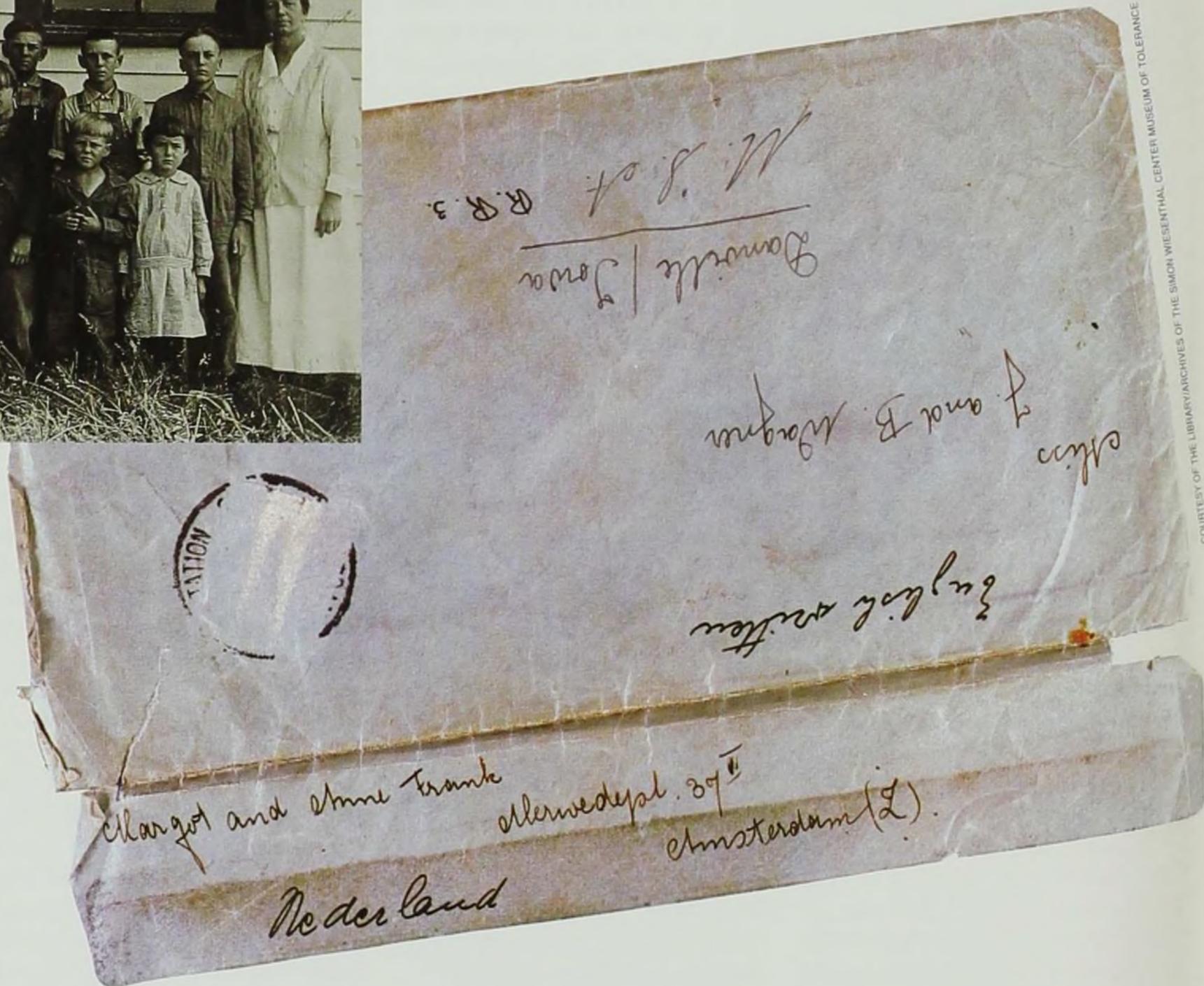


COURTESY CYRENE WAGNER



COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY ARCHIVES OF THE SIMON WIESENTHAL CENTER MUSEUM OF TOLERANCE

Postmarked from Amsterdam— Anne Frank and her Iowa Pen Pal

by Shelby Myers-Verhage

As World War II loomed over Europe, an innovative Iowa educator was bringing the situation home to her students. One spring day in 1940, the seventh- and eighth-grade teacher at the Danville Community School in Des Moines

County offered her students the chance to correspond with pen pals overseas. One of her students, Juanita Wagner, drew the name of a ten-year-old girl in the Netherlands—Anne Frank.

