A Picture of the Wilmington Homefront During World War II

This edition of the Bulletin examines the Wilmington homefront during World War II through a collection of letters belonging to the family of Mary Eloise Bethell. The letters were submitted to the Society by Mildred Harris. Mary Eloise Bethell was the daughter of William Craig Pinckney and Mary Guettart Mitchener Bethell of Wilmington. A graduate of Converse College, she was largely a self-taught artist. She furthered her studies at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris. She also attended the Instituto de San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, Portland State College in Oregon, and New York University. Her art has been exhibited in New York, New Jersey, South Carolina, New Mexico, Canada, Lebanon, France, and Mexico.

Mary Eloise Bethell Tells the Story

Before I knew what was happening, she'd worked out a plan to turn three of the four bedrooms in our house into rooms for officers from Camp Davis to use when they were in town. They'd come in on Friday night with steaks to barbecue on the grill in our yard, or they might take us out to the airport where there was some sort of installation; all kinds of military stuff and a mess hall with long tables where we ate dinner with the soldiers. Sometimes we went to Uncle Henry's, a barn-like place with a long table running down the center. Boys would come in hauling steamed oysters in a plain kitchen bucket and dump them out on the table. If you wanted, they'd open your oysters for you and drop them in hot butter. The oysters were roasted close by the barn and the heat of the fires kept the place quite comfortable. I didn't eat oysters or shrimp, so I'd have fish and it was really good. For $1.00 you ate all you wanted, sitting there looking out over the water. There was a crowd there all the time.

I especially liked Captain Burrows who was good looking, interesting, and one of the nicest people I've ever known. He was studying our tidal creeks and used to take a small boat to explore some of them. Occasionally he invited me along on his shorter trips. Once we went up the Cape Fear River and into a little creek which I doubt I could find again; they've probably built a factory on it by now. I have a photograph from that trip showing me in a two-piece sarong-type bathing suit I just loved. That was highly unsuitable attire for exploring a swampy, snake-y creek doesn't seem to have occurred to me. Some time later Mother told me that Captain Burrows, out in the Pacific, had been seriously injured. That brought the war closer to home.

Mother’s project for renting out rooms was very successful; now she was bringing in some money and I was headed back to Converse. College girls wrote pen pal letters to unknown young men in the Armed Forces to keep up morale. We had these stamps about an inch square, with our picture on them and we sent these to whomever. I still have a letter from somebody named Bill, who wrote back that he was an Irishman, “an outspoken Westerner,” tempo
rarily from Louisville, Kentucky. He wanted to know if I was going to join the Army or the Navy. "My mistake - they don't have girls in the armed forces do they? Too bad, I am sure a Southern Belle like yourself would do much to make the Navy a much more pleasant place for some of us lads who are headed for that branch of things."

For those of us in school, the war seemed pretty remote most of the time except when someone we knew was missing or killed in action. I'd sort of been going steady with Tommy Jenkins so when he was killed in the early days of the war it was a terrible shock. During summers in Wilmington I worked with the group that was spotting planes for civil defense. Mother was active in that too, and all those single men under her wing brought out her mother hen instincts. She arranged parties and introduced them to "nice girls."

The Rest of the Story

(Told by Mildred Harris)

So it happened that officers from Camp Davis, eager to get away from "Splinter Village," found a weekend retreat in a two-story brick home located on a large lot at the northwest corner of Park Avenue and Windsor Drive (the address at the time was 205 Windsor Drive) Glen Arden, Wilmington, North Carolina. The officers christened it "The Chateau Bethell," in honor of the owners of the house, William Craig Pinckney Bethell and his wife, Mary Guerrant Mitchener Bethell, always known as M.G. The 1940 construction contract shows house and lot together cost $12,249.00; there was a mortgage of $11,000 payble at $165.00 a month. As their daughter tells us, a financial pinch was the impetus for renting out rooms in the first place, but everybody concerned appears to have enjoyed the arrangement.

As members of the original "Bethell Gang" were posted from Camp Davis to other areas, new ones took over their rooms. Some absent ones wrote only occasionally; others kept up a regular correspondence, reporting their activities, location (when they could) or instituting a guessing game by hinting at where they were when all the censor would let them say was "somewhere in Germany." At one point, George Bethell had access to a typewriter; otherwise, all letters are written by hand. Postage was free with a full military return address and a signature on the envelope. Use of the tiny V-mail messages was encouraged from overseas but regular airmail required a six cent stamp.

