

# “Come home at once”

## The 1917 Letters of Neva Stockdale

by Sharlene Voogd Cochrane

**N**eva Stockdale was 23 years old and a hundred miles from home in the tumultuous spring of 1917. As a first-year student at Cornell College in Mt. Vernon, Iowa, Neva (*right*) was taking classes in German, physical training, harmony, organ, piano, English, and china decoration. She wrote daily, sometimes twice a day, to her beau, Fred Voogd, 21. Fred was attending business school in Cedar Rapids, a dozen miles from Mt. Vernon. Neva also wrote to her family back in Aplington, a small farming community in Butler County. She and Fred had both grown up there, and although they knew each other's family, their romance began after both had graduated from high school.

Neva kept these letters, and years later, after her death in 1984, they were found stored in a large, flat box in her attic. Within the correspondence between her and Fred, and their families and friends, a dramatic, intimate story unfolds in a small, rural community in the early 20th century. The letters present the realities of medical care; the reliance on daily mail rather than telephones for communicating vital family news; the role of faith; and the approach of World War I. Perhaps most important, the letters attest to the various roles and responsibilities of women. As more and more young women left home for college, they found themselves conflicted over their responsibilities to their families, versus their responsibilities to themselves and the larger world.

In Neva and Fred's letters of March 1917, amidst talk of weekend dates, Fred's impending graduation, and their possible marriage were references to events taking place back home in Aplington. Gladys Gerhardt Stockdale, the wife of Neva's older brother Ray,

had given birth on February 16 to their first child, a little boy. But there were complications—childbed fever.

**C**hildbed fever—or puerperal fever—occurs if the uterus becomes infected following childbirth or abortion, or if pathogenic organisms invade the bloodstream, causing blood poisoning, or septicemia. Recognized since the time of Hippocrates, puerperal fever took the lives of appalling numbers of women—perhaps half the cases of maternal mortality.

Yet despite its prevalence, progress in understanding its causes was tragically slow. In the mid-19th century, some physicians began to observe that women came down with puerperal fever after being visited or delivered by a doctor who had treated others with the fever, and that the more invasive the delivery (with hands or instruments), the greater the incidence of the fever. By 1879, Louis Pasteur had linked it to streptococci, its deadliest bacterial cause, but not the only cause. In the 1880s, physicians began to connect the spread of disease with the lack of sterile conditions, and sought to prevent puerperal fever through the use of scrubbed hands, antiseptic instruments, face masks, and clean surroundings. Although these measures reduced the number of cases of puerperal fever, doctors still had no way to treat it until the development of sulfa drugs in the 1930s and then penicillin in the early 1940s.

In 1917, the year Gladys Stockdale fell ill, a doctor might prescribe bed rest, hot or cold applications to the abdomen, and sedatives, and hope that the patient's own resistance would outlast the fever's virulence. The symptoms were dramatic and difficult:



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high fevers, chills, weakness, heavy sweating, dementia. Besides physical suffering, there were emotional swings as one day the patient would be doing well, the next, writhing in pain and mental agony.

The series of letters begins with Neva writing to Fred—her “dearie” and her “dearest”—first with news of the baby boy, and then with concerns for the new mother.

3/1/1917

Dearie —

... I heard from mother today — she says she saw the boy but she didn't say whether it looked like “auntie,” or not — (but I hope not like this auntie, anyway.) ...

Always yours,  
Neva

3/8

My Dearest —

... I wish I knew more about Gladys. Glen says she got up last Sat. — and must have taken cold, for she's pretty sick now. Howard's [letter] was written Monday (& Glen's before that) and he said she had a fever. So now that's all I know, just enuf to make me

all worried about her. Wish they'd keep me posted about things or else not tell me at all. ...

Yours,  
Neva

3/8

Dear Neva:

... We were down to Gladys' last Sunday and you know she is not getting along so well, she was up and around some but took to bed again on Thursday a wk. ago, took with a chill, had the Dr. several times, also had Dr. Miller down from Ackley Tuesday for consultation, the next day or so was some better, but this is Thursday, Ray was just here, had been to a sale at Harkens.

And just got back, when they phoned for him to get the doctor, she is having another chill. I am frightened about her, have been ever since she took back to bed, I am afraid it is blood poisoning, and if it is that, she can't live. I hope it is not, but I have been so worried about her. She has a dear little boy just as cute as can be. They all think it favors Howard, but I cant tell, he has been real good, sleeps most of the time. They have no name for him yet. ...

Hazel [Neva's sister] stayed with Mildred [Gladys's sister] last Sat night till Mon evening, you

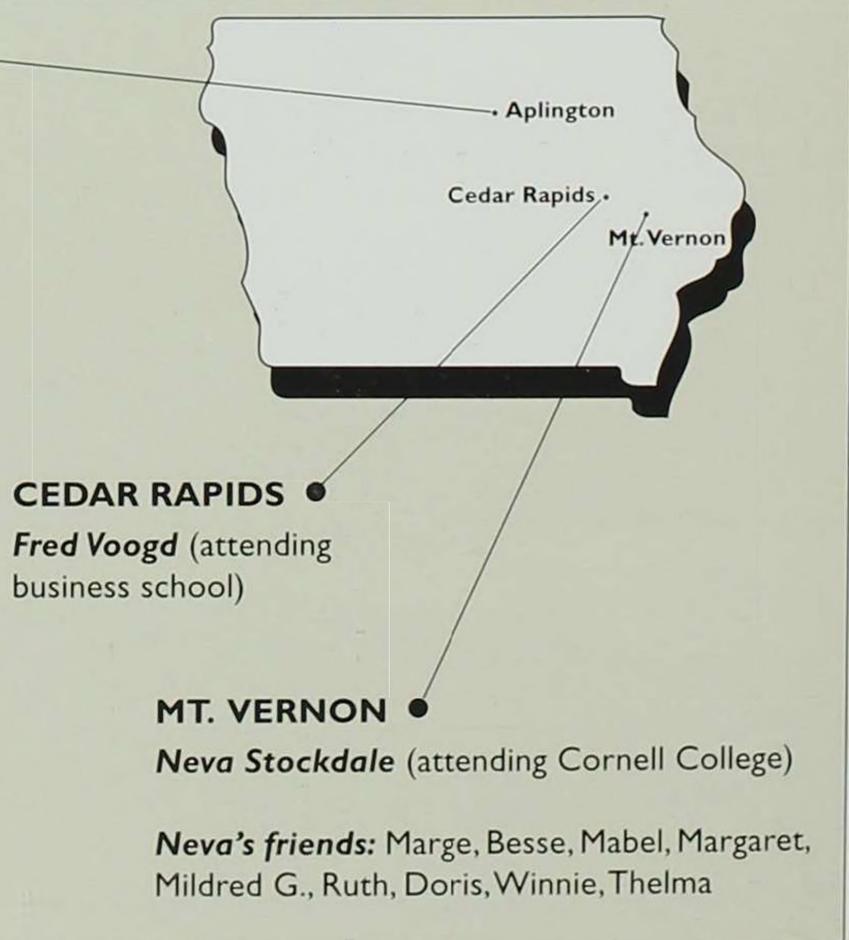
**APLINGTON (in Butler County)** ●

**Neva's parents:** C. J. & Louise Keller Stockdale  
**Siblings:** Ray (husband of Gladys Gerhardt Stockdale)  
 Bob (or Rob)  
 Hazel  
 Bill  
 Glenn  
 Howard

