890.

28 For a case study of public education in one northern Michigan town during this period, see Patricia Albjerg Graham, *Community and Class in American Education, 1865-1918* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974).

29 Lára (Anderson) Christopherson, "Caroline (Taylor) Christopherson's Diary," n.d.

30 Lbs, 34 NF, Jane Hearn to Susie Briem, July 30/August 5, 1881.

31 Exactly where or at what level of school Taylor taught is still a mystery. In a biographical article, Taylor's friend Sigtryggur Jónasson said it was a "latinuskóla" which he translated as "College." See Sigtryggur Jónasson, "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor," *Syrpa: Mánaðarrit með myndum*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1920), p. 99.

32 Leopolda z Lobkowicz Dobrzensky, *Fragments of a Dream: Pioneering in Dysart Township and Haliburton Village* (Haliburton, ON: Municipality of Dysart, 1985), p. 229.

33 Lára (Anderson) Christopherson, "Caroline (Taylor) Christopherson's Diary," n.d. See also *Daily Witness* [Montréal], April 8, 1875.

34 Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Department of Agriculture fonds [hereafter RG 17], A-1-1, vol. 131, docket 13750, Taylor to Lord Dufferin, April 12, 1875, included in Harry Moody, Governor-General's Office, to the Minister of Agriculture, April 16, 1875.

their cottages this fall? I will write from Fort Garry?"³⁵ After helping select the "New Iceland" colony site on the shores of Lake Winnipeg, Taylor received an appointment as "Icelandic Agent" with the Immigration Branch of the Canadian Department of Agriculture and began to plan a migration of about 200 Icelanders, mostly families with young children, from Ontario to the Canadian Northwest.³⁶

Taylor was one of the many colonial functionaries in the nineteenth century who used his position to provide opportunities for members of his extended family.³⁷ Carrie, Jane, and Susie accompanied their uncle and aunt to the colony and lived in their house in the new village of Gimli. During the winter of 1875-1876 Carrie served as the colony's first teacher, focusing on helping the young Icelanders attain a working knowledge of English.³⁸ After helping the immigrants construct their cabins, William S. Taylor decided to settle in the colony himself. He claimed a homestead south of Gimli and settled there with his second wife Eliza and their three young children. John's and William's sister Frances, known to the sisters as "Aunt Fanny," later joined them in the colony, as did their nephews and namesakes William and John Hearn, the sons of William's sister Jane, who resided in Ottawa.³⁹

During their time at Gimli, the Taylors kept up an active correspondence with their widely scattered kin. Susie's archive includes four letters from this period written by her older sisters in Michigan. One of the letters demonstrates the strains that the break-up of a marriage could place on sibling relationships. Around 1878 Lizzie separated from her husband George Lapham and was left to care for four young children alone. Anna and her husband Everett took Lizzie and the children in on their farm in Winterfield Township. Everett helped Lizzie get a job teaching in the district, which she told Susie that she liked "first rate."⁴⁰ However, a rift soon opened up between the sisters over Lizzie's relationship with a sawmill worker named James Carpenter. Lizzie had begun secretly corresponding with Carpenter through a mutual friend and was also arranging clandestine meetings under a variety of pretences. When confronted about this by her brother-in-law, Lizzie said that she would marry Carpenter as soon as her divorce from George Lapham was finalized.⁴¹ "It seems that I never saw Everett feel so bad about anything as he did about that," explained Anna. "We sat up that night till after midnight talking it over the four of us. We told them we didn't think it right and asked her to wait till she knew more about him and only meet him as a friend till she had her divorce at

35 Telegram, John Taylor to William Stewart Taylor, July 10, 1875 (the original document is in the private collection of Carol Jarvie, Langley, British Columbia).

36 LAC, RG 17, A-1-2, vol. 1513, p. 3, John Lowe to John Taylor, September 15, 1875.

37 For an overview of the developing literature on imperial families, see Esme Cleall, Laura Ishiguro, and Emily J. Manketow, "Imperial Relations: Histories of Family in the British Empire," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring 2013).

38 Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga* (Winnipeg: Author, 1965), p. 37.

