

Rathbun Family Correspondence

Rathbun Family Papers

1916-1942

Title Statement

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Descriptive Summary

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MS 00020

Unit ID

/repositories/2/resources/8699

Unit Date

1916-1942

Language

English

Creator

Rathbun family

Extent

3.00 Linear Feet

Repository

Special Collections Research Center

Administrative Information

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Administrative History:

Walter James Rathburn was a ship captain on vessels associated with the navy and with shipping. He spent time in the Panama Canal Zone during World War II. His father was also associated with ships and his brother, too. Ella-May Abbot is a woman who works and enjoys her family then must adjust to marriage with a man whose time is more often on ships than at home.

Scope and Contents

The collection consists mostly of love letters between Ella-May Abbott of New Orleans, Louisiana and Walter James Rathbun who is based in ship ports in the United States, Europe, Nicaragua and the Panama Canal Zone. Letters from Walter Rathbun's Mother, Mrs. J. Baird of Floral Park, New Jersey and other family members are included.

Ella-May and Walter begin a correspondence courtship in 1916, then breakup in 1919. They begin writing to each other again in 1926 and finally marry in 1930, after Walter was able to obtain a divorce from his wife in Brazil.

In their almost daily letters, Ella writes about her day's activities and Walter writes about his ship duties and his experiences while in port. His World War II letters from the Panama Canal Zone are marked by a censor and have few details about his work but contain many comments about the culture among the Navy families, particularly the wives. A running thread through the years is the inability of Charles Rathbun, Walter's brother, to hold a job.

Walter has many titles while working on ships including 2nd Officer and Captain. In World War II he is a Lt. Commander in the United States Naval Reserves stationed in the Canal Zone. Ella-May is a window designer for a large department store in New Orleans, but gives up her job when the couple gets married and moves to New Jersey. They later move to Pasadena, California where Ella-May's mother and sisters live.

Keywords

Letters (correspondence)

Love letters

Canal Zone

Merchant marine--United States

Panama--Description and travel

Shipping--United States

United States. Navy--History--20th century

United States. Navy--History--World War, 1939-1945

Women--Social life and customs.

World War, 1914-1918

United States. Naval Reserve

Arrangement of Materials:

Chronological order.

Description of Subordinate Components

Box 1

Unit ID id290184

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359214

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290187

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359221

Unit Date 1916 January-August

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 1 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Walter Rathbun writes from the S.S. Matanzas of the Ward Line and Ella-May writes from her home in New Orleans, Louisiana. Walter relates some of his onboard duties and says he wants to enter the U.S. Coast Guard School. He tells of his past relationships and of his past wild ways. These letters are the beginning of his courtship of Ella-May.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290190

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359222

Unit Date 1916 September -1917

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 2 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Scope and Contents Walter remembers saying goodbye to Ella-May seven years ago in 1909. He is transferred to the S.S. Pamco of the Ward Line as a 2nd Officer, then returns to the S.S. Saratoga doing military duty since the ship is being turned into a hospital ship. He's taking an exam for chief mate, but needs to decide whether to take an officer job of "navigating Lieutenant" on an auxiliary cruiser. Ella-May writes about her job, family and friends.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290193

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359223

Unit Date 1919-1920

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 3 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Very few letters between Walter and Ella-May since they ended their relationship during this time. There are letters from Walter's father and brother, Charlie, both associated with ships. Walter is in Norfolk, Virginia, Newport News, Virginia and Woodstock, New York and works on ships S.S. Oglethorpe and S.S. San Pasqual.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290196**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359224**Unit Date** 1921**Mixed Materials** 1 (Box)**Container** 4 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Correspondence with family and one post card from Ella-May.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290199**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359225**Unit Date** 1922-1924**Mixed Materials** 1 (Box)**Container** 5 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Walter works on the S.S. Lorraine Cross in Argentina, Texas and Brazil. He marries sometime in 1922. Correspondence is with family members. Ella-May sends him a Christmas card on December 12, 1923.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290202**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359226**Unit Date** 1926 March-June**Mixed Materials** 1 (Box)**Container** 6 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