**Fred's parents:** Richard A. & Bena Weiss Voogd  
**Siblings:** Beulah  
 Edward

**Gladys Gerhardt Stockdale** (wife of Ray Stockdale)  
**Siblings:** Mildred            Bernice  
 Lucile                        Pauline  
 Vernon                        Marjorie

**Friends and neighbors:**  
 Esther DeFriesse, Addie Waudby, Mrs. Paulson, Lizzie, Anna, Nettie Wilson, Ladies of the Christian Endeavor Society



see Mrs. Gerhart [Gladys's mother] stays with Gladys most of the time and Mildred is afraid to stay home alone at night. . . . Thought I had better let you know about Gladys' condition. Am glad all is well with you, and am hoping it will be so at Ray's house. . . .

I am still your  
loving Mother.

3/10

Dear Neva:

I didn't mean to scare you to death, but just told you how things stood, so if anything happened you would be ready for it. She is much better now, and I am sure out of danger, they don't allow anyone in to see her yet, that is a visitor you know, because it disturbs her; but is getting along real well. So do not worry about her, am almost sorry I told you about it. But I was worried about her myself, of course we heard how she was the next day but of course you could not know so quick. . . . But Neva you know we would have let you know if things got worse to have you come home. So please do not worry any more. Hazel was mad cause I let you know anything about it. . . .

Yours Lovingly  
Mother.

3/11

Dear Neva:

Well they changed Dr. and Gladys is worse, they haven't very much hope for her Neva. They are going to do all they can for her, but it is very doubtful she pulls through, hope she does. Now if things get still worse will try and let you know every day. I think [Gladys's sister] Lucile will come home Tuesday. Her Mother is pretty near all in. So don't worry to much about it

Yours in haste  
Mother.

A flurry of letters, all written on March 12 and 13, spread the alarming news that Gladys's condition was worsening. Neva learned that a network of women in the family and community was helping with all aspects of the crisis. All the care was administered at Ray and Gladys's home, where the dining room became the sickroom. Although there was a nurse at the house almost constantly, the nursing chores were also shared by the women in the family (Neva's mother and only sister Hazel, and Gladys's mother and two sisters) and community.

The situation also required caring for a brand-new child, still without name, who had to be fed, cleaned, rocked, and comforted. Domestic work also continued amidst the sickness. There were meals to prepare, dishes to wash, rooms to clean, laundry to do. The work was strenuous, physically and psychologically, and a variety of women, within and beyond the family, combined forces to keep the household in order and to provide emotional support.

Whereas caregiving was clearly women's work, the role of the men in the family was less direct. Ray, Gladys's husband, continued to maintain their farm, working in the fields, caring for the animals, going to market. Neva's father had a telephone installed at Ray's (most rural households in Iowa had telephones by then, but long-distance calls were prohibitively expensive). Neva's five brothers wrote to her about Gladys's condition but evidently took no direct part in her care.

Meanwhile, a hundred miles away at college, Neva was in constant turmoil about whether to stay at school in Mt. Vernon or go home to help her family.

3/12

Dearest Fred —

I'm just sick, Fred. Got a letter from mother late this P.M. and she says Gladys is worse — there's hardly any hope for her. Oh Fred I just can't stand it — And poor Ray! What will he ever do! Lucile's coming home Tues. Oh I wish I could see Gladys but let's hope — let's hope she pulls thru — but mother says it's doubtful. Wish I knew tonite how she is now. Mother's was written yesterday noon.

Lots of Love  
Neva

3/12

Dear Brother [Fred].

Mrs. Ray Stockdale is very sick. They have sent for [her siblings] Vern and Lucile. Ester DeVries [a nurse] is there now. They had Dr. Blackmore but now they have Dr. Hobson. It is doubtful if she will get well again. I feel sorry. Ray feels very badly about it.

From Your  
Sister Beulah

3/13

My Own Dearest Neva:

Recd your letter this morning and am sorry to hear that news. I can imagine how you feel and of course it would make it awfully bad if Ray should have to lose her. But dear you can only hope for the

best and here's hoping it turns out alright. I can feel for him cause there is a woman I love and if it was her why I'd go wild. Wish I could see you awhile maybe could cheer you just a trifle for a short time at least. . . . Here's hoping for the best in your moments of feeling blue and if only I could cheer you it would make me real happy. . . .

I am Yours always  
Fred

3/13

Dear Fred: —

. . . Mrs. Ray Stockdale is a very sick girl not expected to live, too bad, isn't it. . . .

Your father,  
R. A. Voogd

3/13

Dear Neva.

. . . Glads is geting along pretty good. she has the fever and it is lots lower in the morning then it is at night. It gets a little higher in the evening but it does not seem so bad. . . .

Glenn

3/13

Dear Neva:

. . . Well she wasent as good as yesterday, for she had another chill, I think it was last night but this afternoon she seems a little better, she is resting easy. . . .

I was down to Ray's in the afternoon taking care of baby, he is real good they had to give him the bottle. Addie Waudby was there helping that afternoon. They have Ester DeFrieese for there nurse. Mrs. Paulson stayed there two nights and Lucile was there too last night, she came Monday morning, she dont expect to go back anymore now. They didn't know wether Verne is coming or not. Mrs. Gerhart is all done up, it has been almost too much for her, she had sore throat last night. She and the hired girl both gave out being up so much all night, and the worry. I didnt know, but I would go tonight if no one else is there, but Ray wanted to see if the girl is able to come, first.

Pa had a phone put in there this morning, So it will be more handy than it was in the past. They dont let anyone in to see her. I would like to have seen her, but she mustnt be disturbed you know. The Ladies of the society sent her a boquet. She is in a bad condition Neva; if she get well the doctor thinks she will suffer or not be strong like she was. But we will hope "Doctors dont always know it all." She will pull through, Neva.

. . . She has been an awfully sick woman, and isn't out of danger yet but it seems good to have her a little better, we still have hope. We all feel so bad about it, it seems we all love her so much. And if anything happened it would be so hard for Ray. What would the poor boy do. . . .

