

Young girl's letters provide insight

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Two weeks ago, I explored the history of the Young Ladies' Seminary in Benicia. St. Catherine's Convent in Benicia was another well-known institution of the time.

One of its students was Carrie Pittman of Bridgport, who spent the years from 1868 to 1873 at the convent. Many of her letters to her mother as well as some of her composition books have survived. They allow glimpses of her personality, her life as a boarding student and the concerns a teenager had in the early 1870s.

Carrie's father, Charles J. Pittman was born in Bristol, England, in 1824. He came to the United States in 1850 and supported himself as a hotelkeeper in Grass Valley and in San Francisco. He returned to England in 1854, where he married Louisa May Pittman. The couple traveled to San Francisco in the autumn of 1854 on the steamer "Sierra Nevada" and purchased the City Hotel. In 1855, they moved to Cordelia where they also ran a hotel. Here, their only daughter Carrie E. J. was born Sept. 19, 1855.

The family moved to Green Valley in 1862, where they purchased and operated the Bridgport Hotel. Two years later, Charles Pittman died, leaving his widow to operate the hotel and to raise Carrie.

By 1868, with educational institutions still scarce, Mrs. Pittman decided to have 13-year-old Carrie's education completed at St. Catherine's Convent in Benicia.

The convent had been established in 1850. By the time Carrie entered, the school accepted about 150 students and had about thirty employees. "The doors of this institution are open to respectable young ladies of every religious creed who desire the acquirement of a refined and solid education," explained a school prospectus at the time.

The academic year consisted of one term, running from mid-August to mid- June. Courses offered included "English, French, Spanish and Latin languages, rhetoric, elocution, composition, ancient and modern history, biography, mythology, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, bookkeeping, botany, natural philosophy, chemistry, astronomy and use of globes, vocal music, instrumental music, writing, drawing, painting, tapestry, plain and ornamental needlework, etc."

Following Carrie's letters from age 13 to 17, one can see the impact this extensive

education program had on the young girl. Her early letters are written in a breathless and choppy style with a rather creative way of spelling. Her later letters become much more serious and often touch on the lessons she was studying.

Several themes run through many of her letters. Homesickness and a longing for mother, friends and familiar surroundings come up again and again, most often right before or after the summer break, Christmas and Spring vacation.

All her letters start with "dear" or "dearest mother" and the tone is always very affectionate. Her first preserved letter dates from Jan. 14, 1869: "Dear Mother, I received your letter on 13 instint (yesterday) I was so glad to here (sic) from you. I am so sorry you could not get Lizzie for I know you are lone some with out me I would make so much noise ..."

All letters contain a hodgepodge of information, often imparted in a single line. While the schools provided food, lodging and some amenities, the students had to take care of their own clothing. Carrie constantly asks or sends for clothing, needs clean dresses or has to purchase articles to augment her wardrobe. On March 4, 1869, she relayed a purchase to her mother: "... When Mrs. G.S. Wilson was here I bought me some colars (sic) and cuffs and shoe laceses (sic) which came to a dolar (sic)."

In the same letter, she allows a glimpse into how important the letter exchange and frequent contact with home is: "Sister first came in with the letters. I ran and asked Sister if there was not one for me but pretty soon my name was caled (sic) out and I went up she gave it to me ...

"I was in Spanish class when Mrs. Wilson was ready to go and she bid me good bye in there. I wanted to send my love and some kisses to you but of course I would not say that in there ... You always write me such nice long letters. I try to do the same to wards you but can not. I try to do the best I can."

The boarding girls did not have much money, if any, of their own. One of Carrie's most frequent requests throughout her years at the convent is for stationary and stamps.