On March 3, 1926 Ella-May writes Walter and asks what has he been doing for the past 4 years. She also asks about his wife. He answers on March 25 that he came back to his Mother's house in New Jersey without his wife. Later letters imply that the marriage is over. By May 18, Ella-May tells Walter that she loves him. They continue writing love letters to each other, interspersed with news of their daily activities and the problem of annulling his marriage. Walter's Mother writes to him regularly.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290205**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359227**Unit Date** 1926 September-December**Mixed Materials** 1 (Box)**Container** 7 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Walter and Ella-May continue writing love letters to each other, interspersed with news of their daily activities and the problem of annulling his marriage. Walter's Mother writes to him regularly.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290208**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359228**Unit Date** 1927 January-March**Mixed Materials** 1 (Box)**Container** 8 (Folder)

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290211**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359229**Unit Date** 1927 April-May 16**Mixed Materials** 1 (Box)**Container** 9 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290214**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359230**Unit Date** 1927 May 17-30**Mixed Materials** 1 (Box)**Container** 10 (Folder)**Box 2****Unit ID** id290217**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359215**Mixed Materials** 2 (Box)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290220**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359231**Unit Date** 1927 June-July**Mixed Materials** 2 (Box)**Container** 1 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Walter is still working from Puerto Cabezas in Nicaragua.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290223**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359232**Unit Date** 1927 August-October**Mixed Materials** 2 (Box)**Container** 2 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Walter becomes a Free Mason. Ella-May asks Walter to either keep her letters in his desk or destroy them "because things I say to you sound very silly..."

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290226**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359233**Unit Date** 1927 November 1-15**Mixed Materials** 2 (Box)**Container** 3 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290229**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359234**Unit Date** 1927 November 16-30**Mixed Materials** 2 (Box)**Container** 4 (Folder)

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290232**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359235**Unit Date** 1927 December**Mixed Materials** 2 (Box)**Container** 5 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290235**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359236**Unit Date** 1928 January**Mixed Materials** 2 (Box)**Container** 6 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290238**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359237**Unit Date** 1928 February**Mixed Materials** 2 (Box)**Container** 7 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290241**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359238**Unit Date** 1928 March**Mixed Materials** 2 (Box)**Container** 8 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Walter is still working from Puerto Cabezas in Nicaragua.

Box 3**Unit ID** id290244**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359216**Mixed Materials** 3 (Box)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290247**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359239**Unit Date** 1928 April-May**Mixed Materials** 3 (Box)**Container** 1 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Ella-May writes about the murder of the negro foreman at the Logging Camp by Supt. Roy Byrd and how frightened her mother is. Walter's Mother visits him in Nicaragua.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290250**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359240**Unit Date** 1928 September-November**Mixed Materials** 3 (Box)**Container** 2 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Walter works from Rotterdam, Holland and is Captain of the S.S. Sacandego. He travels to and from the United States, mainly to Northeast ports. Walter and Ella-May continue writing their daily letters when apart, but they have more opportunities to see each other. They spend the months of June - September with each other. Walter is talking to a lawyer about the possibility that his first divorce wasn't final before he married the Brazilian wife, which means the 2nd marriage wasn't legal.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290253

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359241

Unit Date 1928 December

Mixed Materials 3 (Box)

Container 3 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290256

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359242

Unit Date 1929 January

Mixed Materials 3 (Box)

Container 4 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290259

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359243

Unit Date 1929 February

Mixed Materials 3 (Box)

Container 5 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Walter still works from Rotterdam, Holland and is Captain of the S.S. Sacandego.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290262

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359244

Unit Date 1929 March-April

Mixed Materials 3 (Box)

Container 6 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Ella-May gives her opinion on race as a reaction to the book "Africa-Slave or Free." She moves into her own apartment in New Orleans. The last time she saw Walter was on October 21, 1928. She's going to New Jersey to meet him and stay with his Mother.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290265

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359245

Unit Date 1929 May-June

Mixed Materials 3 (Box)

Container 7 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Walter talks of his two marriages.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290268**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359246**Unit Date** 1929 July**Mixed Materials** 3 (Box)**Container** 8 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Ella-May visits Walter in New Jersey and later writes him about an incident with his Mother and states "never, never ask me to see her again..." She writes about the rail strike and the police, scabs and people killed.