39 Hearn, "The Hearn Family Story," pp. 43-47.

40 Lbs, 34 NF, Lizzie Lapham to Susie Taylor, June 24, 1879.

41 Michigan had relatively liberal divorce laws during this period. For a comparison of laws in Canada to those in the American Midwest, see Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 437-439, 451-454.

least.”⁴² Lizzie and James Carpenter refused to do this and married later in 1880. Anna’s letter to Susie seems to ask for affirmation that they had followed the right course in dealing with the situation, including how they had cared for Lizzie’s children: “We have never knowingly treated her unkindly or unjustly unless in this matter and we have made this a subject of prayer for months. We have tried to do right and if we haven’t we are both very sorry. The children all seem to love us very much. None of them want to leave us.”⁴³ Susie reported the news from her older sisters to Halldór and added her own opinion about the situation: “I heard from my sister Anna last week. She had a good deal to say about Lizzie, and it all makes me feel more and more sorry for I believe that nothing but misery can come of it all and poor Lizzie has had trouble enough in her life already without courting more.”⁴⁴

In the fall of 1880, the Taylors in New Iceland had troubles of their own. The colony had struggled from the very beginning; inadequate housing, a hunger crisis, and a scurvy outbreak in the first winter were followed by a smallpox epidemic in the winter of 1876-1877.⁴⁵ Susie Taylor and other members of the Taylor household contracted smallpox but survived. Agricultural development was slow, markets were distant, and employment virtually non-existent, all of which led to disagreements among the Icelanders over whether or not to abandon the whole enterprise.⁴⁶ In 1878 and 1879 John Taylor employed bellicose rhetoric, including threats of legal action and property seizures, in an attempt to force disaffected settlers to stay.⁴⁷ The departure of the majority of the dissidents for Dakota Territory in 1879 held the promise of resolving the colony’s internal problems, but catastrophic flooding in 1880-1881 convinced even the most determined settlers, including Taylor himself, that there was no choice but to leave. The Taylor household relocated, first to rented accommodations in St. Andrew’s parish on the Red River, and then to new homesteads on the prairies of western Manitoba, where many of the former New Iceland colonists also resettled.

A shared love for their aunt and uncle and the joys and sorrows that attended living in their house at Gimli as Carrie, Jane, and Susie made the transition to adulthood helped forge an enduring bond among the sisters. In a poem written in 1901 Carrie attempted to convey the love that she still had for her sisters, in spite of their long separation:

42 Lbs, 34 NF, Anna Ballard to Susie Taylor, September 5, 1880.

43 *Ibid.*

44 Lbs, 34 NF, Susie Taylor to Halldór Briem, September 17, 1880.

45 For more on this epidemic, see Ryan Eyford, “Quarantined Within a New Colonial Order: The 1876-1877 Lake Winnipeg Smallpox Epidemic,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 17 (2006), pp. 55-78.

46 See Jonas Thor, *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), pp. 110-129.

47 See, for example, his public announcement in the colony’s newspaper, *Framfari*, May 14, 1879, in George Houser, ed. and trans., *Framfari: 1877 to 1880* (Gimli, MB: Icelandic National League of North America, 1986), pp. 565-566.

A useful servant still, my pen will strive to be,
 If I will let it now record,
 My loving thoughts of thee,
 My thoughts are hard to bind, they wander o'er the sea
 I think of you and your dear boy
 and then of sisters three
 We still are close together,
 though miles and miles apart
 The cord will ne'er be severed that binds you to my heart.⁴⁸

Jane thought that, of all five sisters, she and Susie were the closest (Figure 3). In 1922, after 40 years of separation, Jane wrote, “*I love you & know I have your love. We were the only two brought up together & I think the bond was extraordinarily stronger than with the others. You know what I mean, I know.*”⁴⁹

In the letters, discussion of their time in New Iceland is focused primarily on recalling the happy times, especially their marriages in 1877 (Carrie), 1879 (Jane), and 1880 (Susie). By getting to the altar before Susie, Jane was able to collect a prize offered by Canadian Governor General Lord Dufferin during his visit to New Iceland in the summer of 1877. In return for conveying him to his ship in their rowboat, Dufferin promised to send either Jane or Susie, whoever was the first to get married, a copy of his 1859 travel book about Iceland *Letters from High Latitudes*. After receiving the news of Jane’s wedding, Dufferin fulfilled his



Figure 3: Susie (seated) and Jane in Winnipeg c.1880. Photo courtesy of the Hearn family.