The name “Anne Frank” resonates for us

Opposite: Inset, Birdie Mathews with pupils, 1923. Envelope contained letters from Anne and Margot Frank sent to Danville, Iowa, in 1940, in a pen-pal exchange orchestrated by Mathews.

today because of the diary the young Jewish girl kept while in hiding from the Nazis during World War II. First published nearly fifty years ago, the diary is the story of an ordinary teenage girl facing extraordinary circumstances. She details in her diary the usual adolescent fears about growing up, falling in love, and being misunderstood by her parents. Yet she also writes as a Jew hiding from the Nazis as the war raged outside. Readers of the diary all over the world have come to see her as a heroine of the war because, in spite of all she suffered, she still felt that people were inherently "good at heart." Her words have touched generations of people who continue to struggle to understand the complexities of a world war in human terms. Few people realize, however, that long before *The Diary of a Young Girl* became legendary, a few pages of Anne Frank's thoughts came to Danville, Iowa, in the spring of 1940.

This brief connection between Amsterdam and Danville was because of the work of Birdie Mathews to bring those worlds together. By 1940, Mathews was a veteran teacher. She had been teaching since age eighteen, having begun her career at the nearby Plank Road rural school, where she taught grades kindergarten through eighth until she was past forty. About 1921, she moved to the Danville Community School, where she taught seventh and eighth grades. Over two decades at a country school, where she had taught a wide range of curriculum and varying ages and levels of students, no doubt made her a seasoned teacher. But Mathews had accumulated other experiences as well, overcoming the professional isolation that particularly plagued rural and small-town teachers.

These teachers had few opportunities to interact with colleagues outside of their buildings. Even help from the Iowa State Department of Education seemed distant; only local administrators could make requests for its limited materials. In an effort to bring new teaching practices and ideas to rural teach-

ers, the State University of Iowa and other colleges brought traveling workshops, called Tri-County Institutes, to regional locations each fall. Similar to today's in-service days, the institutes met for a half- or whole-day session of speakers and workshops. The institutes minimized the isolation of rural teachers and furthered their professional growth.

Birdie Mathews most likely participated in some of these sessions, since they were often required of all staff. Yet she also spent summers studying at Iowa State Teachers College in Cedar Falls and Colorado State University, as well as at Columbia University in New York, where, according to her 1935 diary, she took three courses—"Education and Nationalism," "Modern Trends in Classroom Practices," and "Character and Personality Testing." Few teachers had the time, resources, or incentive for this level of professional education.

"Miss Birdie," as her students called her, acquired more teaching resources through travel. She was even a bit of a local celebrity when she sent home lengthy letters to the *Danville Enterprise* detailing her 1914 trip to Europe. Her letters became front-page news, and her travel experiences became classroom lesson plans. Her students remember fondly the afternoons when they would gather around Mathews to hear her adventures. Opening their eyes to the world beyond, she frequently sent postcards to her students from her travels overseas and across the country, and it is believed that on one of these trips she acquired the names of potential pen pals for her students.

Because pen-pal writing as a classroom practice was still fairly rare at this time, only creative teachers such as Birdie Mathews would have set up situations in which their students could learn firsthand about the world. Some Danville students wrote to other children in the United States, but many, including Juanita Wagner, chose to write to overseas pen pals.