Box 4**Unit ID** id290271**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359217**Mixed Materials** 4 (Box)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290274**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359247**Unit Date** 1929 August-September**Mixed Materials** 4 (Box)**Container** 1 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290277**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359248**Unit Date** 1929 October-December**Mixed Materials** 4 (Box)**Container** 2 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290280**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359249**Unit Date** 1930 January-April**Mixed Materials** 4 (Box)**Container** 3 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Ella-May tells her boss, Mr. Heckert, that she is leaving and getting married. After Walter and Ella-May marry, they rent an apartment in Newark, New Jersey. Walter is still traveling between New Jersey and Rotterdam. Ella-May writes that she is homesick and lonely.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290283**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359250**Unit Date** 1930 May-June**Mixed Materials** 4 (Box)**Container** 4 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290286**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359251**Unit Date** 1930 July

Mixed Materials 4 (Box)

Container 5 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290289

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359252

Unit Date 1930 August-September

Mixed Materials 4 (Box)

Container 6 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Walter's port of call keeps changing from Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Norfolk.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290292

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359253

Unit Date 1930 October

Mixed Materials 4 (Box)

Container 7 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290295

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359254

Unit Date 1930 November-December

Mixed Materials 4 (Box)

Container 8 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Walter is home for 52 days from December to January 1931.

Box 5

Unit ID id290298

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359218

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290301

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359255

Unit Date 1931 February-March

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 1 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290304

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359256

Unit Date 1931 April

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 2 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290307

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359257

Unit Date 1931 May

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 3 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Walter was relieved of command of the S.S. Sacandego. He is home and there are no letters between June 1931 and May 1932.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290310

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359258

Unit Date 1932 June-July

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 4 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290313

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359259

Unit Date 1932 August

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 5 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Walter's port is in the Soloman Islands and Ella-May lives in Pasadena, California. She writes Walter almost every day, but only one letter from Walter has survived.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290316

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359260

Unit Date 1933, 1934, 1936, 1937

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 6 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Walter and Ella-May have moved to Long Beach, California where they continue to live until the 1940's. They are living frugally. Ella-May's family live nearby. Walter works on the George Washington and the America in August 1934. Walter's Mother writes in 1937 that she is sorry Walter is going to lose his job. She also informs him that Charles' ship blew up and he lost his job.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290319

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359261

Unit Date 1938 January-August

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 7 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Scope and Contents Walter's Mother talks about moving from New Jersey and regrets time spent with "that man" but decides she is too old to move. There are very few letters between Walter and Ella-May since his port is near their home.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290322

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359262

Unit Date 1938 September-December

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 8 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Ella-May writes to Walter while he is in San Jose, Costa Rica, Central America, La Paz, Baja California and Mexico.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290325

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359263

Unit Date 1939

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 9 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290328

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359264

Unit Date 1940

Mixed Materials 5 (Box)

Container 10 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

In May, Walter is in Vancouver, Canada but by October he is a Lt. Commander of the USNR in San Francisco, California.