The surviving letters, from the years 1943-1945, give us a snapshot of Wilmington people and places as well as some idea of the effect at home of disruptions, large and small, caused by the distant war. They wrote about mail never received; they thanked M.G. for the boxes of goodies she kept sending them - whether they wanted them or not; they hinted at the grimness of war; they recounted amusing incidents; they passed around news of other members of the gang, of family and friends. In cold nuts on the Western front and on sweltering islands in the Pacific, they reminisced about the food and other comforts of their home away from home, The Chateau Bethell.

The Letters

1. Colonel Donald J. Bailey, Camp Davis, NC, 10 February 1943

George Burroughs came by last night for a brief visit. He reiterated Murray Dougan's invitation to use his room while he was away and insisted I take the front door key (though I tried in vain to tell him that was unnecessary). It seems that our friends are all becoming majors: Dougan I heard got his; Charlie Shreve got his today. I forwarded Don Roth's letter to him via George last night.

P.S. M.G., I almost forgot your request for Bob Oswald's address. Really, I do not know what it is but believe Camp Edwards, Mass. will get him.

2. Major Murray D. Dougan, Orlando, FL, 12 October 1943

It was wonderful, every minute - you have such wonderful friends and such a lovely home - I'm certainly going to miss it all. I only hope someone will show your son the kindness and consideration you have shown me.

3. Bailey, Camp Davis, 24 June 1943

As you note from the heading of this, we now belong to the Automobile Association of America (AAA). Now we should be able to command guns, automatic weapons, or search lights with equal ease.

This place has really become "Mosquito Hollow." We have to sleep under mosquito nets and use flit guns to keep from being carried away.

As for the ration books, my dear M.G., I certainly would have no use of them and want you to use all you wish from them.

4. Bailey, New York City, 22 April 1944

So you can check this off with the Postmaster, here's a request for another box of cookies or brownies or candy that you make. I certainly would like and definitely could use another box of your goodies, M.G. We are rationed to one little paper sack of a half-dozen cookies a week which we can purchase at the PX and our candy supply consists of one O'Henry bar or Hershey bar a week.

5. Bailey, New York City, 30 May 1944

Yesterday, I ran into an old friend of ours, Dave Hopper. Do you remember him? Your ears should have burned because we reminisced at length on the wonders of the Chateau Bethell and the world renowned charm of its hostess and host. Its funny how so many of the old Davis gang have settled down in Merrie [sic] England. We run into one another quite often.

 Wish I could tell you where I am and what we are doing. All I can suggest is that you follow the papers and read "Time" and you will get a much clearer picture than you would have even if I was unencumbered with necessary censorship restrictions. England will always be in my memory as one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. Most of it is somewhat comparable to Orton.
6. Bailey, New York City, 26 June 1944

Normandy has been as cold as the devil the past three weeks. We are not far from the front lines.

7. Dougan, San Francisco, CA, 7 August 1944

I just received your swell letter. About your other letter - I guess it is lost because I never received [it]. That happens fairly often out here with these mail planes. They are always going down. Sometimes they recover the mail, other times they don’t.

From the looks of the news, it certainly looks like our invasion forces are trying their best to beat Stalin to Berlin. I’m sort of hoping that Joe beats them there though - because I believe those Russians would really know how to handle that bunch. I was certainly glad to hear from some of the Chateau Bethell gang over there in the Beachhead area - I certainly envy them their experience - but we have been having a little fun ourselves down here every once in awhile.

Thanks a million for your very kind offer to send me anything I need, but honestly I can’t think of a single thing that I need - our wants are so few and Uncle Sam looks to them very well. I can think of anything for you all to send me I promise I will let you know right away.

Honestly, words cannot begin to tell you how very much I miss you all, the Chateau Bethell, and all the gang back there - and yet less than [a] year ago the whole gang was together back there. We really had a lot of swell times and I really miss them. I think what I miss more than anything are those quite [sic] Sundays, just laying around and not doing a thing I didn’t want to and listening to record[s].

8. Major P. N. Royce, New York City, 9 August 1944

As I sit here sweltering in the Italian summer, I think of how hot it was in 1942 when one Royce, very dirty and very much beaten down by it all, dropped himself into Chateau Bethell. It is not quite so hot here as it was there at this time of year, but there is no place where one can go into a lovely, cool private home, sink into an easy chair, and sip a tall glass of bourbon and water. “Them wuz da days!” I’ll never forget your kindness to me, my friends, and my family, and I’ll be back some day to thank you again.


It seems a long time since we [were] all together at Chateau Bethell. Those Saturday nights we used to try to take Old Wilmington apart - and almost succeeded. I still remember the thrill of being able to sleep until 3:00 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon, under those wonderful comforters - just a good old lazy Sunday - doing nothing I didn’t really want to do. Lord, how I miss those out here. If I could just spend a lazy afternoon and completely relax it would be wonderful - and listen to some records.

