

Lifestyles

'The Letters of Nora Hall' holds slice of Port Allegany history

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"We Are All Well: The Letters of Nora Hall, 1909-10" (Edited by Judith Swann) — This generous slice of Port Allegany and Hall family history seems so fresh and flavorful, how can it be more than 100 years old?

There are so many references to the early-1900s lifestyle, we have no trouble remembering that generations have passed. But the personality of Elinora Betsy Grinolds Hall, aka Nora, emerges so vividly, we think we know her. What's more, we begin to know something about a family we might think of as Port Allegany royalty, a dynasty.

She didn't live to see Lynn Hall built, or to know about Fallingwater, or two of her sons' involvement in that project. But she did see the beginnings of her sons' careers as builders. There can be no question she influenced them powerfully.

This mother of four grown children called out to her youngest, her adored Howard, while he was in California for two years. Without email or cell phone or even long distance, but paper and pencil or ink pen, Nora defied that hurtful distance to estrange Howard from his family and home community, the family business in which he was a mainstay, or even the homely details of daily life among the Halls.

Nora and John lived in a house that was attached to a planing mill and building supply business, on Railroad Avenue not far from the railroad depot. The rhythm of her life was defined by the trains, daily work, the seasons, family events.

That rhythm became syncopated and tempo raced when her loved ones had any kind of problem, particularly of the illness variety. To whom did they look for succor? She makes only casual references to her role as nurse and caregiver. But the cumulative record shows that some of her siblings, and her nieces and nephews, children and grandchildren relied on her care, over and over.

Yet Nora tried to send Howard reassurance as often as she could, about that central reality of their lives back home. "We are all well," she wrote. When that would have been untrue, she tried to send encouraging news. His Aunt Alzina was "doing better," or brother-in-law Dan Helmer was "gaining."

Nora mailed letters to Howard at the rate of two or three a week. But she wrote to him nearly every day, letters started and interrupted and resumed, sometimes updating the news frequently, like CNN but on a personal level.

She wrote on any paper that came to hand: actual writing paper, old business stationery, the unprinted parts of advertisements, everywhere that was allowed on a postcard. As nature abhors a vacuum, Nora despised empty areas of paper, and filled them.

Judith Swann, an Ithaca, N.Y.-based poet, essayist and editor, has done a masterful job of analyzing, transcribing and arranging the collection of Nora's writings, along with some photos and a few of Howard's letters to his mother. In this she was assisted by Nora's great-grandsons, Fred and James Young.

Swann also researched the community and many topics, so as to help interpret them to the reader. Starting with no background in the area or the family, she learned enough to understand more of the history, geography and culture than we could have expected. If occasionally she got a hold of the wrong end of the stick, she did not point us wrong with it, in anything of significance.

Swann handled the raw material, and provides the reader with a few reproductions of the letters. As she notes, they are highly legible except where damaged by water or tearing. Nora's penmanship was clear and uniform. Some of her spelling and grammar are nonstandard, to our eyes, but we know from reading newspapers and other publications from those days, regionalisms and vernacular were fluid.