In her introductory letter in the spring of 1940, Juanita, age ten, wrote about Iowa, her mother (a teacher), sister Betty Ann, and life

COURTESY BETTY ANN WAGNER



Juanita Wagner, 1941

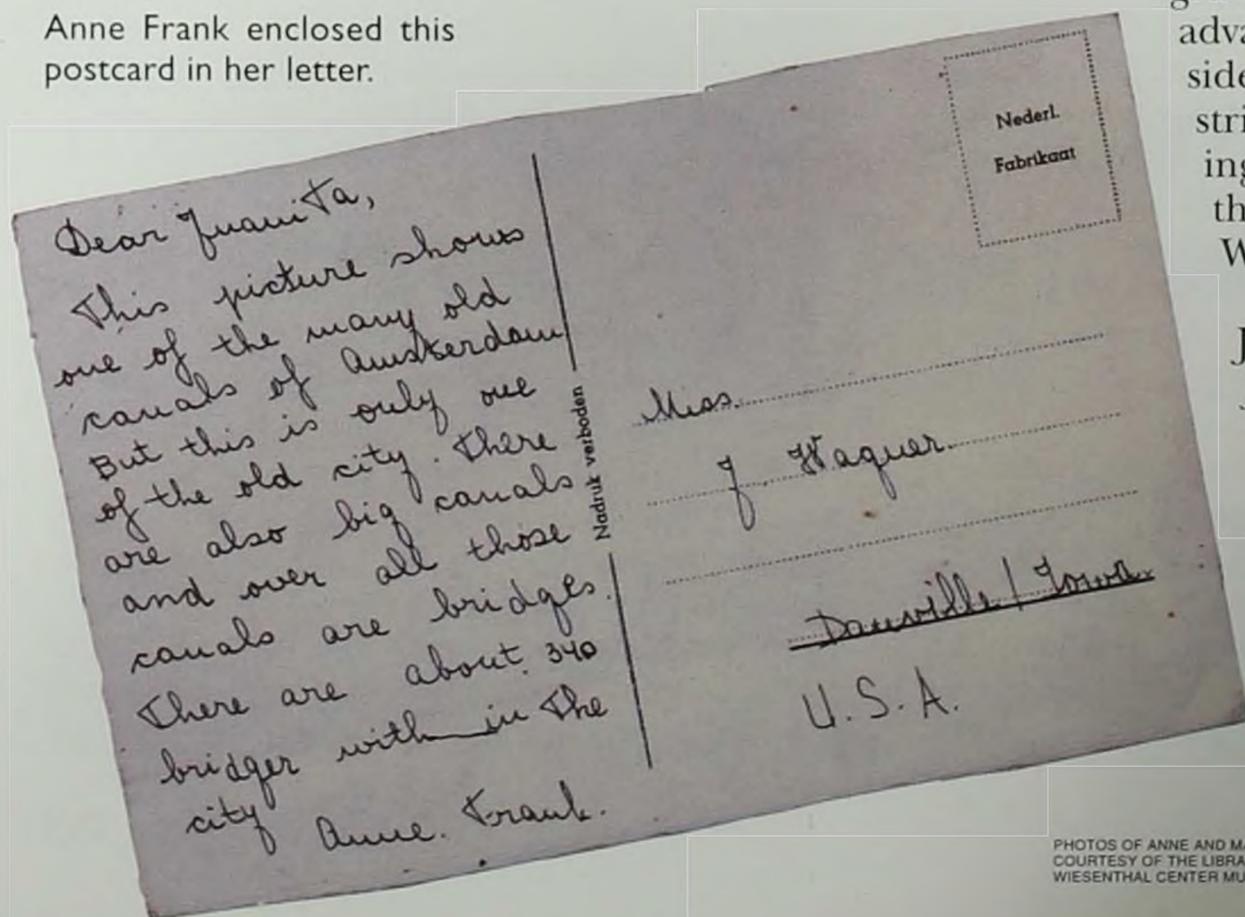
on their farm and in nearby Danville. She sealed the letter and sent it to Anne Frank's home address in Amsterdam.

In a few weeks Juanita received not one, but two overseas letters. Anne had written back to Juanita, and Anne's sister Margot, age fourteen, had written a letter to Betty Ann, Juanita's fourteen-year-old sister. "It was such a special joy as a child to have the experience of receiving a letter from overseas from a foreign country and new pen pal," Betty Ann Wagner later recalled. "In those days we had no TV, little radio, and maybe a newspaper once or twice a week. Living on a farm with so little communication could be very dull except for all the good books from the library."