Do you remember the Saturday nite [sic] we all started cutting off ties? How that ever got started, I will never know, but it seemed like a wonderful idea at the time, and still does. I still laugh when I think of how we cut Bill’s tie off, right up to the knot. Those were certainly wonderful days and I will never forget them. We certainly enjoyed ourselves and will again, someday.

10. Bailey, somewhere in Holland, 23 October 1944

It was terrible to hear about George Burroughs. Did he “get his” in New Guinea? Of course I remember him very well indeed. I do hope he pulls through in grand shape and without after effects. And Phil Royce - first in Italy and now in France. In this huge Army over here now, one runs into so many friends unexpectedly so it is very probable that I might bump into Phil some place, some time, although if he is where I expect he is now, the chances of seeing him in the near future are mighty slim. It was sad hearing about Mayor Cameron. His son, Dan, was in to see me the other day and I offered him my condolences.

You see, I am coming back there someday and certainly the reason is not only because I have got furniture and trunks stored at the Farrar Storage Warehouse!

Thad an overnight stay in Brussels the day it was liberated. It will long live in my memories because the population in both places were so overjoyed they almost mobbed one.

It is a shame Davis is closing down. What do you suppose they will do with it, tear it down? The wastages of war are appalling aren’t they?

11. Bailey, somewhere in Germany, 5 January 1945

Heaven knows that all you do is forever think of things to do for us. Therefore please do not send me anything else but please know that I did so appreciate the things you and Bill did send! Thank you a million! I’ll need a thing now for a long time.

Its hard to tell what we are doing and about where we are without violating censorship, so I’ll let you use your imagination. Notice we are now deep in Germany. It is hilly, pine-tree-covered forest land, with a white blanket of snow on the ground.

12. Bailey, New York City, 15 April 1945

It was a surprise to hear the Eloise and Dougan’s romance hit a snag. I’m sorry. The uncertainty of war and its great distances, however, will upset many supposedly stabalized [sic] emotions. Heavens knows when any of us can expect to get home. Then, after this is over, we’ll have a Pacific job on our hands in the great wastes of China.

What a shock our President’s death really was. I suppose that we cannot contest God’s will, but it does seem that it would have been better for the world if he had been spared one more year. No one can dispute the fact that he was one of the greatest leaders this world has ever seen.

13. Dougan (now a Lieutenant Colonel), San Francisco, 11 June 1945

This war separated us by 12,000 miles, right at the time of our lives that we needed most to be together - that and the fact that words in letters can just never do the job that had to be done in this case. I used to think that anything could be conveyed with words, but I know now that I was never more wrong. I know all this would never have happened if we could have been together and talked it over, but the Gods of War decreed otherwise so we will just have to make the best of it.

When I said I needed her help before, I wasn’t just making up words. There have actually been times when I felt that if she didn’t help me I would never come out of this.

Maybe it sounds strange for someone to cling to a pillar of strength 12,000 miles away, but its not at all strange to those of us out here. Almost every one has such a pillar that he calls on for reserve when the chips are down. With some it’s the farm they are going to buy; with others it’s their wife, or their children, or the garage they are going to start. With me it was, and is [Eloise] Bethell. These things allow one to relax, to shut out the things that happen and the things you must see. They are only really escape mecha-

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isms that our minds dream up - our escape from reality - without which a person will soon escape from reality the hard way - by going “tropical.”

I want to feel that regardless of what Eloise’s decision now is, that when I do finally get back (and I will, I know) that I will still be one of the “Chateau Bethell boys.” That means a lot to me - much more than you can ever know - because I never forget those days I spent there. I never will. I can say truthfully that they are the happiest days of my life.

14. Bailey, New York City, 3 October 1945

With the group breaking up, all of my officers went home. It was tough to see them all go, but the war over, that had to be.

Conclusion

“The Chateau Bethell” meant a great deal to those officers and others who spent time there and got some much-needed relaxation. Those officers also meant a great deal to their host family, as evidenced by the bond they created which endured throughout the war, and presumably afterwards. The letters clearly indicate a shift in the officers’ moods over the course of the war. Memories of Chateau Bethell played a larger role in their everyday lives as the war dragged on. Chateau Bethell was a “home” that was only a letter away.

Through these letters one can also catch a glimpse of the relationship between the soldier and the homefront. One of the major reasons for Allied success in this great war was the support at home. That is why all of the “Chateaus Bethell” around America were of such great importance to U.S. efforts in World War II, the last conflict to enjoy such homefront support until Operation Desert Storm in 1990.