⁴⁸ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, January 19, 1901.

⁴⁹ Lbs, 34 NF, Jane Hearn to Susie Briem, February 26, 1922.

promise and also included an autographed photo with his letter.⁵⁰ Susie's sisters often sent her letters to coincide with wedding anniversaries. On December 30, 1888, Jane wrote, "This is the 9th anniversary of our wedding day. How time flies. It seems only the other day that we were all gathered together at dear Uncle's. What changes there has been [*sic*] since then."⁵¹ Indeed, the sisters' life paths diverged sharply after their departure from New Iceland.

Carrie and Sigurður Christopherson

Carrie and her husband Sigurður claimed a homestead that they called "Grund" (Meadow) in what became the Rural Municipality of Argyle in southern Manitoba. When they left New Iceland, 26-year-old Carrie had two young sons, John Sigurður (b. 1877) and William Christopher (b. 1879). Five more children would follow over the next nine years, two boys and three girls, including a son named for Halldór Briem and a daughter named after Susie.⁵² By 1891, through a great deal of labour, both their own and hired, and good fortune, Sigurður and Carrie had built up a mixed-farming operation with a net worth of \$12,000. "Grund" consisted of 110 acres, with fifteen in wheat and five in oats, and they had 20 cattle, six horses, 40 sheep, 20 pigs and eleven chickens.⁵³ Sigurður became a prominent man in the community, a postmaster, school trustee, storekeeper, land dealer, and member of the municipal council.⁵⁴ "Sigurdur is head and ears in Municipal business," Carrie wrote in 1884. "He is also one of the school trustees. His business has kept him travelling around a good deal. He is seldom a day at home."⁵⁵ As time went on, Sigurður appears to have spent the bulk of his time on matters other than farming, as Carrie told Susie in 1888: "Sigurdur does not farm a great deal.... We have to keep a hired man the year round and now that the family is so large I cannot very well do without a good strong girl."⁵⁶ Carrie's husband was also an active member of the Manitoba Liberal party, and those political connections helped him get appointed as an immigration agent to Iceland in the early 1890s. During Sigurður's long absences, Carrie ran the farm, store, and post office at Grund. She frequently told Susie how much the stress and strain of that responsibility placed upon her.⁵⁷

In the first years of the twentieth century, Sigurður, then in his middle-fifties, began to experience failing health. During the winter of 1902-1903 he travelled to the Pacific Coast. Carrie reported to Susie that "he is so pleased with British

50 Public Records Office of Northern Ireland, Dufferin and Ava papers, D1071/H/B/H/320, Mrs. Janie Hearn to Lord Dufferin, March 7, 1880. The story and copies of documents related to it are included in Mary Hearn, "The Hearn Family Story," p. 45.

51 Lbs, 34 NF, Jane Hearn to Susie Briem, December 30, 1888.

52 Halldór Briem Christopherson, born July 17, 1882, and Susan Christopherson, born January 7, 1886. Halldór Briem performed the baptism for his namesake before leaving for Iceland in the summer of 1882. See University of Manitoba Icelandic Collection, Jón Bjarnason and Halldór Briem's Register of Baptisms, Confirmations, Marriages, and Burials, 1876-1882.

53 From data included in Baldwin L. Baldwinson, "Annual Report of Icelandic Immigration" in *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, vol. 5, 2nd sess. 7th Parliament, 1892, pp. 158-159.

54 Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, December 23, 1888.

55 Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, January 27, 1884.

56 Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, December 23, 1888.

57 See, for example, Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, January 1, 1894.

Columbia and Vancouver Island that he is thinking of going there again and spending a couple of months in exploring with a view to settling there.”⁵⁸ This resulted in Carrie’s relocation to British Columbia, where the family settled at Crescent Beach, near White Rock. They remained in British Columbia for the rest of their lives, Sigurður passing away in 1921 and Carrie in 1923.