The Frank sisters' letters from Amsterdam were dated April 27th and 29th and were written in ink on light blue stationery. Anne and Margot had enclosed their school pictures. The letters were in English, but experts believe that the Frank sisters probably first composed the letters in Dutch and then copied them over in English after their father, Otto Frank, translated them.

In her letter, Anne told of her family, her Montessori school, and Amsterdam. She

Anne Frank enclosed this postcard in her letter.



must have pulled out a map of the United States because she wrote, "On the map I looked again and found the name Burlington." Enclosing a postcard of Amsterdam, she mentioned her hobby of "picture-card" collecting: "I have already about 800."

Anne made no mention of the political situation in Europe. Her sister, Margot, however, wrote Betty Ann that "we often listen to the radio as times are very exciting, having a frontier with Germany and being a small country we never feel safe."

COURTESY BETTY ANN WAGNER



Betty Ann Wagner, 1943

Referring to their two cousins in Switzerland, Margot remarked, "We have to travel through Germany which we cannot do or through Belgium and France and in that we cannot either. It is war and no visas are given."

"Needless to say, we were both thrilled to have established communications with a foreign friend, and we both wrote again immediately," Betty Ann recalled years later. The Wagner sisters anxiously awaited a second reply postmarked "Amsterdam." But no reply came. Although they did not know that the Frank family was Jewish and therefore in grave danger as the Third Reich advanced, Betty Ann did consider that mail might be restricted or censored. Wondering what had happened to their new Dutch pen pals, the Wagner sisters waited.

Anne's April 29th letter to Juanita had been written just three weeks after Germany had invaded Denmark and Norway—that spring had proved to be a successful one for the Nazi campaign in northern Europe. On May 10, eleven days after Anne wrote her letter, the

Dutch surrendered to the Nazis.

At first, little seemed changed in the Netherlands except for the presence of soldiers on



Margot Frank. The Frank sisters enclosed this photo and Anne's (right) in their letters to the Wagners.

the streets. Yet Jews slowly began to feel the effects of the Third Reich. By October 1940, Otto Frank as a Jew would be required to register his business. By June 1941, when Anne Frank would be turning twelve, Jews would be forced to carry identity cards stamped with the letter "J." In the fall of 1941, Anne and Margot, like other Jewish children in Holland, would have to attend a separate school.

Europe's volatile situation seemed far removed from the world of Juanita and Betty Ann Wagner, where students thought of the war in Europe as they thought of ancient history, that is, as hardly relevant. Yet gradually, the war became more of a reality for the Wagner sisters, their teacher Birdie Mathews, and other

southeastern Iowans. Scattered articles about the war in Europe began to appear in the *Burlington Hawkeye Gazette* and *Des Moines County News*. In 1940, a war munitions plant was built between Danville and nearby Middletown. The munitions plant was somewhat controversial: on the one hand it brought new jobs to the local economy; on the other, it took almost a dozen family farms in the area. Temporary housing was constructed for people moving to the area for the jobs. Draft notices began arriving. On Fridays, "Current Events Day," students in Birdie Mathews's class and other classrooms discussed articles and radio broadcasts about the war in Europe.

Suddenly in December 1941, the bombing of Pearl Harbor catapulted the United States—and Danville, Iowa—into the war.



Anne Frank, before May 1940

Worried that something had happened to Anne and Margot, Betty Ann and Juanita Wagner still waited for a reply as winter dragged on. No letters came.

By the spring of 1942, in Anne and Margot Frank's world across the Atlantic, Jews were now forced to wear the yellow star of David on all of their clothing and were forbidden to use public transport. Soon many other restrictions came. Anne would write

SHSI (DES MOINES)



Trailers purchased by the Federal Farm Security Administration to house ordnance plant workers in Burlington were one sign that the war that was engulfing the Frank family and other Europeans was beginning to affect Iowans

in her diary: "Jews must hand in their bicycles . . . must be indoors from eight o'clock in the evening until six o'clock in the morning; Jews are forbidden to visit Theaters, cinemas and other places of entertainment." Anne was just entering adolescence, and such restrictions surely affected her budding social life. Later she would record in her diary her friend's comment that "you're scared to do anything because it may be forbidden."