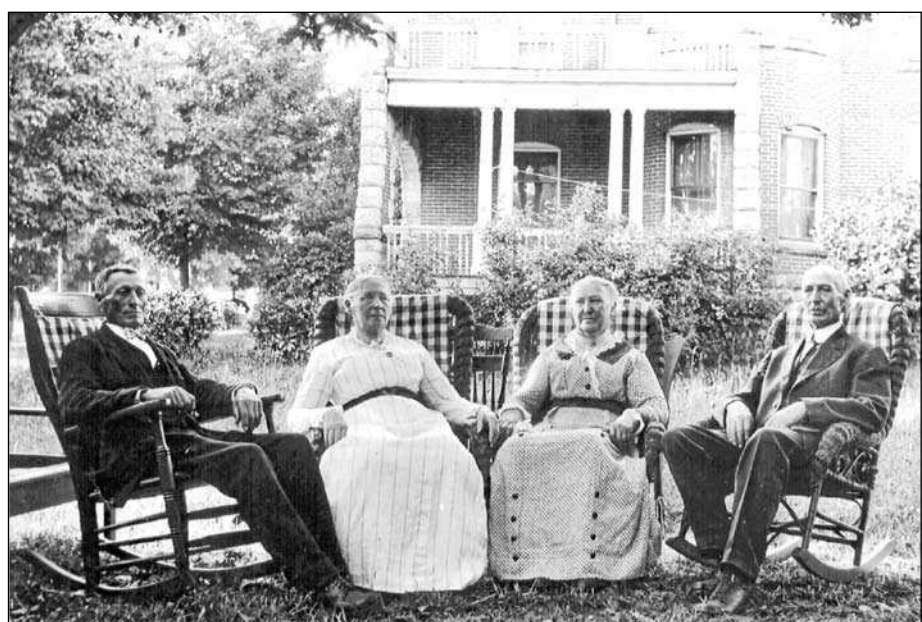


Photo supplied by James Young

Elinora Betsy Grinolds Hall, usually called Nora, is third from left in this photo. From left, these four siblings are Jeb Grinolds, Esther Campbell, Nora and Frank Grinolds. This photo shows them on the lawn of a Church Street, Port Allegany residence in the early 1900s. Alzina Foster Grinolds Hanson Pelton is not in the photo. She died in late 1910.

The narrative content of Nora's letters tells us about the Halls to a degree that reminds us of the "character development" skills of great fiction writers. We see the traits of each, from her husband (hard working, hard headed, tight fisted, but not good at business) to her latest grandchildren (willful and clever Raymond, Viner Hall, future architect) and adorable, sturdy Howard Baker (future builder par excellence).

John Hall was very good at planing and milling lumber. He could make furniture, woodwork of all sorts, shingles and crates and spindles for builders and local industry. He had construction skills too, and could do masonry and plastering. What he could not do is keep the business solvent.

That's why Walter and Howard went to Santa Paula, California, in April of 1909. Howard was single and 28, Walter several years older. Howard had been working in the mill with his dad, and building for others, and had invested and borrowed to help keep the mill afloat. The two young men were to get work out west where building was booming and wages were high, and send what money they could to help keep creditors at bay back home.

Walter lasted only two months and came back home. His high maintenance wife, Marie, was pregnant, and wanted him home. Nora was disgusted at Walter's desertion of Howard and "the plan." But Howard's willingness to stick it out filled her with pride. She had her doubts when he went into business for himself as a contractor, and built at least two houses. The Santa Paula papers mentioned him favorably. But she was nervous: being in business was risky.

While Howard sent money home and paid down his and the family's business debts, Walter seemed to dabble, and to burden the family as much as help it. But he could build, no question about it. Both he and Howard could design and build houses or make them to plan. They were considered architects.

Nora lets us get to know daughter Bertha Hall Helmer, wife of prominent attorney Dan, active in civic and social affairs, substitute school teacher, a founder of the McKean County Historical Society, performer in local theater productions, adoptive mother. To this day she is a byword in Port Allegany, where she became a personage.

We become familiar with daughter Mae, married to Leewyn Baker (glass plant worker), mother of one little boy and then of baby Howard, named for his uncle. Howard Baker's name lives on in Baker's Acres, the original name of Katherine Street Extension and its hillside housing development featuring Usonian-style homes.

There are encounters with many local characters, tales of fires that destroyed homes and damaged buildings. There are weather reports, depth of snow or mud recorded, drought and rain and rapid thaw duly mentioned.

Seeds sown, garden crops watered and harvested and dried or root cellared or canned, berries picked, butter bought or made, eggs sold, baking done Saturday, laundry done Monday (or not, depending on weather), church attended or not (again, weather controlled), hens set, chicks hatched, roosters killed, chores done—all these events were shared regularly with Howard.

Nora's style is unselfconscious, taking no credit for her own accomplishments but apologizing for what she fears might be mistakes or "sounding crazy." And certainly she is conflicted: how she wishes he were home! Yet no, she would not want him to return, for California is good for his health (apparently he had allergies or colds in cold weather, in Pennsylvania). He must see the world! He must enjoy himself! He must not work too hard!

She teases her son about "the girls" he must be seeing, and girls she could line up for him back home. When she does not get a letter for a week or longer, she is in a state. She walks to the train station or the post office, mailing and checking for letters or "postals." When she gets photos from her "baby boy," she is ecstatic.

We watch as John works on what is called Nora's "house on the hill"—a more desirable location than the living quarters by the railroad and the mill. Not to Nora, though. John just up and moves their belongings, and she must go along. Little by little she comes to like the place. Probably it is "her" house to keep it safe from seizure by creditors.