Jane and William Hearn

Jane and William Hearn initially settled on a homestead called “Prairie Home” not far from Carrie’s and Sigurður’s farm Grund. However, in 1884, after receiving the patent to their land, they moved from Manitoba to Florida as part of yet another Taylor family group migration. In the two years prior to his death in 1884, John Taylor hatched several schemes to resettle his family in a warmer climate, promoting schemes in Jamaica and British Columbia before finally settling on the area around St. Augustine, Florida. Several members of Jane’s husband’s family, who were also her aunts, uncles, and cousins,⁵⁹ relocated there from Ontario. However, the family struggled to get established, and fighting broke out between the older and younger branches. William and Jane relocated to Toronto in 1888 where they established a furniture store at 1369 Queen Street West. In 1901, after a visit to Toronto, Carrie related Jane’s role in the business to Susie, as well as the physical toll years of hard work had taken on their 42-year-old sister:

Janie is the life and soul of the whole establishment. She attends to the housework, attends to the express orders, the telephone, superintends the upholstery and really does a great deal of the work repairing furniture padding and covering chairs, painting, varnishing and all sorts of odd jobs. She makes all the children’s clothes and knits their stockings. It is really surprising the work she does. Still she can scarcely walk more than a block or two on the street.⁶⁰

Jane Hearn died in Toronto in 1929 at the age of 69, making Susie the sole surviving Taylor sister.

Susie and Halldór Briem

Susie, the baby of the family, had a quite different life from that of her four older sisters. Coming to New Iceland at the age of thirteen, she grew to maturity during her six years in the colony. Halldór Briem began courting her when she was fifteen. “Perhaps that is too young to have suitors,” she told a reporter from the *Manitoba Free Press* in 1930, “but I had plenty.”⁶¹ She married Halldór at the

⁵⁸ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, March 12, 1903.

⁵⁹ Jane Taylor and William Taylor Hearn were first cousins. Jane was named for her husband’s mother, Jane Taylor Hearn (1828-1903) and William was named for his wife’s father, William Stewart Taylor.

⁶⁰ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, January 1, 1901.

⁶¹ Alla Johnson, “Susie Briem, Canadian, has Wistful Memories of West after 48 Years in Iceland,” undated clipping, *Manitoba Free Press*, 1930. So far I have been unable to locate the original of this article in either the online archive of the *Winnipeg Free Press* or the associated microfilms. It was probably published in the *Free Press Evening News Bulletin*. Taylor family descendant Roy Christopherson has posted a scan of the clipping on his website: http://www.christopherson.net/genealogy/photo/3000/IMG_SCAN_3354a.b.c.e_SusieBriem.jpg (accessed February 24, 2015).

age of nineteen. At the time of their marriage, Halldór was a recently ordained pastor serving Lutheran congregations in New Iceland that were rapidly shrinking due to out-migration. He had had a tumultuous career as editor of the colony's newspaper *Framfari* (The Progressive), which embroiled him in all the religious and political controversies that convulsed the struggling colony.⁶² The couple lived for a time in Winnipeg, and then in the Icelandic community in Minneota, Minnesota. Throughout that time Halldór's health was continually poor due to some unspecified ailment. In 1882 the couple decided to make the move to Iceland in hopes of restoring Halldór's health. He obtained a position as a teacher in the school at Möðruvellir near Akureyri in northern Iceland. Susie at first lived with her father and mother-in-law on their farm, Reynistaðir, and sent home descriptions of her new life to her aunt and uncle Taylor, who forwarded them to the *Manitoba Free Press*. They were published in a three-part series called "Letters from Iceland by a Winnipeg lady."⁶³

Later, the couple made a permanent home in Reykjavík. Halldór went north to teach at Möðruvellir during the school year, while Susie stayed behind, an arrangement that resulted in prolonged periods of separation. Carrie intensely disapproved and frequently questioned her sister about it: "You must feel very lonesome all the time without Halldor. I do not understand how you can endure it all."⁶⁴ It seems that Susie coped with this circumstance in part by surrounding herself with a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. During her many years in Reykjavík, Susie Briem participated actively in the intellectual and cultural life of the capital. She wrote poetry in English, corresponded with many English visitors to the island, and authored a translation of the Icelandic national anthem that was praised by its original composer, poet Mattias Jochumsson. She worked in the administration of the home economics school in Reykjavík and kept the books for the Icelandic Agricultural Society. Eggert Briem described Susie as "one of the most learned, best read, and most intellectual ladies I have ever known."⁶⁵ Susie Briem died in Reykjavík on December 29, 1938, at the age of 77.