When the Frank family received an arrest notice for Margot, they were scared enough to go into hiding on July 6, 1942. Otto Frank planted clues around their apartment to suggest the family had fled to Switzerland. Their hiding place was the rear part of the building where Otto Frank had his business in the heart of Amsterdam. The door to the "Secret

Annex," as Anne called it, was hidden behind a bookcase in one of the offices.

A business acquaintance, Hermann van Pels, and his wife and son, Peter, also joined them. A few months later a Jewish dentist, Fritz Pfeffer, also moved into the annex (making a total of eight people hiding in four small rooms and a watercloset). Four of Otto Frank's coworkers knew about the annex above their offices; they supplied the families with food and news of the outside world. Although her letter writing to Danville had long since ended, Anne wrote faithfully in her diary.

On August 4, 1944, while Danville residents were reading about the Polish underground and the Nazis' flight from Florence in the *Burlington Hawkeye Gazette*, German po-

Ten-year-old Anne Frank writes to Juanita Wagner in Iowa: "I

Dear Juanita, I Amsterdam 29
 April Monday.
 I did receive your letter and want to answer you as quick as possible. Margot and myself are the only children in our house. Our grandma is living with us. My father has an office and mother is busy at home. I have not far from school and I am sitting in the fifth class. We have no hour-classes we may do what we prefer, of course we must get to a certain goal. Your mother will certainly know this system, it is called Montessori. We have little work at home.
 On the map I looked again and found the name Burlington. I did ask a girl friend of mine if she would like to communicate with one of your friends. She wants to do it with a girl about my age not with a boy.

I shall write her address underneath. Did you yourself write the letter I received from you, or did your mother do it? I include a post-card from Amsterdam and shall continue to do that collecting picture-cards I have already about 800. A child I used to be at school with went to New-York and she did write a letter to our class some time ago. In case you and Betty get a photo do send a copy as I am curious to know how you look. My birthday is the 12th of June. Kindly let me know yours. Perhaps one of your friends will write first to my girl friend, for she also cannot write English but her father or mother will translate the letter.

PHOTOS OF LETTER, COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY/ARCHIVES OF THE SIMON WIESENTHAL CENTER MUSEUM OF TOLERANCE

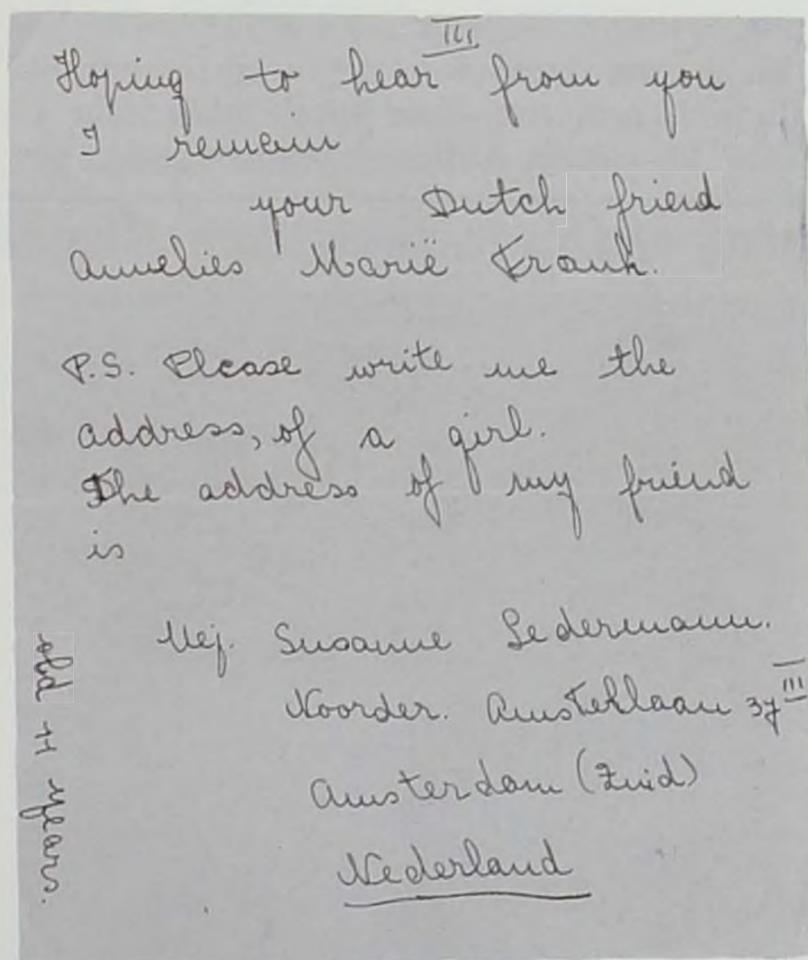
lice entered the secret annex and arrested the Frank and van Pels families and Fritz Pfeffer. Within a month, they were transported by train with many other Dutch Jews to Auschwitz, the death camp in Poland. The men and women were separated, but Anne and Margot were allowed to stay with their mother until October 1944, when the sisters were transferred to Bergen-Belsen. Their mother died in January 1945.