Your Loving Mother

3/13

My dearest Fred —

I didn't keep my promise to write in the evening; but dear I know you'll overlook it when you know just how awful I felt. For I had gotten that letter before supper. . . . Couldn't go to supper. . . . I didn't feel like doing anything. . . . You could help a whole lot right now for I need to be cheered if anyone ever did. Of course as soon as I awoke this morning — I began wondering how Gladys is. And told the girls when I left just where I'd be in case I got a call. Well, Marge brought my letter to chapel — I met her in the hall, and opened the letter right there — was trembling so I could hardly read — the paper just shook. . . .

The letter was from [my brother] Bob, he wrote yesterday p.m. and says, she seems a little better — temperature has gone down some, it's 102. He says she certainly is a very sick girl — but they're doing all they can for her. And all we can do is wait. Oh I wish he'd told me to come; I've been wanting to go home all p.m. — but now I've got to wait till morning before I'll know anymore about it! He says mother wanted to wait till they knew whether its for better or worse before they sent for me. But I want to go. Seems like I just can't stand it. I couldn't do a thing today — tried to practice etc. but just couldn't.

Your own  
Neva

3/14

Dear Neva:

I am down at Ray's now. So can tell you just how Gladys is. She seems to be resting now. I was in to see her and she talked to me. She was so pleased about the pillow you sent her, she wanted to see it at different times. The Christian Endeavor sent her a bouquet of carnations. Say Neva you can get her a boquet, if it isent to much bother for you.

The baby was very sick last night and this morning, but is much better now. I am going to stay tonight. I did not stay the other night. So we hope it will continue, as it is now. So we will let you know from time to time, hope all is well with you. I will

close as Ray is waiting to mail this. But Gladys seems some better.

Your Loving  
Mother.

3/14

Fred dear —

... Well, "your" little girl is feeling a little better — it's quite a relief to know Gladys is a little better but still — Mother's letter this morn said she's not quite as good as Mon. she had another chill Mon. eve but was resting well Tues., and is not out of danger but they are still hopeful. Am glad they have a good nurse — Esther DeFriese. They also have a hired girl, but she and Mrs. Gerhardt are both about all in. Mrs. Paulson stayed there a couple nights. Mother said maybe she'd stay there herself last night — but I hope she didn't have to for I'm afraid she would be sick next.

Say dear I'm going to ask the folks tonite if I can't come home Fri nite — I could come back Sun. I probably couldn't see Gladys very much (for mother says they don't let hardly any one in — disturbs her too much — why Mother didn't even see her when she was there Mon. taking care of the little boy) but I'd see her and I'd feel a whole lot better — they don't tell me much about things in their letters — whether she's suffering much or not, etc. Guess they don't stop to think that I'm anxious to know about everything. Doctor's say if she does pull thru "she'll never be near as strong as before." But we hope they're mistaken on that. . . .

Always Yours,  
Neva

**N**eva's mother kept her updated through frequent letters filled with detailed descriptions of Gladys's condition, the comings and goings of family and friends, and her own hopes and worries. On the other hand, the infrequent messages from Neva's father, C. J. Stockdale, were direct and to the point.

3/15

[Western Union telegram]

Neva Stockdale

Gladys some better Think best for you to come home

C J Stockdale

3/15

My Little Sweetheart:

Am hoping you are safely home by this time for if everything went well you certainly must be. . . . How are matters? Hope better and improving and that it will continue for better so I can soon have you back. If it should happen that you would have to stay home over two weeks Id be tempted to come home some time to see you cause couldnt stand it without seeing you. . . .

With Love  
Your Own Fred.

3/15

My Very Dearest —

Gladys is in very serious condition — they don't think she can live till morning — Mother was here this p.m. and sent Verne to the depot to see if I came. . . . He said I came just in time if I want to see her. I'm at Gerhardt's now for mother had gone home — and Hazel and Bill are coming down in a few minutes and we're going up to Ray's. Oh Fred I don't see why they didn't tell me it was so awfully bad and I'd come before (for it is bloodpoison) she probably won't recognize me tonite, she can't talk anymore. She asked about me yesterday and wanted to know if I was here. She's fallen away so much they think I wouldn't know her. Dear, it's just awful and what will my poor brother do. The baby wasn't expected to live yesterday but is alright today.

Always Your Own  
Neva

3/16

My Own Dearest Fred —

... Lucile and I just got in from Rays and all have had supper here so Lucile is getting some for she and I and its ready — so must eat. Oh it's just awful — these hours and minutes I've lived thru since I got home. Gladys is in such an awful condition — and the suffering she's gone thru! but we're glad she's having no pain now towards the last.

When I got there last night found Ray in the kitchen trying to console the crying baby — and two people working over Gladys. She was delirious — wide open eyes and trying to talk and moving her arms all over. She couldn't [talk] very plainly but could make out what she said. She'd recognize diff. ones for a moment but not very long. I sort of hated to go in for Mildred had been in — holding a lamp for them, Gladys is downstairs in dining room — but had to quit and came out in the kitchen fainting. I took the crying baby from Ray — and you should have seen him — he stopped crying instantly — just looked and looked at his "auntie."

Esther wanted to phone Hobson so she says take baby in the parlor. I hardly dared look at Gladys, for I didn't dare faint with that baby. But when I stepped in the room Gladys says "Hello Frieda." I says hello but went on in the parlor. I just couldn't have gone up to her then. But after finally getting him to sleep and got my nerve and when I walked up to the bed as soon as she saw me she raised her head and stretched out her arms and she says (course it was hard to understand but got it all right) "Hello Neva, I'm so glad to see you."

Always Your Own  
Little Girl

3/17

My Dearest —

I'm right here at Gladys' bedside, the dear girl is sleeping now — and the nurse, Esther, said I could just sit here quietly so as to be near when she awakens for Esther's gone upstairs to lie down (she's had only about 6 or 8 hrs. and maybe not that much, rest since she's been here — came Sun morning — she certainly is about sick herself) and Mrs. Paulson's resting on the davenport. Nettie Wilson is doing up the kitchen work. Its very quiet around today. Gladys has aroused a little but we got her comfortable and is now sleeping again. But I must quit for a little and dust the room so Esther won't have to when she gets down.

. . . Couldn't possibly finish this before — had so much to do all PM about 5.30 Lucile came up to Ray's and I came to Gerhardt's to care for the baby — for we brought him here this morn. . . . The baby needed me all the time. Gladys pulled thru yesterday altho was so very low, and last night it was terrible — they could hardly hold her in bed. But this morning she seemed to have changed for the better and has rested all day. Doctor says tonite — he has some hope and we're all hoping.

