

Brownington, 1908-'09

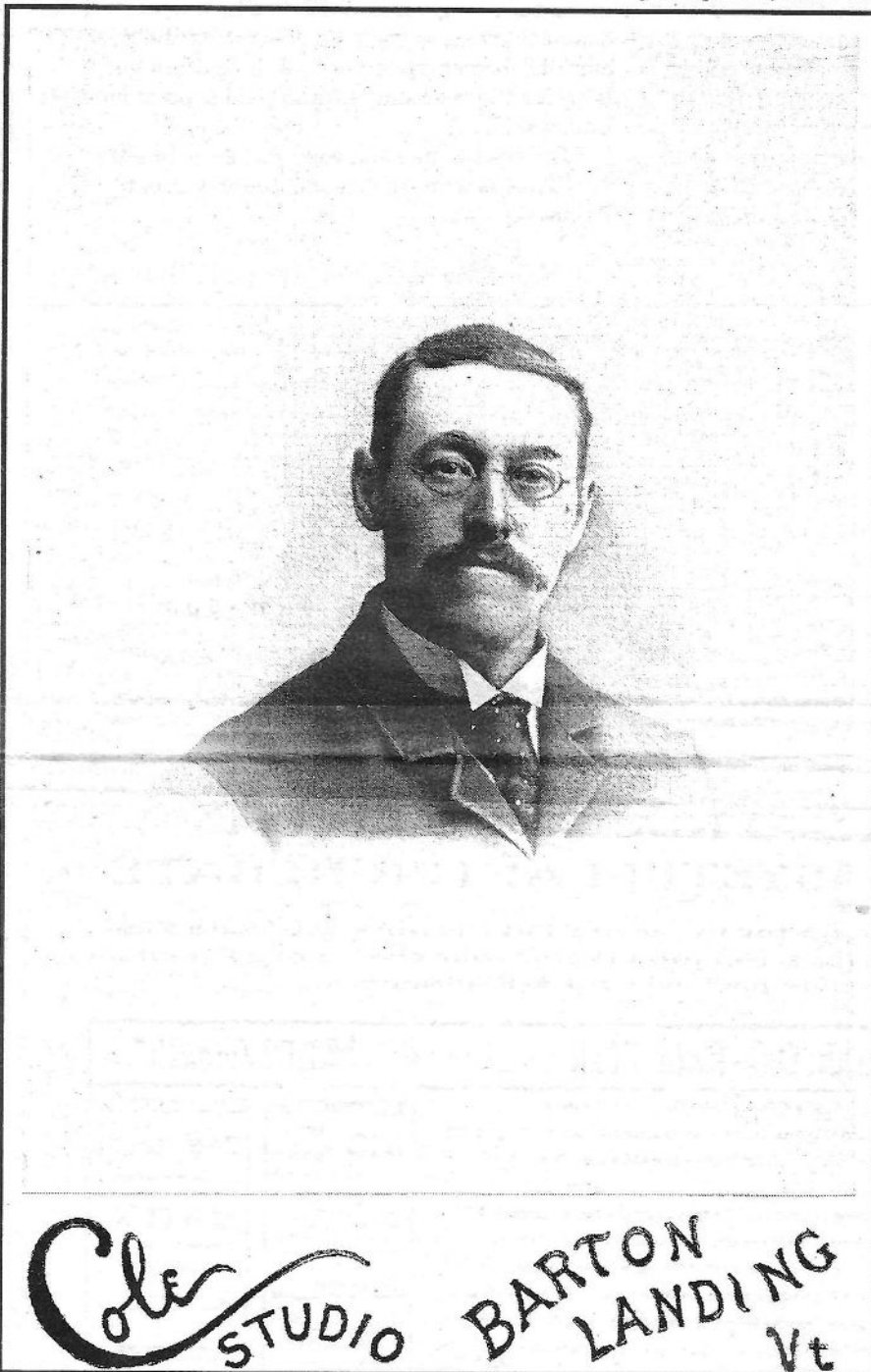
The Robinsons — letters b

by Darlene Young

Ellis A. Robinson was a reluctant Vermont legislator. In October of 1908, he left his farm in Brownington, his young family and his position of town clerk to serve in Vermont's General Assembly for four months. Although he served as the town's representative during the 1908-'09 session, a series of letters makes it clear he would have preferred to be at home with his family and tending to his farm. Ellis Robinson agreed to take his turn in the General Assembly despite his

awareness of the hardship his absence would cause his family.

The story of what that legislative session was like for Ellis in Montpelier, and for his wife Bessie at home in Brownington, is conveyed through their correspondence. The letters are frequent, sometimes as many as three a week, and filled with affection and humor. Letters from Bessie are often accompanied by notes and drawings from the Robinson daughters, Ruth, age seven, and Eva, age four. In addition to letters, Ellis and Bessie often communicate by telephone, and Ellis



This photo of Ellis Augustine Robinson was taken in December of 1897. He married Bessie Delight Gray O'Hara on January 6, 1898.

between legislator and wife

comes home from Montpelier by train for numerous visits.