Epistolary Emotions

The Taylor sisters' long separation generated the letter archive documenting their relationship at a distance. While the letters contain many expressions of affection and love, numerous tensions are also evident, including over Susie's residence in Iceland. The other sisters seem more or less to have expected that Susie would never return. In 1883 Carrie reported, "You would have laughed at the letter in which Anna spoke of your journey to Iceland. It was almost as though she had heard of your death she said. Instead of gaining a brother by your marriage she had lost a sister.... She never expects to hear of you again."⁶⁶ If there was to be a reunion, it would most likely occur in the hereafter. Jane wrote, "[W]e may never

⁶² See Thor, *Icelanders in North America*, pp. 110-129.

⁶³ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, November 11, 1882, p. 9; March 19, 1883, p. 5; April 10, 1883, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, January 1, 1894.

⁶⁵ Susie Briem's obituary, *Morgunblaðið*, January 7, 1938, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, February 4, 1883.

meet again perhaps. It makes me feel so lonesome and sad but I know that we both have the hope of meeting in that Better Land where there will be no more parting.”⁶⁷ Of all the sisters, Carrie had the best chance of meeting Susie again in the land of the living. In 1896 she mentioned the possibility of travelling to Iceland in 1900 along with Sigurður, who was at that time working as an emigration agent for the Manitoba government, but this trip never materialized.⁶⁸ Sigurður did visit Susie in 1900 and brought along his and Carrie’s son Halldór (known as “Dori”), who stayed with his aunt and young cousin Siddie during the summer of 1900. Susie reported the visit to her husband: “Sigurður is staying at Hotel Reykjavík, but Dori is staying with me. He sleeps on the sofa. I am sure Siddie will miss him very much when he goes away, for Dori plays with him and tells him stories. I do like to hear Siddie speak english [*sic*] to someone else besides myself. Dori is a little fellow for his age. He resembles Carrie very much in expression and manners.”⁶⁹ On at least one occasion, Carrie had an individual travelling to Iceland hand-deliver a letter to Susie. “It seems to shorten the distance between us when our friends are going back and forth,” Carrie asserted.⁷⁰

On a few occasions, Carrie offered subtle encouragement for Susie and Halldór to join one of the groups of emigrants that Sigurður was busy organizing. She highlighted the growth and development of the Icelandic immigrant community and referred to the unfulfilled demand for Icelandic Lutheran pastors in the settlements:

I suppose Halldor feels more at home in Iceland among his people and he has better opportunities there than here. There is certainly a great need of more Icelandic Ministers here. But none of them seem inclined to leave Iceland. Of course the Icelanders have improved a great deal in circumstances since you went to Iceland and a great many of them have risen to positions of trust and affluence. A great many of the younger ones have received good educations and they now feel that as a class they stand as well as any other nationality in this country.⁷¹

Carrie, who was well-aware on the difficulties faced by the Icelandic farmers and farm labourers during the 1880s and 1890s, sometimes found it difficult to conceal her contempt for Susie’s adopted home, which she on one occasion referred to as “that horrid place you live in.”⁷² This disdain for Iceland, in combination with her heavy responsibilities at Grund, likely explains why Carrie chose not to accompany Sigurður on one of the many trips he took to his homeland.

Carrie believed that Susie, having married into a relatively wealthy Icelandic family, was living a life of privilege that insulated her from the difficult circumstances faced by most Icelanders. “We hear of hard times in all parts of

⁶⁷ Lbs, 34 NF, Jane Hearn to Susie Briem, November 14, 1888.

⁶⁸ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, March 25, 1896.