Lots of Love  
Your Neva

**W**hile Neva was in Aplington with her family, she benefited from her own network of support; her close female friends from Cornell College wrote her letters filled with consoling messages of faith. (Cornell College was founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church and considered itself a nonsectarian "Christian institution." Students were required to attend daily chapel assembly and expected to attend at least one worship service at a church of their choice on Sundays.)



3/18

My dear Neva —

We were so sorry to hear that your sister [-in-law] was so bad when you reached home. We think of you so much and hope for the best. It seems that there is so little one can say but sometimes it is good just to know that one has friends and love and sympathy for after all that is by what and for what we live.

Sometimes it is hard to believe that all is for the best but in the long run we find it true. Even our deepest sorrows have made us able to give more to the people about us. Dr. Koehler preached such a good sermon this morning. He told of Jesus being left alone by his earthly friends in his hours of greatest grief and I thought how wonderfully blessed we are in receiving through him love and sympathy. . . . If there is anything I can do for you Neva just let me know.

Lovingly,  
Besse

3/18

My dearest Neva,

You can't know how badly we girls felt when we received your letter. We had all so hoped that your sister might be better. Oh Neva, my heart goes out to one in trouble, for I know what it means. It is so hard to always understand God's will, and know everything is for the best. All we can do is simply to trust and believe, knowing all things worketh out for the best to him that puts his unfaltering trust in the Master.

We girls are all thinking of you, Neva, everyday and hoping that you will have strength to bear the



**Neva's college friends: "We will be so glad to have you back with us."**

unusual burden that is put upon you. If there is anything we can do for you, be sure and let us know. . . . My there is so much suffering everywhere, if we only knew of it. And then to think how discouraged we get sometimes, for absolutely nothing that really matters. If we look far enuf we can always find some one who has more troubles than we do.

Now Neva, we are hoping and trusting everything will be for the best. We will be so glad to have you back with us.

Lovingly,  
Mabel

3/18  
My dear Neva

I can't tell you how sorry I am for both you and your family. . . . I do hope, Neva, that there is hope for her and that she will get better. We are watching every mail for some more news from you and are hoping and praying that it will be good news. . . . Be sure you let us know, Neva, about your sister because we are all anxious about her. . . .

With all my love  
Margaret S.

3/20  
Dear brother [Fred].

Mrs. Ray Stockdale was a little better. They have hope for her now again. I have seen the baby. I brought some jello over to Gerhards to bring to them. Then the baby was over to Gerhards. I saw Neva then too.

Your Sister  
Beulah Voogd

**N**eva returned to college after a few days. As she wrote in a letter to Fred, Gladys was improving. Letters from her family resumed, filling Neva in on the day-to-day events.

3/21  
My dear Fred —

I hope I hear tomorrow how Gladys is, for haven't since I got here. I went over to see her before I went to the depot, and almost changed my mind (about coming back) after I got there — for she had had another chill that P.M. and fever was up to about 104 or 104 1/2 but of course we couldn't expect her to just pick right up and get better quick and the doctor didn't seem to have any doubt about her. So I just came. She looked so much better that P.M. and talked to me and not a bit delirious just then. She'll probably be in bed a no. of weeks yet — how terrible to suffer like she has.

Always Yours  
Neva

3/21  
Dear Fredie

I talked to Hazel Sunday night in church Neva was not their Gladys was pretty sick yet But am glad she is getting better right along and the baby to. Nobody thought she would live the Doctors or Nurse. Neva got here just in time; she was so bad it was awful, Nurse is their yet, Verne is here yet.

Your Mama

3/22  
Dear Sis Neva

. . . Gladys is getting along pretty good. She is getting some better every day. We are all glad of that and Gerhards are feeling lots better over it. But I hope she don't get worse again. . . . I guess that is all from your brother.

G. S.

3/22  
Dear Neva

. . . Gladys is getting along fine a little better every day. . . .

From your brother Howard

3/22  
My Dearest —

Fred it seems just ages since I left you that day — why it seems about 6 weeks instead of just one — a week ago tonite, I was writing to you just about this

Esther wanted to phone Hobson so she says take baby in the parlor. I hardly dared look at Gladys, for I didn't dare faint with that baby. But when I stepped in the room Gladys says "Hello Frieda." I says hello but went on in the parlor. I just couldn't have gone up to her then. But after finally getting him to sleep and got my nerve and when I walked up to the bed as soon as she saw me she raised her head and stretched out her arms and she says (course it was hard to understand but got it all right) "Hello Neva, I'm so glad to see you."

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3/22

My Dearest —

Fred it seems just ages since I left you that day — why it seems about 6 weeks instead of just one — a week ago tonite, I was writing to you just about this

time — only I was feeling just a whole lot different than I am now — and you know why don't you? Why just think of giving a person up and thinking that it must be for the best — and then after all, suddenly realizing that she doesn't have to go and we can have her after all. Why Fred it seems almost too good to be true! and we'd just ought to feel perfectly happy now, hadn't we?

Yours  
Neva

3/26

Dear Brother.

Mrs. Ray Stockdale is getting better. Although she is not near well.

From Your  
Sister Beulah

3/26

Dear Neva:

This is Monday morning, we were down to see Gladys yesterday, she is improving slowly. The sore limb she had is getting better but the other one is sore now. she had such pain in it, they had to inject medicine to relieve pain. She is a pretty sick woman yet. They do not let strangers in to see her, only relatives, it seems to excite her some. I told her I hope she would get better soon, she said she thought it would be four or five wks. and then she wants to go home to her Mother's and stay. I suppose because the baby is there, she says it is a long time since she was home.

The baby is getting along fine, and the milk seems to agree with him and he sleeps most of the time, stoped in to see him yesterday. Verne is getting to be quite handy around the baby. Verne held him under his arm, for the folks to see him, and he held his head right up and looked at all of them just as though he understood it all. Lucile is still at Rays, she expects to be there this wk. and I think next wk. they are going to have a new girl. Ester is still there and the Doctor is still coming every day. Mr and Mrs Rabe were down to Gerharts yesterday. But they were not going to see Gladys, she did not seem to want them to come. She is hardly able to stand the strain yet.

She wanted to see Rob yesterday, she said she treated him so mean the last time he was there. She wanted to make it right. They think she must have dreamt it. She said there were chairs around her bed, all smeared with eggs, and he couldn't have a chair to sit on. Wasn't that strange. Say Neva, her flowers

were all wilted friday, and Anna and Lizzie sent her a bouquet of red carnations, came on that day. She seemed to be pleased. . . .

