

Laura M. Kephart's Letter to Leonard W. Kephart

19 February 1929

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Transcribed and Edited by Galena Mosovich

ENGL 618: Research Methods in English
Professor Brian Gastle
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Introduction to the Series

This transcription and its attendant annotations, explanatory material, and bibliography were prepared by students in ENGL 618: Research Methods in English, the required gateway class for the MA in English degree program at Western Carolina University (WCU). The learning outcomes for this class include the following:

1. Conduct appropriate, effective, and ethical scholarship.
 - a. Effectively find and use advanced research tools (handbooks, databases, guides, bibliographies, etc.) appropriate to a subject.
 - Students will be able to use a wide variety of such tools and evaluate those tools.
 - b. Find appropriate advanced research (print and electronic scholarship) and apply that research to specific disciplinary questions or issues.
 - Students will be able to find a variety of scholarship, evaluate both the appropriateness and rigor of that scholarship, and incorporate that scholarship correctly and effectively.
 - c. Develop accurate bibliographies and reference citations.
 - Students will be able to annotate, abstract, and cite materials following standard MLA format.

2. Understand the process by which the texts we use are made available.
 - Students will be able to conduct basic editorial work and evaluate the editorial work of others.

All work is presented as submitted by graduate students. While they take great care with their transcriptions and annotations, errors are possible. As they learn throughout this class, good scholarship requires meticulous research and corroboration by authoritative sources. Our objective is to provide transcriptions and annotations of WCU's Special Collections materials that will be useful to the institution, students, scholars, patrons, and all users of our library's resources.

Introduction to the Letter

The following is a transcription of a letter from Horace Kephart's wife, Laura Mack Kephart, to her son, Leonard. The original is dated Feb. 19, 1929. Within this letter, Laura discusses attending a baby shower in Michigan with her daughter Cornelia, her 67th birthday celebration, an experience at church and reading an article in the *Liberty* magazine, and the criticism she and her son have for Kephart's most recent manuscript.

The overall themes of the letter include the physical and mental troubles of aging, current events (politics/religion), the winter weather, and her husband's fiction draft. Depending on the topic, Laura's tone ranges from casual and humorous to sorrowful, sarcastic, and self-deprecating.

Without naming the work, Laura is referring to *Smoky Mountain Magic*, a fictional tale written by Kephart from 1920 to 1929 (the year Laura wrote this letter) that was ultimately rejected by his publisher. His family stowed the manuscript away until the Great Smoky Mountain Association published it in 2009 with the help of Kephart's great-granddaughter, Libby Kephart Hargrave ("Horace Kephart descendant to read from Park advocate's novel"). Neither Laura nor their son, Leonard, were fans of this book. As she says in her letter: "I am disappointed in the plot. It is fairly moth eaten, and he surely did not need, with all the material he had, to have it that."

Laura also divulges why she thinks her husband fell in love with her ("because I was different from any girl he had known") and then says this infatuation eventually morphed into irritation ("he felt other folks would call me 'queer'"). This is an interesting choice of words because the word queer held an ambiguous meaning during this time.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has identified uses of ‘queer’ to mean strange as early as the 1500s, although back then it did not relate to a person's gender or sexuality,” according to Jessica Stern, the executive director of LGBT advocacy group Outright International. “During the period between the 1890s and 1920s, the term began to be used scornfully to describe gay or effeminate men, lesbian or manly women, and probably transgender people who didn't neatly conform to expectations about who a woman or man should be. (Gander)

Laura goes on to express that her health is ailing, and she writes that her arm is causing the most trouble. She admits she would go to the doctor every day if she could afford it and expresses her stubbornness/pride as she says the C’s (unidentified name) offered to pay for it—and quaffs in the same sentence. She invokes a version of the biblical proverb, “the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak,” which in her words is, “the ghost is agreeable but the meat is not able.”