Box 6

Unit ID id290331

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359219

Mixed Materials 6 (Box)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290334

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359265

Unit Date 1941 January-March

Mixed Materials 6 (Box)

Container 1 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290337

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359266

Unit Date 1941 April-May

Mixed Materials 6 (Box)

Container 2 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

In April, Ella-May joins Walter in the Canal Zone for a month. In May, Walter is stationed on the USS Bullfinch in Yorktown while at the Mine Warfare School. Ella-May is very ill from a tooth extraction and uses a Christian Science member to heal her.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290340

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359267

Unit Date 1941 June 1-15

Mixed Materials 6 (Box)

Container 3 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Scope and Contents Walter's address is "Lt. Commander of the USS Parakeet" Balboa, Canal Zone, but later he is with the USS Magpie Section Base in Cristabal, Canal Zone.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290343**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359268**Unit Date** 1941 June 16-31**Mixed Materials** 6 (Box)**Container** 4 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290346**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359269**Unit Date** 1941 July 1-10**Mixed Materials** 6 (Box)**Container** 5 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290349**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359270**Unit Date** 1941 July 11-20**Mixed Materials** 6 (Box)**Container** 6 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290352**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359271**Unit Date** 1941 July 20-31**Mixed Materials** 6 (Box)**Container** 7 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290355**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359272**Unit Date** 1941 August 1-17**Mixed Materials** 6 (Box)**Container** 8 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Ella-May orders a new white uniform and cap for Walter. She prepares for her trip to the Canal Zone by buying luggage, clothes and getting shots.

Box 7**Unit ID** id290358**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359220**Mixed Materials** 7 (Box)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290361**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359273**Unit Date** 1941 August 18-31**Mixed Materials** 7 (Box)**Container** 1 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

On August 18, Walter writes "If you find it necessary to throw away a lot of old letters why do so dearest because there is no use leaving them around for other people to read." She replies "All afternoon I have

been tearing up letters so I can burn them in the incinerator...it is awful to lose and to throw any of the beautiful letters you have written to me." In Ella-May's August 18 letter, she relates the situation across the hall from her where a step-dad beats his step-daughter and makes her do menial work. Walter's address changes to SS Magpie.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290364

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359274

Unit Date 1941 September 1-15

Mixed Materials 7 (Box)

Container 2 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Ella-May has a reaction to the shots required to go to the Canal Zone. Ella-May completes her ship plans for her trip, but Walter wants her to fly. Walter berates her for not letting him initially help since he is more experienced with travelling.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290367

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359275

Unit Date 1941 September 16-30

Mixed Materials 7 (Box)

Container 3 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Ella-May has moved out of her apartment and flies to the Canal Zone to live with Walter. Walter's brother, Charlie, has also arrived in the Canal Zone needing a job and money. Many details about the process to get from California to the Canal Zone.

Correspondence

Unit ID id290370

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359276

Unit Date 1941 October

Mixed Materials 7 (Box)

Container 4 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290373

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359277

Unit Date 1942 April-May 15

Mixed Materials 7 (Box)

Container 5 (Folder)

Correspondence

Unit ID id290376

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/359278

Unit Date 1942 May 16-30

Mixed Materials 7 (Box)

Container 6 (Folder)

Scope and Contents

Ella-May writes that she plans to join Walter for a month in Yorktown, Virginia.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290379**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359279**Unit Date** 1942 July-August**Mixed Materials** 7 (Box)**Container** 7 (Folder)**Correspondence****Unit ID** id290382**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359280**Unit Date** 1942 October-December**Mixed Materials** 7 (Box)**Container** 8 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Walter is stationed on the USS Bullfinch in the Canal Zone and Ella-May is living in Pasadena, California.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290385**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359281**Unit Date** 1943-1945, 1949**Mixed Materials** 7 (Box)**Container** 9 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

On January 1, 1943, Walter writes from the U.S. Naval Hospital in Balboa, Canal Zone, that he has been in the hospital for two weeks and has been told that he needs six months rest. On January 8, he says he is leaving Panama and hopes he can stay in the Navy. Other letters during these years are either from or to Ella-May's sister, Lydia Vaughan of Orange, New Jersey or from George and Clara Potts of Los Angeles, California. These families are relatives of Ella-May.

Correspondence**Unit ID** id290388**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/359282**Unit Date** 1957-1959**Mixed Materials** 7 (Box)**Container** 10 (Folder)**Scope and Contents**

Letters to Ella-May Rathbun in Pasadena, California from family and friends.