With much love,  
Your Mother

3/28

Dear Fred:

Mrs Ray Stockdale I understand is improving slowly

Your Father,  
R. A. Voogd

3/29

Dear Neva

I thought I had better write and let you know how Gladys is. We were up there this afternoon she is not getting along so well, although they are doing all they can do for her. She cant talk now and has a high fever. The Doc has not very much hope for her, But we are not going to give up, just yet. As long as there is life, there is hope. Do not get scared, But I thought best to let you know just how she is. So you will know what to expect. The baby is real good and growing some,

Yours in haste  
Mother

3/30

[Western Union Telegram]

Neva Stockdale

Come home at once  
C.J. Stockdale

3/30

My Own Neva:

Suppose you are safely home by this time at any rate here's hoping so and that matters are not as bad as you expected. . . . I had planned a glorious time for Saturday and now all in vain, but then of course your erand is far more important and so guess we can wait can't we dear. . . .

Love, Your Own  
Fred

3/30

Dear Fred —

Just arrived and no one is here, am going to phone home. . . . Just heard here that Gladys passed away this morning. Oh, how can I ever stand it?

Yours  
Neva

3/30

Dear Fred —

Mrs Ray Stockdale passed away this morning, poor girl, I wrote you the other day that she was improving seems that she had been till that day she commenced to sink

Your Father  
Rich Voogd

3/31

My dearest Fred —

Here I am at Ray's — have been here all the time (except I went down town this P.M.) they brought me right here when I came last eve. Lucile and I stayed here all night. Poor Ray — he never slept a wink all night. We're here "all alone" now — he and I (Lucile just went home for a little while) — he's trying to read — oh but its quiet — we're sitting here in the kitchen and the old clock is just ticking away.

Yes we're here alone — the one that has made this a home for him is gone — it hardly seems that it can be true — but it is — she's gone — she's in the parlor in a coffin — all dressed in her wedding clothes — and I combed her hair today — her mother wanted me to, for I combed it the day she was married so they wanted me to fix it as near like that as I could — so I've tried to; Dearest I do wish you could see her — she does look nice — of course she's fallen away, but her face has quite a sweet expression and oh she doesn't show all the suffering she's gone thru, as much as you'd think she would.

Oh its so sad — just think — just 1 yr. 1 mo. and 1 wk. ago today she stood there one of the happiest of brides and who would have ever tho't then, that twould be this way! (It certainly is a blessed thing that one doesn't know what's before them.) It seems hard to think its for the best but we know it must be — and then when we wonder why — why did it have to be — I always think of "Someday We'll Understand." . . .

My dear, on my way downtown I stopped in to see the little boy — the darlingest little fellow — but "motherless" — he'll never know what it is to have a "mother," will he? Dearest, it's all so sad.

Goodnite Sweetheart

4/1

My dear Neva —

. . . Dear we were so shocked and sorrowful to get your card. It is certainly very sad especially for your poor brother. I think it is fine that vacation is so near and that you can stay at home and do get a good rest and dont worry about anything. . . . Please dont take this too hard, it must all be for the best or it could not have happened. . . .

With lots of love,  
from Ruth

4/1

Dear Neva: —

I was so sorry to hear that your sister died. Please give my sympathy to your brother. . . .

With love,  
Mildred G.

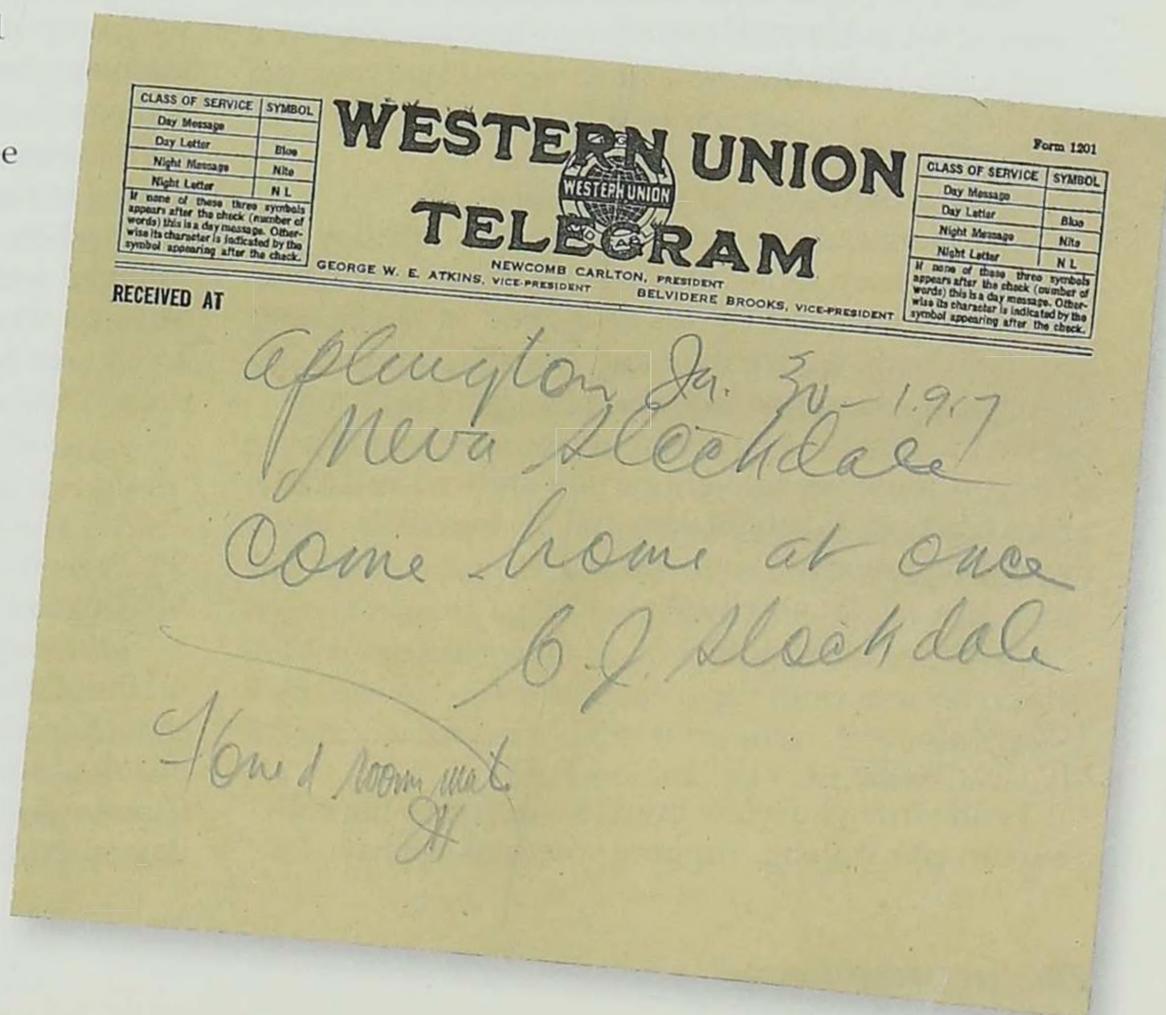
4/1

Dear Neva: —

Your card came and was dreadfully sorry to hear of the dreadful news. . . .

