

# CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Hearth and Home

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## Feature Essay

Fall 2009

**Jewett, Leah Wood** *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Hearth and Home.*

### Hearth and Home

The holidays and the close of a year bring both joy and sorrow, conjuring up memories of family and friends, those loved and those lost. The pangs of separation--metaphorical or physical, temporary or permanent--grow stronger and more painful at times when people traditionally gather, be it during a seasonal celebration, or a simple meal.

Lyrics from the contemporary popular tune *The Vacant Chair*, a poem put to music by George F. Root and published on Thanksgiving 1861, express a family's pain and remembrance of a young soldier lost in battle:

We shall meet but we shall miss him

There will be one vacant chair

We shall linger to caress him

While we breathe our evening prayer

When a year ago we gathered

Joy was in his mild blue eye

But a golden cord is severed

And our hopes in ruin lie

At our fireside, sad and lonely

Often will the bosom swell

At remembrance of the story

How our noble Willie fell

Surely the close of each day ushered in reflection on hearth and home on the part of both soldiers and civilians. But the seasonal celebrations at the end of each year were inevitable reminders that life would never be the same for those who endured the Civil War.

A letter among the McMurrin-Austen Family Papers, Mss. 4795, held in the Louisiana Lower Mississippi Valley Collections in LSU Libraries' Special Collections exemplifies the yearning of a soldier for his family, and for the times they shared together before the war. The correspondent is unknown\*; he writes to his wife Mary from the hospital where he is stationed in Georgia.

Camp Near Rossville Geo.

Dec. 31st 1863

My own dear precious Mary,

As you say, it seems almost useless to write to you anymore. I don't know whether you are living or dead. There was a large mail come in night before last. Gray and all the rest about the Hospital got a handful of letter & papers, but your humble servant. I have but the one correspondent, and she has always been so faithful & prompt heretofore, that when a mail came in, I could boast in never being disappointed. I feel bad enough about not getting a letter this time – the last one you wrote stopped off very abruptly, and I don't know but you might be in the insane asylum by this time. A messenger was dispatched to Chattanooga today for the mail, but he could find none for the Brigade.

Mary, you will perceive from the date above that this is New Year's eve. It is now about 8 o'clock at night, and a cold wet windy disagreeable night at that. It has rained constantly all day. The wind now howls in hurricane style, threatening to turn the tent topsy turvy. The Steward is on his knees holding it down. The desk is set up against the tent pole and it shakes so that I can only write a little while at a time between the blasts of wind. You must take it there in periodic doses, like you took Quinine for the chills.

This is not the only annoyance I am laboring under. I have not got a chimney built yet have to depend for heat on a fire in front of the tent and the smoke from it counterbalances what little cold comfort it offers. I have been very busy ever since we moved here. And will be for a week to come. I can't innumerate all that is to be done, but will tell you a portion.

The nos. [numbers] business of the reg. has to be settled up at the end of the year, Gray is still acting Brigade Surgeon and as I am in charge, I have it all to do myself. I had to take an inventory of everything in my possession. Make a statement of all that was drawn in the last year, how much was expended for the sick, what was lost or destroyed, how much remains etc. etc. and it is difficult to tell how where & when everything, even a part of it was receipted for by Miller Gray Sheriff [?] & myself and the whole thing is somewhat mixed. I also had a weekly report Sanitary report personal report etc. to make out today. Besides all this we have had to move ever since we came here, for a better position.

We have three tents and each requires a chimney. Our hospital tent being worn out, it became necessary to put up a log house, for the accommodation of the sick. Sent wagons out 3 miles- pulled down a deserted house, and have got it up again minus chimney roof & doors. There is lumber stone brick mortar and various other things to be broked up, and a lazy set of men who take no interest in anything but rations to look after. I might go on enumerating my labors, but I have said enough on the subject. I am not complaining as I generally feel better contented when I have plenty for head & hands both to do, but the hour of repose [illegible] I would like to have near comfortable quarters, than I have to night.

Oh! How different it would be if I were only at home to night dear Mary, sitting by a comfortable fire with you and those three prattling children! What a pleasure it would be to set up and watch the old year take its departure as it is I think I will soon have to get down on the clapboards. And let it wink out as best it can in the storm. How many thoughts, fancies, emotions, loves, joys & sorrows a New Year's Eve calls to mind! My brain has been busy today, with the thronging associations of the past vivid hopes of the future, old hearthstone recollections, and the tender memories of a tender wife & three clustering children clinging for support to kind and indulgent parents. In looking back over the past year, I feel more than ever grateful to Kind Providence that we are permitted to see the end of another Year. Death has made so many hearts & hours desolate in the past year, that those who have escaped should be truly thankful that they are not among the victims. I feel like writing more tonight, but

it is getting so cold & disagreeable that I must stop and finish up the beginning of the New Year. Hoping you may have a happy New Year. Accept an imaginary kiss & good night.

Friday, Jan. 1st 1864 – I had my mind made up to write you a long good letter to-day, but it is so cold that the ink freezes on the pen, and the paper is so cold my fingers are almost numb already. The weather changed very suddenly last night to bitter cold- Ice froze on the tent two inches thick. We have done nothing today but stand about the fire, to keep warm. If we had been a little smarter and had our chimney up, we might be comfortable today as it is I look upon it as a dull New Year. At least I can call to mind some that we have spend together that was a good deal more pleasant. I would love to send you and the children a nice little present today to remember me by if I was only some place where anything was to be had. I had this day set apart to take a trip to the top of Lookout Mountain , and pick up some relic from that famous spot, that will figure in history for all time to come; but it is too disagreeable to move away from the fire. I will really have to stop. Besides the cold the smoke from our log heap blows directly in the tent and I am almost strangled with it. It may do better this evening.

Dear Mary it is now Saturday night, Jan. 2d and this letter on hands with no better facilities for writing than I had yesterday. The Quartermaster is going to start to Bridgeport in the morning and I will finish this up and send it as it is. It is a very imperfect letter to what I intended to write when I commenced. I thought of making it a kind of New Year's present, but I am disappointed. I am writing on my knees by the fire, freezing on one side & burning on the other. The weather continues very cold, almost as cold as any day I ever saw in Egypt. I almost froze last night got our chimney partly built today by thawing the mud with hot water, will finish tomorrow. The mail came in tonight again with letters for everybody but myself. What in the world does it mean? I feel vexed and worried about it. There is so many things I want to say that I can't say anything. I often wonder whether there is any other man in the reg. whose mind is so continually occupied about his home & family as mine. With many kisses for you and the children. I must again say goodbye.

Your ever fond & affectionate hus'd

[illegible]

It seems a terrible shame to be uncertain of the author's name or his rank, brigade, family's names, home town, list of action seen by his unit, or to have, at least, a likeness of his face. But perhaps, for our purposes, the letter's anonymity lends it more value in that the author could be any soldier, anywhere, at any time. He is *every man*, surviving one more day, thinking of home and loved ones, wishing for reunion and an end to war. The letter transcends politics, cause, and battle objectives; it is profoundly and powerfully human.

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The Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections at LSU Libraries' Special Collections are replete with letters of hearth and home. Detailed finding aids are available via the web at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/special>.