This letter would be of great interest to Kephart scholars who are involved in research on his fiction writing, his family, and his nonfiction as well. Laura’s thoughts and feelings in her note shed light on her husband’s composition process, and this letter makes it clear that she played a significant role in editing his works and guiding him through revisions in the past. This might be a testament to Laura’s grandfather’s intellectual influence; he was the founder of *The Ithaca Journal*, and coincidentally, his name was also Horace (Lowery). The letter might also pique the interest of those who are intrigued by the couple’s separate lives (B. Kephart). Laura’s letter, written nearly three decades after they moved away from each another, is a testament to their commitment, albeit an unconventional one, to their relationship.

Editorial Statement

A diplomatic edition reports the text of a single, usually unique and usually notable document with as little editorial intrusion as possible, according to Erik Kelemen, (109). The transcription of this letter is in line with the framework set forth by a diplomatic edition in that the emphasis is on persevering the exact words and punctuation of the text to maintain its authenticity. Any obvious errors in the text, including spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and other features appear as they do in the manuscript. This edition follows MLA 8th Edition formatting, employs page breaks to signal the end of each page of the letter, attempts to manipulate paragraph indentations and some spacing (based on Word document capabilities) that are as close to the original as possible in the layout, and uses footnotes for the reader to quickly access supplemental information. The text is double-spaced to make it easy to read.

Laura Kephart's writing appears to be done with a fountain pen. Her penmanship seems normal for her age, but there are areas where fatigue seems to set in. She is a big fan of dramatic indents and using the plus (+) symbol in place of "and." For continuity in this transcription project, the plus (+) symbols appear as ampersands (&). Her lowercase *f* and *p* can look similar, as well as her lowercase *m* and *n*. There are a couple strikethroughs as well.

The physical letter itself is written on thin, off-white/yellowish note paper. There are three separate pieces of paper: 1) a horizontal piece of paper folded in half, with each half on both sides serving as one of the first four pages of Laura's note; 2) an additional triple folded piece of paper with text only on one side going lengthwise/vertically; 3) the envelope. The last page of the note appears to be written and/or inserted after the letter was initially composed. It comes after the page ending with Laura's signature line ("Lovingly Mama") yet it does not

include any denotation or postscript. Given the subject matter, one can only assume how much more Laura wanted to say about Horace's latest book.

The envelope is postmarked East Lansing, Michigan; Feb 19, 1929. A two-cent stamp is adhered to the top right corner with wavy lines from a meter mark in the foreground.

Front:
Mr. L. W. Kephart
226 Maple Ave.
Tacoma Park
D.C.

Back:
L. M. Kephart
R.D. 1 Burcham Dr.
E. Lansing Mich.

The return address (i.e., Laura's address in East Lansing, Michigan, where she was likely living with her daughter, Cornelia) is interesting because the house number does not resemble modern-day addresses. It is also extremely difficult to read. According to Michigan State University (MSU) Libraries, the address is most likely "R.D. 1 Burcham Drive." This correlates with a 1926 map of the city they referenced that shows the road sitting just outside of city limits, and this means the postal service could have assigned it a rural delivery number.

Special thanks to Western Carolina University's (WCU) Special Collections department at Hunter Library, whose focus is to make manuscripts documenting southern Appalachian life and natural history more accessible. Thank you to Emilia Marcyk at MSU Libraries and Lauren Douglass at the East Lansing Public Library for helping me navigate East Lansing's maps and decipher the return address. Thank you to Dr. Gastle for encouraging us to dig deeper into the Horace Kephart legacy.

Transcription

MS page #1

Feb. 19th 1929

Dear children¹,

Here is another cold morning & it is not comfortable for my old bones and muscles.

Last week was right frisky

Thurs. afternoon Cornelia² and I were present at a stork shower staged by Mrs. Cox for Mrs. Ralter³.

Fri. Ernest Wheeler and his chum – Lamb were here for dinner; sort of a triple celebration. It was Virginia's birthday & Ernest & mine were the day before. Sally made a three layer cake which had 67 candles on it. If you subtract 9 & 29 (?), it leaves us right ~~useful~~ youthful. That useful might have stood with more truth than the other. My inferiority complex is not so great as to allow me to deny my usefulness – in spots.