⁶⁹ Lbs, 34 NF, Susie Briem to Halldór Briem, April 3, 1900.

⁷⁰ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, March 25, 1896.

⁷¹ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, August 18, 1892.

⁷² Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, February 3, 1893.

poor Old Iceland. You say nothing of it in your letter.”⁷³ In response to a letter from Susie describing an excursion through the volcanic district Mývatnsveit, Carrie chided her sister for her leisured ways: “I think you have a very free easy time. I am sure I would have enjoyed the trip to Myvatn with you very much.”⁷⁴ In reality, from what little of her writing is available, it seems that Susie was aware that her social position was atypical of the experience of the majority of Icelanders in the 1880s, when cold temperatures dramatically reduced the yield of forage crops needed for sheep raising, the mainstay of the Icelandic agricultural economy. In one of her letters to the *Free Press* Susie reflected on how hard life was for farming people in Iceland: “There is nothing like a famine at present, but the people have been obliged to kill off so many of their sheep because they had not hay enough to feed them. The hard times will come next year, and many will be glad to get away and come to America.”⁷⁵

In contrast to Carrie’s multi-faceted disapproval of Iceland and Susie’s lifestyle there, Lizzie and Anna, after getting over the initial shock of the news, were intrigued by their sister’s residence in such a strange, far-away country. They saw Iceland as a mysterious and exotic place and asked Susie to send detailed descriptions of life there.⁷⁶ “There are so many things I want to ask,” wrote Anna. “I think I will send you a list of questions as they do in school. How do you dress? How do they build and arrange the houses? What sorts of wood grow there? Have you any English-speaking friends? Have you any Manufactory in Iceland? Are you ever homesick?”⁷⁷ Anna asked such questions in part to satisfy the curiosity of friends and neighbours. Several nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, and cousins also wrote to Susie wanting to know something of what it was like to live in Iceland.

One of the most common sources of tension between Carrie and Susie was over the frequency of letter writing. In 1886 Carrie wrote, “Oh! I forgot to give you a good scolding for the lame excuse you made for not writing me. You said you did not write because I owed you a letter. You ought to consider that my leisure moments are fewer than yours. Don’t you think so?”⁷⁸ Carrie assumed that Susie, who had no children before 1893, should have plenty of time to write letters and frequently chided her sister for not writing more often. “It is awful to think how lazy you are to write. I am sure you would never write a line if you had half a dozen children.”⁷⁹ In both of these examples, the boundary between playful teasing between siblings and something unthinking, insensitive, or even malicious in tone or intent is difficult to determine. On one occasion Carrie indicated that perhaps her complaints about the frequency of Susie’s writing had gone too far: “I wrote you a letter a few days ago but on reading it over I thought I had been unkind to speak as I did about the long time that often elapses between your letters. How

⁷³ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, December 25, 1885.

⁷⁴ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, December 23, 1888.

⁷⁵ *Manitoba Daily Free Press*, April 10, 1883, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Lbs, 34 NF, Lizzie Carpenter to Susie Briem, March 3, 1890.

⁷⁷ Lbs, 34 NF, Anna Ballard to Susie Briem, June 29, 1890.

⁷⁸ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, January 1, 1886.

⁷⁹ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, April 21, 1889.

do I know but you might be lying on a bed of sickness and yearning for one of your sisters to minister to your wants or wishing for only a few short lines from one of us.”⁸⁰

The problem of how to read the letters, and how to interpret the dynamics of Carrie’s and Susie’s relationship in particular, also arises around the topic of children. Carrie had a large family, while Susie had only one son. Susie did not have her first child until she had been married for eleven years. From Carrie’s comments on the subject, it is likely that Halldór and Susie either had problems conceiving or carrying a pregnancy through to term and that Susie shared her feelings on the subject with her sisters. In 1885, Carrie wrote, “Dear Sister you seem to feel rather sad at the idea of having no little ones, but tho I think it quite natural still it would be hard to have them & not have health to take care of them.”⁸¹ In subsequent years Carrie constantly reminded Susie of the care and attention required by young children: “You said in one of your letters that you did not envy me anything except the children. I think with your poor health it is a blessing you have not my six. You would not have much time for amusement or reading if you had.”⁸²