Lovingly  
Doris

The crisis past, the letters between Neva and Fred began to mention other matters: their dates, summer plans, and Fred completing school and beginning a job (perhaps in response to his father urg-



ing him to continue to work hard and to spend less money). The letters also mentioned another crisis—the United States had just declared war on Germany.

4/16

My Dearest —

... I've been feeling quite blue tonite — shed a few tears before supper — but I couldn't help it — got to thinking about Gladys being gone and how lonesome Ray must be out there, especially on a gloomy day like this. And then to think she couldn't even take care of her own baby — and that a — not even a "relative" taking care of it. Not that I'm worried about the care it gets — oh no — for I know Mrs. Lucas is caring as if it was her own. But I'm so glad he's right there and is a whole lot of comfort to Ray I know. . . .

With lots of Love  
Your Neva

4/18

My Own Neva:

... After 1st of June this boy will settle down to work for he soon wants his little girl to be with him always and if he can afford her why not? Dont you say so? Yes you do. Then too it will make more of a man of me, a desire to get some place. Can't help but tell you how I feel and you always want me to why not. Neva it seems to me that I love you more every-day and each day find I need you more all the time. . . .

Lots of Love and Kisses  
Yours Always  
Fred.

4/19

Dear Friend Neva

As I promised you a word about our little boy will try and keep same to you. He is growing just fine and he now weighs 10 1/2 lbs he is good as can be day and night both; we went up and visited Grandma G. the other pm it was so nice and pleasant. I took him out for the first time he gets more sweet every day wish you could see him I hope you are well and had a nice trip back to school, love to you from Baby and myself, everybody is well

Lovingly,  
Mrs. Lucas.

4/20

My Dear Neva: —

I will write you a few lines in a hurry, so the children can take it along. Suppose you think we have for-

gotten you, but we have been so busy all wk and one day I lost being in bed all day with a sick headache, so it is Friday all ready again. . . . We were down to Ray night before last. The Baby is getting along fine. . . .

from your loving Mother

4/25

My Own Neva:

... Even after you are mine always we will get out on a little trip once in awhile, that has always been my plan and we will enjoy ourselves just as much as before in fact I'll be just a whole lot happier after you are mine for I've tried to be a man in every way and have succeeded in lots of things and so you see I want you sweetheart yes I do. And now that you have promised to be content in a small place awhile I am satisfied that you really want me as much as I do you and you know it wont be long till our wishes and hopes will be relaized. Oh! you happy days. Im as usual thinking of my own girlie and always wishing her happiness and health. I'm a good boy always,

Lots of Love and Kisses  
Yours Always  
Fred.

4/28

Dear Neva: —

Have been looking for a letter from you all wk. I suppose you think you won't write if we cant. But really Neva we have been so busy all wk., and so tired at night, that we are ready for bed by nine oclock, for we get up at five now. [Your sister] Hazel is practicing now, she expects to go and take her lesson this afternoon. . . . We washed yesterday . . . and will send your apron soon. We have not been down to Ray's for a wk. He was here the other day, had been hauling hay up here. Ray says baby is gaining right along I think he weighs eleven pounds or better. . . . Ray and Mildred were here Sunday, said Baby weighs 14 lbs so you see he is doing better, gained 1 lb in three days. They are thinking of naming him Lewis Ray. . . .

Your Loving  
Mother

5/1

My Dearest —

... Finally heard from home — a letter from mother this p.m. She says [my brother] Bill's quit school. He had to help at home for a week and then didn't want to go back. But listen to this: Ralph Cunningham has joined the Navy and leaves yesterday or today. Certainly surprised me. Baby weighs

14 lb, gained 1 lb. in 3 days. Isn't that fine. . . .

Lots of Love  
Yours Always  
Neva

5/1

Sweetheart:

. . . The War problem seems to be a popular subject here for its all we hear since they have passed the drafting law. The young fellows seem to be worried and in fact they have reasons to feel that way for when your name is called you have to go and nothing can prevent it. Now your brothers are safe that is Rob, course Bill is too young for this drafting law it includes the ages of 21 to 24 so that is me. You see Im no farmer and am not married so it just catches me right, course Im ready if need be but dearie how I've longed for you and yes have waited a long time and if such a thing should come to pass it would make it seem awful hard for me, for as you know there wouldn't be much chance of coming back. But lets hope that such things will not happen and that our plans may work out just fine, for if they do you will soon be mine and then I'll quit this worry. . . . Yes Im just longing for you already for I want to hold you close for you are the only one that can make me feel contented and I always want you near. . . .

Goodnight Dear,  
Fred.

5/4

Dear Neva,

just a card to say the little darling now weighs a few ozs over 14 lbs he is so cute and sweet notices things and plays with his hands, he coos when I talk to him, Oh he is some boy. All are well, best wishes for you,

I am as ever  
Mrs. Lucas, nurse

5/7

My Little sweetheart:

. . . They are talking of closing our school next week for so many of the boys have enlisted that there are only a few left but here's hoping they don't for at least three weeks for I want to be near you dearest and besides you haven't been over here as much as I want you to for we want to see a few things before we go home don't we dear? One of the boys I know real well left this noon, he was around shaking hands with us and he joined the "Aviators Corps." I had quite a talk with him and he told me a number of interesting things. Please sweetheart don't worry about



**Neva's beau, Fred Voogd: "I always want you near."**

me so much for it hurts me to have you feel that way. I realize that you love me with all your might and would hate to see me go but I may be lucky yet at least we will hope so. I'm so happy for I've a true little girlie and you no doubt noticed that I was very happy yesterday for dearest we did have such a fine time and both enjoyed it so much. . . .

Lots of Love,  
Always Your Own  
Fred

5/8

My Own Sweetheart:

. . . Three more fellows from Business College enlisted yesterday p.m. You know you met Krueger well he's one of them. . . . Got a letter from Sis today, she says Dad run the Mitchell into the side of the shed and broke it says he's some expert driver but he says it won't happen again. Sure have to laugh how she puts it. Grandma seems to be worrying about me, wishes I were home. . . . Am anxious to get to work for it means having you sooner and that is my main desire always. . . .

With Love and lots of Kisses,  
Your Own,  
Fred

5/10

My Own Sweetheart:

... My but the bunch at school is awful slim only three or four of my old friends left and in two weeks after this I'll be gone home. Have been dreaming about those old car rides we'll have for even tho the city is nice in ways the small town with its old fashioned ways seems to beat them all for me. The city has many places of amusement but it takes loads of coin and after all the old auto rides and things at home seem to me as being more fun. We can go anyplace we want and believe me we are going to see stuff at Waterloo more than once this summer. We'll have some time this summer and always in fact won't we dear?

lots of Love, Yours,  
Fred

**N**ow alone, Ray wrote his sister Neva with news of the baby. The letter hinted at needing her help with the child and with running the house—since Neva's school year was almost over and she would be in Aplington for the summer anyway.

