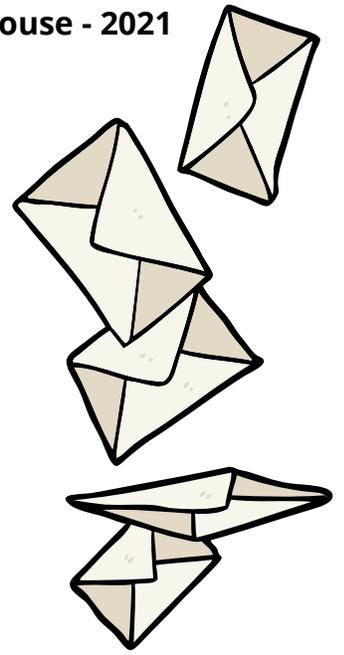


Your True Friend



This is one of a series of letters exchanged between William and Miriam in the late 1870s. They met after Miriam's parents moved to Orange, Texas in 1877 so her father could open a new branch of the Lutchter & Moore Lumber Company. She lived in Orange for about a year before returning to her hometown in Williamsport. William began correspondence and a long distance courtship. This is one of his earlier letters. William states his intent while also giving Miriam all the latest gossip and news from Orange.

Orange, Texas - October 5, 1878

Miss Miriam:

Yours of the 27th came to hand last evening. You say that you asked two or three questions in your last letter that I did not answer. This is the first letter that I have received from you since the one you wrote on the 7th of last month and the only question you asked was about Nichols and that I answered as far as I knew. Miss Hannah Latchem has not been back since she left here or since you left rather. I have not heard why. When she left she spoke of coming back in a month or two to live. I have not heard Ollie say whether she had heard from you or not. Robinson, Murray, Willie Curry and myself spent the afternoon there last Sunday and had a verry nice time. Intend [on] going again this evening, Murray and I.

I did not mean that you [were] in the same wagon as Ollie when I said what I did. [I] am sorry that I said anything since you[ve] taken it that way (1). I think you are quite as ready to jump to conclusions as I. I understood you from the first. I am satisfied as long as I am considered a friend and I promise you to ask nothing more. If there is anything to be forgiven, I do freely and from the bottom of my heart, but when you ask me to forget, you know not what you ask. As long as you are single you may know in me you have a friend that loves you and who you can safely trust. After you marry, then it would be a sin to love you. You need not give yourself any uneasiness about my showing you too much attention when you come back, for I don't intend to get in anybody's way... that is if you ever come back. I hope you may never have to come back since you hate to leave home so bad, but if you do, I for one will do everything that I can to make it pleasant for you (2).

(1): None of Miriam's letters survive so we do not know exactly what triggered this defensive response from William, but it was likely something to do with Ollie's dating life or relationship status.



William Henry Stark

(2): William may not have known quite what he was promising or how this promise would in some ways dominate the rest of his life. William and Miriam, along with the rest of their family, became unusually committed to Orange. Most major mill and plant owners lived at least part time (if not almost full time) in major cities like Houston or New York. Once married, Miriam and William lived in their entire lives in Orange and were involved in making many improvements to the city such as paved roads, electricity, and running water. Miriam told William he had to build her a house before they were married. She even threatened to postpone the wedding when there were construction delays. Their second home, The W.H. Stark House, was Miriam's dream home, constructed to look like the finest homes in her childhood town.

There is to be a dance one night this week at a private house; [I] have not heard what one yet. Mr. Russell has just returned from the west where he sold a good many carloads of shingles. He intends starting his mill up again in a couple of weeks. I expect that it will be about the last run for me, though it may not be (3). Burton Bros. have been after me for a month to work for them next year, but they have not offered me my price yet. If they come to my figures I will go to work with them the first of January. If not, I will go to the swamps this winter (4). Dunbar has moved up to Mrs. Force's Place. Henry Force was over to rent part of our ranch this morning for him and his mother to live in, but we could not see it. She would go crazy if she was in one end of our house unless she was used to noise for we are a terrible noisy crowd (5). The election is all the rage at present. That comes off on the 5th (6).

Your Papa has been quite sick but is getting about again. I stopped in to see him last Monday morning. Your Mother had been verry uneasy about him. She said she sat up there all night with him by herself. One night she could hardly keep from crying. She was telling me, she could not help but think what a fix she would be in if anything was to happen. She said if she had of had just one of the girls she would have been better satisfied (7). There has been a deal of sickness down town here in the last month (8). All of Frank Cleveland's folks have had the fever, except Miss Francis. Miss Jessie has been having the fever again. It has helped her looks. She is looking better than I['ve] ever seen her.

You must excuse my scratching. I hurt my hand last week and it is so numb that I can scarcely use it. Hoping that you may have a pleasant time and a rainy day pretty soon to answer this. I will say good bye.

As ever, your true friend, W.H. Stark

(3): William was a sawyer, an extremely skilled and dangerous job. Sawyers directed the actual cutting of logs at a mill and were in charge of quality control and safety. They had to be very close to the cutting blade or saw, often riding the sled with the tree as it was cut. A proven sawyer like William was one of the most in demand men in a lumber town. The mills paid well but work could be inconsistent, depending on supply and demand.

(4): William is probably joking here, but it is possible he might have intended to spend the winter trapping in the swamps. Fur mammals like beaver and mink have thicker coats in the winter, making their pelts more valuable.

(5): William lived with a group of bachelors, most of whom he talks about in his letters. In a previous letter, he mentions that their house had been dubbed "the Bachelor's Retreat." They were very active socially, with William describing the many dances, parties, and boat rides. He often goes into great detail about these events, probably to make Miriam jealous.

(6): The date William gives for this election is a bit odd, as it is a day before the prescribed national voting day on Tuesday the 6th. This is either a mistake or due to the local voting authorities. This presidential election was a battle between the Democratic incumbent Grover Cleveland and Republican challenger Benjamin Harrison. Harrison won, but Cleveland would not be gone long and beat Harrison in a rematch in 1892, becoming the only president to serve two non-consecutive terms. Cleveland won the Texas vote each time he ran, in 1884, 1888, and 1892.

(7): While Miriam was home in Williamsport, William used an ingenious dating strategy - getting her parents to like him. He visited them often and gives Miriam regular reports on his visits. In this case, he seems to be trying a guilt trip, mentioning how Miriam's mother wished she had one of her girls with her while their father was sick.

(8): Periodic fevers, especially Yellow Fever, and local epidemics were a sad and common part of life in Orange. In one of his letters, William describes how the whole city is in quarantine. Miriam and William's first child, Frannie, would die of a fever at around 18 months of age. Orange had limited medical infrastructure and the medicine that existed at the time did little to help a serious outbreak of fever. Quarantining was often the only way to stop it.