¹ The letter's envelope is addressed to Leonard W. Kephart, (1892-1988). (Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930)

² Cornelia Kephart (1888-1947), oldest child of Horace and Laura Kephart. ("Death Certificate") (Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940)

³ Unidentified. Speculative spelling of Ralter.

MS page #2

It is convenient for me to be here, when Sally⁴ does not want to be. I did not like her at the first glance & you know how unreasonable I am in my likes & dislikes. If only she had busted out instead of Florence⁵. It will be well when she finally catches a man and marries.

Sunday night I went to Church & lived to tell the tale. Through Lent they have service Sun. evening. Mr. Tasman⁶ gave a good Unitarian sermon or Prayer; can't see how the Episcopal Church endorses him. C.⁷ says he is a devout Churchman. Did you see the article in last weeks Liberty?⁸ It is by an Ark. editor on Evolution⁹ & is good. He will be run out of the state if he does "not watch out."

What you say about your father's novel does not surprise me

⁴ Unidentified.

⁵ Unidentified.

⁶ Unidentified.

⁷ Presumably Cornelia.

⁸ This is presumably a reference to *Liberty: A Weekly for Everybody*. From 1924-1950, the illustrated magazine covered middle-class culture in a style heavily influenced by the emerging motion picture industry and focused on the most sensational and popular issues. See more: www.gale.com/c/liberty-magazine-historical-archive.

⁹ In 1925, opponents of evolution were victorious in making it a crime to teach any theory (e.g., Darwinism) "that denies the story of the Divine Creation in the Bible" in Tennessee. The ACLU and John Scopes, a rural teacher, fought in a highly-watched trial that was not successful legally, but was good for pro-evolutionists in the court of public opinion. In the years immediately following the Scopes trial, other states, namely Arkansas, enacted laws like Tennessee's. (Pew Research Center)

but does disappoint me. I am not surprised at the weak shots. He should never try to write about normal people.¹⁰ They do not interest him and therefore he does not understand them. Why doesn't he stick to the mountaineers; write sketches about them and then combine into a book. He always makes ordinary folks stilted and boring. He treats them the same way.

The only reason he "fell for" me was because I was different from any girl he had known. Then when he got me the "different" irked¹¹ him & he felt other folks would call me "queer."¹² He is a very peculiar man; likes to be original & conventional, at one & the same time.

I am disappointed in the plot. It is fairly moth eaten, and he surely did not need, with all the material he had, to have it that.

He has a wonderful workable

¹⁰ *Smoky Mountain Magic*, a fictional tale written by Horace Kephart from 1920 to 1929 about an adventure in the Deep Creek watershed, Cherokee Indian Reservation, and Bryson City in the summer of 1925. The Great Smoky Mountain Association published it in 2009.

¹¹ Author's misspelling of "irked."

¹² See the introduction to this transcription for more information about the term's use in this period.

MS page #4

vocabulary. Also, if a thing once interests him, it is his forever, thrills, details, & all. But, he could never remember to pay the gas bill or fix the furnace. He was not interested in them – or in you children when you were small.

This surely has been a hard winter. “Haven’t had such weather in years”! Since the Wed. before Xmas, I have not felt well for one day. My arm is useable, but still pains me quite a bit at night. If I had the money, I would have the Dr. treat it once a week until warm weather, or it behaved. When I sew or write much my hand gets jerky, & my brain is so most of the time, I guess. The C’s¹³ say they are to pay the Dr. but of course I can’t permit that. Damn \$*t¹⁴

This has not improved my dis-position & it has been hard on all of the others. I have tried hard to be decent, but alas, “The ghost is agreeable but the meat is not able.”¹⁵

Did you know Maiton¹⁶ was in a Christ. SC. School in St. Louis? Lovingly
Mama¹⁷

¹³ Unidentified.

¹⁴ Speculative. Author is presumably using special characters to convey an expletive.

¹⁵ Reference to *Matthew Ch.26:41*. “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Proverb meaning: As much as one wishes to achieve something, the frailties of the human body often make it impossible. (*Wiktionary*)

¹⁶ Speculative spelling of unidentified name.

