

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan

Autograph Books

When I phoned Terry Berry, director of the Amador-Livermore Valley Historical Society's museum in Pleasanton on Main Street, to ask if their collection included autograph books, she responded, "Oh, you mean those little books people used for remembrances in the 1800s?" I laughed. "Well, I'm not quite that old." Yes, my box of special memories holds my own battered blue book, about 6 by 4 1/2 inches, with the title "Autographs" in gold. The first entries are from June 1947 when I was attending my last days of elementary school at Public School 50 in Baltimore, Maryland.

Sometimes these little books were called friendship albums, and that seems to have been the theme for several of my classmates: "There are big ships/There are little ships/But there is no ship/Like friendship." Around the edge of one page a friend wrote: "When you are old and trimming the hedge, remember the girl who wrote on the edge." Another advised, "When you are old and out of shape, go downtown and buy yourself a girdle for \$1.98." My sixth-grade teacher wrote, "My most affectionate regards to my favorite poetess," in beautiful handwriting. Even my father got into the act: "For me it will always be a little girl with pigtails and quick, busy feet."

Autograph books started in the mid-sixteenth century. Their popularity died out with the publication of yearbooks; nowadays students write good wishes on their yearbook pages. In autograph books people wrote short poems or aphorisms, Biblical or literary quotations, perhaps a prophesy; some just signed their names. Others made drawings, occasionally elaborate ones.

Dr. Grace Devnich owns Livermore native Susie Kelly's green velvet autograph book with its ivory-colored celluloid cover incised with flowers and a cherub. Susie attended the Livermore Grammar School until her graduation from the eighth grade. Alma Thorn wrote on January 31, 1899, "May the devil bite the toes of all your foes, /So we may tell them by their limping." In April Susie's teacher Grace McKeany hoped "May you grow to be a good and useful woman." Archer Bowles contributed the traditional "Roses are red, /Violets are blue, /Sugar is sweet, /And so are you;" Paul Kamp was more creative: "Roses are red, /Violets are green, /You look better/ Than a washing machine."

The Museum on Main in Pleasanton has several autograph books in its collection. Cora Rasmussen wrote in Hazel Snarey's book in 1906, "You ask for something original, /But where shall I begin?/ For there's nothing original in me/Except original sin." The front of Hazel's book had a winter landscape. In 1907 when they were in the eighth grade, Emma Reimers advised Hazel: "Some temptations come to the industrious, but all temptations attack the idle." "Put not your trust in money, but put your money in trust," was Chris Runkel's more practical advice.

Louisa Bernal had a maroon velvet "Floral Album"; some of its pages were decorated with flowers or nature scenes. In 1891 Gregory Vitaich took advantage of a page with a robin's nest to write, "Think of me little, /Think of me long/And listen to the words/Of the robin's sweet song." Several classmates expressed their wishes to Louisa in Spanish. A.H. Amador wrote, "Este papel es el alma/La tinta el primer renglón/La pluma deseo el verde/La firma es mi Corazón."

Camille Lucas's autograph book, with green velvet back and celluloid front imprinted with sprays of flowers against a woven basket design, is also in the Pleasanton collection. Camille attended Pleasanton School in 1899 and 1900. Along with their written entries during these years, many students pasted in miniature self-portrait photographs; this custom seems to have evolved into today's practice of including small portraits in yearbooks. Others added colorful stickers.

Peter Breuss wrote, "May ne'er across your pathway drift/A cloud too dark for love to lift," and Lena Thonesen reminded Camille that "A kind word never dies." Camille's mother contributed, "Know this, too, before you are older, /And all the fresh morning is gone, /Who puts to the world's wheel a shoulder/Is he that will move the world on."

Some of us still have these little books at home; others might be found in collections of local historical societies, such as the Livermore Heritage Guild at the Carnegie Library, the Dublin Heritage Center at Murray School, the Amador-Livermore Historical Society in Pleasanton, the San Ramon Historical Society in the Danville train depot. Don't overlook these resources for history in our own Tri-Valley.

Or you could visit the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library at Princeton University and peruse their collection of 196 student autograph books written between 1825 and 1884. The men wrote good wishes to each other, selections of poetry, letters of farewell, and reminiscences of shared undergraduate events—pranks, card games, chess matches, classes. Such a large collection affords an interesting portrait of mid-19th century college life.

(Readers can reach me via e-mail at am3homan@yahoo.com.)

Anne Homan is on vacation. The above was a repeat of a column that ran earlier.