When Susie did finally give birth to a child in 1893, the infant died after only five months. Carrie tried to console her sister through an appeal to faith: “I hope by this time your wounded heart will be reconciled to God’s will. All our trials are sent for some good purpose although we cannot sometimes understand the ways of the Lord.”⁸³ Susie relayed Carrie’s sentiments to Halldór: “[Carrie] sympathised most heartily with us in our sorrow. They have till this time been allowed to keep all their children.”⁸⁴

Ultimately, all five of the sisters experienced the death of a child, the news of which was transmitted in the letters. The letters thus contain many touching statements of grieving and condolence around the deaths of children. Carrie was the last to go through this experience; in 1901, Carrie’s eleven-year-old daughter Lilja, the youngest Christopherson child, died of appendicitis. Just as she had done when reflecting on the death of Susie’s first child, Carrie interpreted the event as an expression of God’s will and consoled herself with her daughter’s faith and purity and innocence of spirit:

Everything that was in our power was done for her, but God knows best, and we have the consolation that she was such a pure innocent child, and that she loved God and trusted in him. She asked the nurse to kiss her Goodbye and told her she was going to God. You two know how broken-hearted we feel. Still I thank God for having lent her to us for these years and the memory of her short sweet life will always awaken the best and most noble thoughts. Our Dear baby girl although she

⁸⁰ Lbs, 34 NF, Caroline Christopherson to Susie Briem, August 18, 1892.

⁸¹ Lbs, 34 NF, Caroline Christopherson to Susie Briem, September 25, 1885.

⁸² Lbs, 34 NF, Caroline Christopherson to Susie Briem, December 23, 1888.

⁸³ Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, September 30/October 21, 1893.

⁸⁴ Lbs, 34 NF, Susie Briem to Halldór Briem, November 28, 1893.

was eleven years old she had the loving innocent face of a little child, was so modest and confiding, not with any of the airs that some little girls of her age assume.⁸⁵

The injunction to resign oneself to God's will is a frequent refrain in the sisters' letters when painful topics were discussed, including their long separation. "It does seem dreadful that you should have to live in that far distant country so long," Carrie wrote. "Still I suppose you feel just like an Icelander and then people easily become accustomed to many things. There is no doubt that God who guides us knows best what each one of us needs."⁸⁶

The issue of distance is ever present in the letters. Jane and Carrie at various times expressed discouragement at the vast distances that separated them. In 1882 Jane wrote, "You must forgive me for not writing sooner. It is not for want of thought or love for you, you know that but I am so busy all the time. How often I think of you in far off Iceland & it makes me feel sad to think how far apart we are."⁸⁷ In 1884 Carrie wrote, "You are so far away from us all that it scarcely seems worthwhile writing to you."⁸⁸ A few years later she reflected, "It seems so far away to Iceland that I can only think that far just as if I was dreaming."⁸⁹

Jane, in particular, lamented the distance, the barriers it created, and the inadequacy of the written word for relating emotion. "Writing is a poor way of carrying ones thoughts & feelings. I wish I could see you face to face & have a good long 'gossip' like in 'time as is gone,' but God knows what is best for us all and [He] will unite us again if it is his will."⁹⁰ This type of refrain became increasingly common in the letters as the women grew older. It reflects both the deep religiosity of their upbringing and an expression of consolation; one day they would all be reunited in the hereafter, as long as they remained on the path of virtue:

I rec'd your dear kind letter long ago & have made up my mind many times to settle down and answer it, but that is almost impossible with my noisy little brood. Tonight they are all asleep and Willie is out so I just feel like having a good chat with you my very own dear sister. I get to thinking of you so far away & that we may never meet again perhaps. It makes me feel so lonesome and sad but I know that we both have the hope of meeting in that Better land where there will be no more parting, if our minds were more taken up with these things how much easier it would be to bear with the crosses & trials of this earthly scene.⁹¹

As the years wore on, the epistolary link between the sisters became increasing attenuated. After writing several letters a year from the time of Susie's departure for Iceland in 1882 up to 1901, Carrie appears to have stopped writing altogether around 1906, only re-establishing contact in 1921, two years before her death. The

85 Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, December 31, 1901.