Soon she and John are struggling to care for farm animals Walter had acquired before decamping to West Virginia to build a house or two. A cow, a pig, a dog, poultry—then John buys a horse and wagon! Until then they had walked everywhere, or ridden with others.

How on earth did they manage? They heated and cooked with wood, lighted with Aladdin lamps. On the hill water was from springs, not municipal. Howard sent money to help pay for the land and springs. In that new house a wing awaited his use.

Suspense builds as John becomes less able to do the work in the mill, more anxious for Howard to return and take things in hand. He tries to sell or at least rent the mill and former dwelling.

Will lawyer Dan persuade Howard to give up his building contractor business in Santa Paula? Will Nora finally yield to family pressure and ask him to return? For, we have come to know, hers is the one plea he will never refuse.

Those who know Walter Hall as the builder who saved Frank Lloyd Wright's flying buttresses at Fallingwater and know that Howard helped him do it, those who have seen Walter's iconic Lynn Hall and Howard Hall's many enduring houses (and his famous wooden signs) may not realize it. But in the many achievements of the Hall brothers, they have seen monuments to Nora Hall.



Photo submitted

Cole Memorial Hospital's maternity unit welcomed Potter County's New Year's baby at 2:20 p.m. Thursday. Baby boy Roger Bradley Green, who weighed seven pounds, 15.2 ounces, and was 21 inches long, was born to proud parents Sandra Shaffer and Roger Green of Port Allegany. The baby was delivered by Dr. Celso Backes, obstetrician and gynecologist from the Cole Memorial Medical Group and Women's Health Center at the Hospital. Among the first gifts the baby received from the hospital was a \$25 gift certificate from the Looking Glass Gift Shop at Cole Memorial. Several local businesses also donated gifts to the family through The Potter Leader-Enterprise. Approximately 250 babies are delivered annually at Cole Memorial.

Home is where their cats are

DEAR ABBY: I never thought I would be a cat-hater. My 70-year-old parents are very active, but ever since they brought home two cats, they are no longer willing to travel out of town. That means they are now missing many family events — Thanksgiving, graduations, funerals, etc. Christmas and Easter are spared because we all travel to see them on those occasions.

I am becoming resentful that their cats are more important to them than spending time with their siblings, children or grandchildren. And, NO — they will not put them in a cat hotel or have someone come into their home to watch them. Suggestions? — RESENTFUL IN SANTA BARBARA, CALIF.

DEAR RESENTFUL: The problem with resentment is that it can fester to the point that it destroys relationships. Has it occurred to you that there may be other reasons your parents no longer want to make these trips? The stress and expense, for instance? Or concern about spending a lot of time driving on freeways? It's also possible that two family visits a year are all they can handle.

One way to lessen your frustration would be to resolve to accept your parents just the way they are — and also accept that it's unlikely they are going to change.

DEAR ABBY: I recently got into an argument with my mom regarding her speakerphone. I've also argued with other family members and friends over this. I believe it is rude to not let someone know that they are on speakerphone, particularly when others are present.

I feel it violates trust and the sense of intimacy that comes with speaking to the person you intended to call in the first place. Mom says it depends on the topic and that a "Heads up! You're on speakerphone"

Dear Abby

isn't necessary. Who's right? — SPEECHLESS IN THE WEST

DEAR SPEECHLESS: You are. When someone makes a phone call, the caller usually expects that the conversation will be private. However, since you now know your mother doesn't agree, either stop confiding anything that you wouldn't reveal in a roomful of relatives, or ask at the beginning of the conversation whether the speaker is on so you'll be forewarned.

DEAR ABBY: I'm 67 and I like sex. My wife doesn't. She has no drive. It may be health-related, maybe due to meds. She has no time; she's a workaholic.

I met a widow who is very tempting. She suggested a "no strings" hookup. I'm starting to think it's not adultery if my wife is sexless. Your thoughts, Abby? — PENNSYLVANIA SENIOR

DEAR SENIOR: I'm glad you asked. Take a pass on the widow's generous offer. Her "no strings" hookup sounds like a snare that could hang you if the Mrs. gets wind of it.

Your wife's lack of sex drive may be due to any of the things you mentioned. It could also be that your technique needs improving. Ask her if that might be the problem. If it is, a sex therapist could help you fix that in a jiffy. And it would be cheaper in the long run than what you're contemplating.

Memorandum

THE KINZUA QUILTERS will meet at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at the Little Fabric Garden. Members are asked to bring sewing machines and quilting supplies.

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