¹⁷ Laura Mack Kephart (1862-1954), wife of Horace Kephart and mother of their six children. (Deaths, Funerals)

MS page #5

There is so much I want to say about the book, but it would be futile.

He always had me criticize what he wrote & it helped a lot. I am not able to write but I do know good writing when I see it.

Another big help was having me read it ~~at~~ aloud to him. That way I could rather emphasize the weak spots.

Can't even spell any more & that in days of yore was one of my strong points.

Annotated Works Cited

“Death Certificate for Cornelia Kephart Moore,” *Michigan Department of Community Health*, 24 May 1947, no. 008968. *AncestryLibrary.com*.

The death certificate for Cornelia confirms her date of birth and death.

“Deaths, Funerals: Mrs. Laura Mack Kephart.” *The Ithaca Journal*, 18 Dec. 1954, p. 3. *Newspapers.com*.

The death announcement for Laura confirms the date and place among other details.

Gander, Kashmira. “Is Queer an Offensive Slur?” *Newsweek*, 21 March 2018, www.newsweek.com/queer-offensive-slur-855703.

Gander’s topical story in *Newsweek* provides context for the word queer.

“Horace Kephart descendant to read from Park advocate’s novel.” *Sylva Herald & Ruralite, The (NC)*, 15 Oct. 2009. *NewsBank: Access World News*, infoweb-newsbank.com.proxy195.nclive.org/apps/news/documentview?p=AWNB&docref=news/12B57E5FED1D4548. Accessed 28 November 2019.

This local news article explains the background of Kephart’s novel.

Kelemen, Erik. *Textual Editing and Criticism: An Introduction*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2009.

The chapter “Textual Criticism and Kinds of Editions” is a great resource for working toward a critical edition in English studies.

Kephart, Beth. “Horace Kephart: A Great-Grandfather Appreciation.” *Appalachian History*:

Stories, Quotes and Anecdotes, Blog by Dave Tabler, 12 May 2009,

www.appalachianhistory.net/2009/05/horace-kephart-great-grandfather.html

Beth was a guest blogger on this site and her post provides information about Horace's family life, along with images of Laura and her children, which are difficult to find.

Kephart, Horace. *Smoky Mountain Magic*. Great Smoky Mountain Association, 2009.

Kephart, Laura M. *Untitled Letter*. 19 Feb. 1929. Western Carolina University's Hunter Library Special Collections, Cullowhee.

Laura's letter to her son Leonard is housed in its original form at WCU. See: Hunter Library, Manuscript Collection 12-05, Box 1, Folder 7, Item 5.

Lowery, George. "Outdoor Legend Horace Kephart's Many Cornell Roots." *Cornell Chronicle*, 11 Oct. 2011, news.cornell.edu/stories/2011/10/janet-mccue-co-writes-intro-classic-book.

Lowery's feature story on Kephart's Cornell connections provided information about Laura's family's ties as well.

Masci, David. "Darwin in America: The Evolution Debate in the United States." *Pew Research Center*, 6 Feb. 2019, www.pewforum.org/essay/darwin-in-america/.

Masci's story chronicles the major events in the debate on evolution; it provides information about the time frame relevant to the *Liberty* magazine story in Laura's letter.

"The Spirit is Willing But the Flesh is Weak." *Wiktionary*. Wikimedia Foundation, 27 March 2018, en.wiktionary.org/wiki/the_spirit_is_willing_but_the_flesh_is_weak.

This dictionary entry explains the proverb Laura references in her letter.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930." Tacoma Park, Montgomery County, MD, 1 April 1930. *AncestryLibrary.com*.

The Census confirms that Laura's son Leonard lived in Tacoma Park at the time she sent this letter to him.

U.S. Census Bureau. "Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940." Meridian, Ingham County, MI, 1 April 1940. *AncestryLibrary.com*.

The Census confirms that Cornelia lived in Michigan with her mother and her family (The Moore Family). The other searches did not provide the latter information, so I used this to corroborate other information.