At Bergen-Belsen, conditions were atrocious, food was scarce, and thousands were dying from disease. Anne discovered an old school friend in another section of the camp; the two girls talked through the barbed wire separating them. As winter ended, typhus swept through the camp. Margot became ill first and died in March 1945. A few days later,

just weeks before the British liberated the camp, sixteen-year-old Anne died.

After the war was over, Betty Ann Wagner was teaching in a country school in eastern Illinois. Still curious about the Dutch pen pals, she wrote again to Anne's address in Amsterdam. A few months later, she received a long, handwritten letter from Otto Frank. He told about the family hiding, of Anne's experiences in the "secret annex," and how Anne had died in a concentration camp. This was the first time Wagner learned that Anne had been Jewish. "When I received the letter I shed tears," Wagner recalled, "and the next day took it with me to school and read Otto Frank's letter to my students. I wanted them

"Hoping to hear from you I remain your Dutch friend. . . ."



Experts believe this is the only surviving letter written by Anne Frank in English. The three-page letter is transcribed on the right.

Amsterdam 29 April Monday

Dear Juanita,

I did receive your letter and want to answer you as quick as possible. Margot and myself are the only children in our house. Our grandma is living with us. My father has an office and mother is busy at home. I have not far from school and I am sitting in the fifth class. We have no hour-classes we may do what we prefer, of course we must get to a certain goal. Your mother will certainly know this system, it is called Montessori. We have little work at home.

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Hoping to hear from you I remain your Dutch friend Annelies Marie Frank.

P.S. Please write me the address of a girl. [Anne ends with the name and Amsterdam address of her own friend, Susanne Ledermann.]

to realize how fortunate they were to be in America during World War II."

By 1956, Wagner had settled in California and was driving home from work one day when she heard a review on the radio of a new Broadway play called *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Thinking it might be the same Anne Frank, she rushed to order a copy of the play. As soon as it arrived she realized it was indeed her sister's pen pal; a photo similar to the one from Anne appeared on the cover.

Although Otto Frank's letter had been misplaced during one of the Wagner family's frequent moves, Betty Ann had carefully kept Anne and Margot's letters safe. In the late 1980s the letters became part of the collections of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, where they are now on display.

And what of Birdie Mathews, the small-town teacher who by a combination of innovative teaching and pure chance briefly connected the Wagner sisters and the Frank sisters? "Miss Birdie" had retired the year the war ended,

having built a local reputation as a devoted teacher who never hesitated to create special opportunities for her students. Years earlier, she had started what she considered the county's first drivers' education program: during recesses, she taught farm boys how to drive her car. The trade-off was that now that they knew how to drive and could borrow Mathews's car, they had to keep coming to school despite seasonal demands of farm work. When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, Mathews had refused her salary so that fuel could be bought to keep the school heated and open. She often organized class picnics and wiener roasts at a park or her home. One former student recalled when "Miss Birdie" took her to a state spelling contest and an overnight stay at the University of Iowa—a truly exciting trip for a youngster from Danville, population 309 in 1940.