86 Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, January 19, 1901

87 Lbs, 34 NF, Jane Hearn to Susie Briem, December 3, 1882.

88 Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, October 19, 1884.

89 Lbs, 34 NF, Carrie Christopherson to Susie Briem, August 18, 1892.

90 Lbs, 34 NF, Jane Hearn to Susie Briem, September 30, 1881.

91 Lbs, 34 NF, Jane Hearn to Susie Briem, November 14, 1888.

reason for the long silence is unclear, but it is certain that the silence was deliberate on Susie's part, not simply a gap in the archival record. In a 1929 letter to one of her nephews, Susie wrote, "I do not suppose that you can ever understand how anyone as home sick for her own people as I have been and am, could deliberately shut the door of communication with those she loved and longed for, out of sheer stubborn pride."⁹²

The exact reason for Susie choosing to cut off communication is unknown. One possible explanation is that there was some dispute between the sisters over the administration of their father's estate in Manitoba. In 1906 Susie reported to Halldór that Carrie had written to her to ask for a power-of-attorney in order to sell a farm that William S. Taylor had left to the children of his first marriage.⁹³ Susie acceded to the request, but her tone and attitude regarding the matter changed the following month after receiving a letter from Jane, who had refused to grant power-of-attorney to Carrie: "She [Jane] said that she had written that it was a strange thing that we should not hear anything about our father's will until two and a half years after his death, and I think too that it was very strange, especially when I had written of my surprise and dissatisfaction at the children of the first marriage having been altogether forgotten or passed over in favor of the second wife's children."⁹⁴ However, whether or not this was the central issue that caused a cessation of regular correspondence between Susie and the others from 1906 to the early 1920s is unclear. What can be said with certainty is that the sisters' correspondence resumed toward the end of their lives, and Susie was very glad for it. "Your mother's letters," she told Jane's son Percival after his mother's death, "have been such a comfort to me, and I have felt her love enwrap me with a sense of spiritual courage."⁹⁵

Conclusion

By the time Susie Briem wrote those lines, all four of her sisters had passed away. They had been separated for many years, and their lives had followed quite different trajectories, but clearly a strong bond remained, cultivated and maintained by the exchange of letters. These kinds of letters, if they survive, and if they are available to researchers, provide an incredibly rich window into the dynamics of sibling relationships, but also present numerous problems and complexities. On one hand, they tell us a great deal about how Lizzie, Anna, Carrie, and Jane felt about their sister in Iceland. They wanted to know about her life, her circumstances, and her hopes for the future. They also wanted to convey their love for Susie and express the hope that one day they would all be reunited in the hereafter. On the other hand, the letters are a one-sided conversation; since so few of Susie's letters survive, it is difficult to know how she responded to her sisters' letters, especially those from Carrie that seem cruel or insensitive. Did Carrie's comments

⁹² Susie Briem to Percival Hearn, June 5, 1929, included as an appendix in Hearn, "The Hearn Family Story."

⁹³ Lbs, 34 NF, Susie Briem to Halldór Briem, March 25, 1896.

⁹⁴ Lbs, 34 NF, Susie Briem to Halldór Briem, April 18, 1906. None of the original letters from Carrie or Jane relating to William S. Taylor's estate have been preserved in the Halldór and Susie Briem Letter Collection.

⁹⁵ Susie Briem to Percival Hearn, June 5, 1929, included as an appendix in Hearn, "The Hearn Family Story."

about issues such as her sister's difficulty bearing children leave Susie burning with resentment toward her older sister, or did Susie respond in kind? Did Susie's description of her cultured life in Iceland come off as snobbish and aloof to a farm woman with heavy family and business responsibilities? Is the seemingly harsh tone of some of Carrie's letters reflective of a combative but affectionate relationship between older and younger siblings, or was this ultimately the reason for the break in the sisters' correspondence? In the absence of Susie's letters, such questions are exceedingly difficult to answer and point to the broader problem of interpretation that results when one is working with letters that represent only fragments of conversations and provide imperfect lenses into complex family relationships.