5/10

Dear Neva,

... Louis Ray is getting along fine he weighed 15 lbs. last sunday and has a double chin and his hands look like hands now (not claws). He notices things crows a little etc. but don't cry hardly any and is rather sober but will laugh once in a while sometimes out loud. Hazel and the girls were up sunday and Hazel took two or three pictures of him. I was not here when they were. They say he moved a little on one suppose the others will be alright tho.

... Suppose you got [the housekeeper] Mrs. Lucas's letter. Mrs. Lucas ... told me yesterday that she got a letter from her brother out west and she said she would have to leave a week from next Sunday. ...

Now when is your school going to be out and is it going to be so you can help me some way this summer? I haven't talked with the folks yet but gess I will have to be doing something pretty soon. I suppose Louis will be alright at Mother G. now and I know they would like to have him there. Mrs. Lucas takes awful good care of him and all that but [Gladys's sisters] Mill and Lucile don't like to come up here because she doesn't let them hold him enough, that is she always manages to hold him herself about that time. ... And now Neva write soon to

Your brother  
Ray

5/23

Dearest Fred —

... I can't help it — when I think of that brother of mine — cause I know how much I miss her — and how much worse it must be for him. But then we know it must have been for the best. ...

With just lots of Love  
Always Your Own  
Little Girl,  
Neva

**L**ike Neva Stockdale, many young women with college educations experienced a tension between the responsibility they felt to the world at large, and, on the other hand, parents' demands that daughters forgo their ambitions outside the home. This conflict between what social reformer Jane Addams called the "social claim" and the "family claim" could be excruciating.

As Addams explained, daughters had been trained to be "self-forgetting and self-sacrificing, to consider the good of the whole before the good of the ego. ... When the daughter comes back from college and begins to recognize her social claim ... and to evince a disposition to fulfill it, the family claim is strenuously asserted; she is told that she is unjustified, ill-advised." The social claim to the world at large, often "vague and unformulated," would give way to the more clearly expressed family claim, leading the daughter to lose a vital part of her life. Her elders, often unconscious of this situation, could not acknowledge the tension, and, as Addams concluded, "we have all the elements of a tragedy."

Addams herself had experienced it when she graduated from college in 1882, at a time when only one out of every 10,000 American women earned college degrees. By the time Neva was in college, that number had doubled—but the family claim was still alive and well in Iowa.

As spring turned to summer and then fall, this "family claim" echoed throughout the letters Neva received. Meanwhile, Fred had just graduated and was now working at the bank in the nearby village of Austinville. He was not happy about the prospect of Ray's needs interfering with his ideas about the summer. Fred had additional worries of his own—he could be drafted at any time.

5/24

My Own Neva:

... Well dear don't work too hard. ... Don't

worry so much about your exams and I'm sure you will get through everything fine if you only stop worrying see. Yes it must be hard for Ray but your worrying about it all the time won't help it any. . . . Can't blame you in a way for helping Ray but am afraid I won't get to see you very much cause if you handle all his work you'll have plenty to do for 12 to 15 hours a day without seeing me. I'm afraid its going to be too hard on you and then too he won't want to let you go when I want you and well you suit yourself in every respect only I don't want you to work too hard and you know I'm thinking of your best and not interfering only I don't want to miss all my old enjoyments. . . .

Your Own,  
Fred

6/1

My Own Neva:

I'm back from my first day's labor. Yes it was very fine and did like it just fine. . . . In a week will be able to handle it just fine. . . . Say I happened to handle a check that was written to you today and the name looked rather familiar, see? (Neva Stockdale) well I know her real well and it seems as tho I have some kind of a claim on her don't you think? . . .

Your Own  
Fred

6/4

My Own Neva:

. . . Well, Tuesday is registration day and I'm getting worried for dear they want such men as I am for you see I'm not a farmer and not a married man for you see they are exempt but I'm fit in every way only a trifle light but they don't care on draft for you see I can soon gain 4 lbs. . . . I want to be with you as long as I possibly can but now don't worry about me to much but I must it seems tell you these things. I wish we had been wise and had been secretly married then I would [not] have to go and would have been better for both I'm sure. Am hoping for the best dear and may the Lord help me to be able to have you as my little wife for that seems to be my main wish in life. . . .

Love and Kisses  
Yours Always  
Fred

**T**wo major events occurred in July: Neva's father died, and Neva and Fred decided to marry. Fred had said all along that once he had finished his education, Neva no longer needed to go to school.

However, the marriage came as a shock to her friends, who wrote to express their congratulations, but also to say they had fully expected her to be with them when the fall term began.

The marriage alone was a "family claim," in the sense that marriage and college were not seen as things one could do together. As summer ended, however, a larger, more immediate family claim was now voiced by Neva's Aunt Lizzie, her mother's sister. Lizzie pressured Neva to remain at her brother Ray's, despite her marriage and intention to set up her own household. Because of her age and availability, Neva appeared to be the most likely family member expected to help.

7/12

My dear Neva

I just heard about your father's death and I can't tell you how sorry I am. . . .

Yours with sympathy,  
Margaret

8/1

Dearest Neva,

You can't imagine how surprised I was to get your wedding announcement. I thought you were intending to come back to Cornell but nevertheless I offer my sincere congratulation to you and Fred.

I had been thinking of you, Neva, as taking care of your brother's baby this summer. I have intended to write you every week but something has come up every time. I really am quite mad at you, Neva, because it seems to me that I was to be flower girl or something of the sort at your wedding. You know I am afraid I shall never have one of my own. . . .

I suppose that I had better write you a very dignified letter, because Fred might not like the ones that I usually write you. I suppose he is quite jealous of you now.

We shall miss you at college next year. Especially your footsteps on the stairs as the clock is striking eight. . . . I am having a very good time this summer. I run the car a great deal and then we go to everything that comes along. . . .

Loads of love,  
Winnie

[Undated letter]

Dear Neva:

. . . . Why Neva you old sport who would have that you and Fred would have pulled off that stunt so soon. Now of course I expected it to happen some

time but I nearly fell off the Christmas tree when I opened the announcement this morning. Honestly I had to read it the second time before I was convinced that I wasn't having a pipe dream. I don't blame you tho and Neva dear, I wish you loads of happiness. Please tell Fred I send congratulations to him and hope he realizes what a dandy little wife he has. Of course he does. . . .

Freshie is coming to see me in Aug. I don't know whether he'll have to go to war or not. He won't go in the first draft anyway. . . .