Because Danville was a small community and Mathews came from a large family, she taught many of her nieces and nephews; they often remarked that she was tougher on them than on the other pupils in an effort to avoid favoritism. Although revered by her stu-

Thirteen-year-old Margot Frank writes to Betty Ann Wagner:

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Amsterdam 27th April 1940. Released under
by Simon Wiesenthal

Dear Betty Ann,
I have only received your letters about a week ago and had no time to answer a right away. It is Sunday today, so I can take the time to write. During the week I am very busy as I have to work for school at home every day.

Our school begins at 9 a.m. till noon then I go home by my bicycle (if the weather is bad I go by bus and stay at school) and return for the class beginning at half past one, we then have class until three o'clock. Wednesday and Saturday afternoon we are free and use our time to play tennis and to read. In the winter we play hockey or go skating if it is cold enough. This year it was unusually cold and all the canals were frozen, today is the first really spring day, the sun shining bright and warm. Generally we have a lot of rain.

In summer we have a two months holiday, then a fortnight at Christmas and so on Easter. Whitsuntide only four days.

We often listen to the radio as times are very exciting, having a frontier with Germany and being a small country we never feel safe. In our class most of the children communicate with one or the other so I do not know children who would want to take up correspondence. I only have two cousins, both living at Basel, Switzerland. For Americans ideas this is not far but for us it is.

We have to travel through Germany which we cannot do or through Belgium and France and in that we cannot either. It is war and no visas are given.

We live in a five room flat attached to the only skyscraper of the city being twelve stories high! Amsterdam has about 200,000 inhabitants. We are near the sea-shore but we miss hills and woods. Everything being flat and a great part of the country lying below sea-level, therefore the name Netherlands.

Father is going to business in the morning and returns about 5 p.m.; mother is busy at home. My grand-mother is living with us and we rented one room to a lady.

Now I think I have told you quite a lot and I am expecting your answer.

With kindest regards
your friend,
Margot Frank

P.S. Many thanks for Juanita's letter as Anne is writing to her I need not write myself.
Margot.

dents, she was known as a strong disciplinarian. One former student recalled her response to a particularly obnoxious boy: "Miss Birdie took him in the hallway and shook him until his shirt buttons popped off."

After her retirement in 1945, Mathews's sense of exacting detail and organization translated easily into her long-time love of needlework and gardening. A meticulous gardener, she believed that "flowers do something for a person—brightens up a home." Every year she shared her abundant vegetable crops with friends and relatives, and she continued to volunteer at the Danville Congregational Church, where she and her family had deep roots. She remained involved in the lives of her many nieces and nephews. With more time to travel, she took several trips to sunny locations during long Iowa winters. She had always kept travel diaries. Now retired, she took more care to keep her day-to-day diaries current. As the years progressed, Mathews traveled less, yet she continued an active correspondence with friends and former students. She died in 1974, at age ninety-four.

Today, Betty Ann and Juanita Wagner continue to tell their story about their brief connection to Margot and Anne Frank, aware that even the most ordinary person can be a part of extraordinary situations. Against a backdrop of an approaching world war, three human impulses briefly connected: "Miss Birdie" Mathews's vision to broaden her students' world view; Juanita Wagner's desire for an overseas pen pal; and Anne Frank's eagerness to respond as "your Dutch friend," as she signed her letter. As a result, a few letters were exchanged and a few friendships sprouted one spring a half-century ago, when Amsterdam came postmarked to Iowa.

In early July 1942, when Anne's family decided to go into hiding, Anne wrote in her diary about packing hurriedly: "The first thing I put in was this diary, then hair curlers, handkerchiefs, schoolbooks, a comb, old letters; I put in the craziest things with the idea that we were going into hiding, but I'm not sorry, memories mean more to me than dresses." Could some of the "old letters" she packed have been postmarked "Danville, Iowa"? □

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