On April 23, 1869, she wrote: "I heard to day that the Union Express envelops (sic) are no use her in Benicia because the men have moved down to the City. And we have to send by Wells Fargo or by post stamps. Those enevelops (sic) you sent me were just the right kind. And when you send me some more be sure and send Wells Fargo. Last night I had a splendid time playing. I am expecting you to come and see Sunday. I do not think that it will rain soon again because it just rained last week. It is so hot today that I can hardly write this letter. Now summer has come. I can wear those thin Chemise. I would be so glad if you would send them for it is so hot now and my thin

dresses to (sic)."

Like many young girls, she seems to have been somewhat scatterbrained when it comes to keeping or remembering her belongings. Another frequent request to her mother is to send something, usually combs, dresses, or books, which she forgot at home after a visit. On May 5, 1869, it was her French book: "I have been waiting very umpatiencecy (sic) for an answer to my last letter but hope to receive one soon. it is now dinner time, so I will have to funish (sic) this, this afternoon ... Ma have you found my french book yet. if you have not, will you please look under the seat of the old carriage perhaps it may be there. When can you send my thin dresses I kneed (sic) them very much."

One of the breaks in the yearly routine was provided by examinations, especially those of the other institutions. These were public affairs where the students would demonstrate what they had learned during the preceding year. On June 2, 1869, Carrie reported on her first experience of such an examination just before the summer break: "Did you see that piece in the paper about the examination at the (Young Ladies') Seminary? It was making sport of their singing and playing on the piano - no wonder. It was an old piano and out of tune. I am so glad examination is so near. It will not be long before I will be having some nice horseback rides in the fields and to see some of my friends."

Her excitement at appearing at her own examination and her first summer break are also apparent in her next letter on June 8, 1869: "... shall I send home any under clothing such as scirts (sic) etc. etc. Try and send the man in once before examination so I will not have so much to take home Examination night. Ma will you please bring in some lead for my hair so it will curl nicely."

While the girls went home for Christmas, they spent most other holidays at the school, creating their own festivities under the guidance of the Sisters. On Dec. 7, 1870, Carrie reported that "Thanksgiving day, or evening we had an entertainment and enjoyed ourselves very much. Yes, my waterproof is plenty long enough for this winter but I think after this, it will be up to my knees ...

"I was wondering where the Christmas tree was going to be this year? It is about two years since they had a tree in Rockville. I hope the weather will be fine so we all could go ... No I have plenty of clean clothes to last till Christmas."

Being cooped up in a house with 150 students and few changes in routine was wearying. On Feb. 2, 1871, Carrie was able to report an exciting outing to her mother: "O, I must tell you what a pleasant time I had yesterday afternoon, after school was out, we (were) all feeling tired of the house, prevailed upon sister to take us out walking

as it did not take as long to put on our hats and cloaks, in a few minutes we were started. We walked over the green hills viewing the hills, trees and water, but as we were coming home, we were greatly frightened by some cows. They appeared to be very wild, but we found out they were some old, tame cows wandering around the hills for a living. We returned greatly refreshed after our walk, and with a good will to study our lessons for the next day."

Additional work projects were added to her schedule such as a tapestry project in September 1871: "Sr. Imelda wants me to get a tapestry piece, but do not know if the price will suit you. I would like to see the piece, think you will like it very much, and I might as well work a piece that will last as long as I live and always feel proud of it, after it is worked."

Housekeeping was another instruction area and some of the results seem to have been hilarious, such as this cooking lesson in October 1871: "You would have laughed to see us dressing chickens. I made some stuffing first it was too thin than we forgot to put something in it, till at last, after doing, I dont (sic) what we got to suit us. Those who ate it said it was splendid."

The tone of Carrie's letters matured much over the years, just as her work and study load increased. On Aug. 29, 1872, she reported: "My time is so busily occupied that I scarcely (sic) have time to think of writing to any one else but you, much less write to them, but will make time to answer my cousins letters. this year I have so much to do, no sooner out of one class than in another, still I like it, there is not any time to think of homesickness."

Carrie Pittman graduated from St. Catherine's Convent in the summer of 1873 and returned to live with her mother in Bridgeport.

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