. . . I'd love to hear from you — what you are doing for your country, what Fred is doing, etc. . . .

Sincerely Yours  
Thelma

8/28

Dear Neva

Since I was out at your mother's Sunday, I have been very much worried. She told me you were intending to leave Ray's and that you could not accomplish any sewing while there. My dear child, I wish I could talk to you. . . . This thing worries your mother, and my dear, I don't feel that she ought to have any more cares added to the ones she has to bear now.

Couldn't you and Fred help this much by staying there this winter and by next spring the Lord may send us a way out. If mother wasn't so weak, I would do it myself, and I too would sacrifice myself for love of your Mother and Ray. And I would have to leave my home and go among strangers. Don't you think that would mean something to me to give up so much. You won't have to give up so much, and you would be doing such a fine thing for Ray, and would lift this burden off your mother's shoulders.

You surely could stand it for this winter and if you wanted to, I should think Fred could do it for your sake. Remember Dear Neva your mother didn't feel like having you get married so soon after your father died, but she gave in and did something she didn't feel like doing just to please you and Fred. Now don't you think it would look as if you ought to help Ray, and so relieve her from this care.

If you agree to do this thing I will help you with your things. So you can go to housekeeping in the spring hemming table cloths, and napkins, towels, comforts, sheets and cases, anything you would not have time for. My dear I always loved you, for your kindness to your mother. This would make me love you even more, and perhaps some day I may help you out even as you would be helping your brother.

Neva, your mother must not be left alone on the

farm evenings at all. Don't you think you could take turn about in being with her Sat. evenings. One night you, one Rob, one Nell, one Hazel, and so on. Talk it over with Ray. So she won't be left alone as she was last Sat. night. What if something should happen to her, and she alone there. So you older children see to this. But don't tell her I had a hand in it, and I don't want to make her afraid, but it is not safe for a woman to be all alone on a big farm like that. If some tramp came along and knew she was alone, you can't tell what might happen. You could stay all night, if you take turns.

My dear these are only suggestions to you. Do as you think best. Give my love to Ray and let me hear from you soon. . . .

With much love, Neva

I am

Aunt Lizzie

September 1917

Dear Neva

I saw your mother Monday night, and she told me of the surprise you had given on Sunday, and my dear the way she looked when she told me you were going to stay with Ray, should have paid you well for the sacrifice you are making now, for her sake and Ray's. I want to thank both you and Fred. I really feel as if you had done me a kindness. Anything you do for your mother, makes me love you the better. Some day may be I can repay you. She said Ray was so pleased.

Mother and I want to get you a wedding present. . . . You and your mother can get your things and leave some here for us to work on. You can start any-time to bring it, and I can pick it up as I want to. Of course dear if you want them embroidered you will have to do that. . . . Aunt Anna and I will be glad to help you. . . .

Goodbye with much love my dear

Aunt Lizzie

Love to Ray — You and Ray must make Fred feel at home there.

**D**uring the tumultuous year of 1917, Neva Stockdale had responded to her father's telegram to "come home at once." She had responded when her brother Ray had asked, "Is it going to be so you can help me some way this summer." She had responded when Fred hinted, "It seems as tho I have some kind of a claim," wanting "to have you as my little wife." And she had responded when Aunt

Lizzie cajoled, "Now don't you think it would look as if you ought to help Ray."

For many women, the expectation that they would help out the overall family, and put aside or sacrifice their own career plans or personal wishes, was often accompanied by promises of love—or threats of the withdrawal of love and approval. As Aunt Lizzie had told Neva, "This would make me love you even more," and "Anything you do for your mother, makes me love you the better."

The reward of training young women to be self-sacrificing was not an unconditional love. Rather, love was the reward if the conditions of proper behavior and family expectations were met. It was an act of "self-sacrifice," just as Jane Addams had described a generation before. In such a scenario, education was secondary to the many specific roles a woman needed to perform. To stop attending college (and whatever the future applications of that education would be) was not seen as a particular loss for Neva. Her wish to set up her own home, with her new husband, was also seen as a small need, given the reality of her brother's situation—raising an infant and running a household while operating a farm. Individual needs and hopes were weighed against overall values and expectations of the family and community. The loss to an individual woman might be "tragic," in Jane Addams's words, but family maintenance and continuity were more valuable.

For Neva (*below*), the choice in 1917 was clear—she

would not continue with college. She spent the first year of her married life caring for her nephew and brother, running their home, as well as making Fred "feel at home there."

Neva and Fred raised two sons, Kenneth (born in 1921) and Richard (1924). Neva became a widow in 1936, when Fred died unexpectedly. She never pursued a calling outside the home. Nevertheless, she mediated the "family claim" later in her life by working within a network of women in her tiny community for larger social issues—forming a women's club, bringing flowers from her garden for Sunday worship services, and taking a leadership role within her church. She helped establish the Aplington library, worked as a volunteer there, and continued her involvement through the 1970s.

Certainly Jane Addams's "social claim" interested and engaged Neva. Nevertheless, at critical moments in her life, when members of her family, including her own husband, needed her attention and care, Neva would always "come home at once." ❖

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The letters published here are from a longer series spanning 1909 to 1920. The collection is fullest for the period when Neva and Fred are courting and in college, often writing twice a day. There are assorted family letters as early as 1903 and continuing into the 1970s, as well as letters and other items from Neva's younger sister, Hazel, who graduated from Grinnell College in 1923. Special thanks to my sister, Jan Voogd, for helping transcribe and organize the letters into archival folders, and for researching our family's history. In these letters, the original spelling and punctuation have not been altered except in a few places for clarity. Ellipses indicate omissions. For more on Aplington's history, see Jane Abbas, Diletta Buseman, Sylvia Meyer, and Becky Uhlenkopp, *Aplington: 1856-1981, 125 Years* (Aplington, 1981). Jane Addams wrote about social and family claims in her *Twenty Years at Hull*

*House* (1910). For a fuller discussion, see: Jean Bethke Elshtain, "A Return to Hull House: Reflections on Jane Addams," *Feminist Issues* 15: 1-2 (Annual 1997), p. 105; and Joyce Antler, "'After College, What?' New Graduates and the Family Claim," *American Quarterly* 32:4 (Fall 1980), 409-34. See also Roberta Frankfort, *Collegiate Women: Domesticity and Career in Turn-of-the-Century America* (New York University Press, 1977); Barbara Sicherman, "College and Careers: Historical Perspectives on the Lives and Work Patterns of Women College Graduates," *Women and Higher Education in America*, John Mack Faragher and Florence Howe, eds. (W.W. Norton, 1988); and Sarah L. Wilkerson, "An Oral History Collection: Reflections of Women Who Attended the University of Iowa, 1917-1924" (University of Iowa Archives, University of Iowa Main Library, Iowa City), 1980.