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: Upon arriving in Montpelier, Ellis expresses his awe at finding himself in the seat of government. Gradually, the tone of his letters change as he adjusts to the routines of a representative and begins considering some of the issues before the Legislature. Ellis comes to enjoy the camaraderie of his fellow legislators and even begins to relish his power as a lawmaker.

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is A bill of particular interest to Ellis during the session is one which would change how towns could use money previously designated for the support of the county grammar schools. Through his letters, Ellis informs Bessie of the bill's progress and his efforts to give town school directors the authority to use the funds to educate students at academies or high schools, since the Orleans County Grammar School in Brownington had ceased to exist. The bill, H.614, passes and is signed into law on January 22, 1909.

In Ellis's absence, Bessie goes through her own transformation, as she shoulders the bulk of the responsibility of caring for their two daughters, helping Ellis's brother Sollie run the farm, and tending to town clerk duties. At first, Bessie is able to continue her household routines, but as the winter wears on and problems arise, she is forced to concentrate on farm and town clerk work. Throughout the session, Bessie shares her worries, asks advice, and vents her growing frustration. Nevertheless, she maintains a real interest in Ellis's activities in Montpelier. Near the end of the session, Bessie regains her equilibrium and comes to a realization of her own strength.

Excerpts from the Robinson letters follow:

Montpelier, Vermont, October 6, 1908

My Dear Wife: Well here I am in this capitol city of this great and sovereign state safe and sound, well fed, well housed, well fixed every way, only I would like to be home and help milk and spend the night.... After dinner which tasted good we went downtown and Mr. [Gilbert Gross of Brownington, senator from Orleans County] showed us the State House. The mighty Ethan still stands guard at the Capitol door....

We looked the building over pretty well. We selected our seats (in our own minds), sized up the Governor's chamber...then we took a walk down State St. to open country.... We saw a police station but have kept out of it thus far.... Give the babies a few H's and K's for me.... There is a New England telephone here in the house so you can get me most any time when I am not playing billiards or at work. With love, Ellis

Brownington, Vermont, October 6, 1908

My Dear Husband: Now why didn't you wave to me when the train started.... The babies are fast asleep as yet. Last night Ruth could not get to sleep so I told her to get into my bed. She thought that was all right and was soon in dream land.... Everything is going all right indoors and out, only that the cows that have the habit of staying away still have it... Ruth and I hold the light for Sollie and help him all we can. Shall I look for you home this week or next? ... With love, Bessie

Dear Papa: How are you? We are pretty well. Mamma lost the barn key and Auntie found it.... With love from Ruth. Good-by.

Dear Papa: Eva want to know if Papa sleep in State House.... I carried the light to the barn for uncle last night. Eva Esther Robinson

Montpelier, Vermont, October 8, 1908

Dear Bessie: Wish I could see you today. Went to the Governor's reception last night.... I expect things will be so that I can get away tomorrow noon for home. If I can I shall telephone you from Barton Landing and you can meet me part way. I hope you are all well and everything going well and I have faith to believe it is. With love to all, I am your hub. E.A. Robinson

Montpelier, October 14, 1908

Dear Bessie: Your card came to hand this noon.... I greatly appreciate the privilege of calling you on the telephone, it seems awfully good to hear your voice and know at short notice...you are getting along.... I got on the Committee on Education all right.... Tonight the Farmers Club meets at 7:30 and the members from
(Continued on page twenty-one.)

the Chronicle, February 3, 1999

“I should like to and a kiss this

(Continued from page twenty.)

Orleans County at 8:30.... I often wish I could step in and help out a little but I remember you all in spite of the many things that call my attention. Give love to the babies and keep a lot yourself and for the rest. Write soon. Ellis

Brownington, Vermont, October
15, 1908

Dear Ellis: ...Glad you are having a chance to see a little of the world outside of Brownington.... Ruth came home today noon with a piece of skin off one side of her nose and the other side scraped pretty well.... She said Earle Odell threw a stone and hit her.... I called up the teacher and notified her to put a stop to throwing stones.... I wish I could step in and see what kind of a time you are having making laws. Be sure to make *good ones*.... Sollie said yesterday that he thought [he] would have to do the plastering some day when you was at home to do the chores and help him a little, the chores is about all he can possibly do with the cutting of wood for both houses.... Good-by with love, Bessie

Brownington, Vermont, October
15, 1908

My Dear Husband: ...The days
seems so long that it seems a good
while since Tuesday. We enjoy
having a chance to hear you speak
once a day.... I have had 75 cents
worth of Town Clerk work to do this
week — a lien note and a personal
mortgage.... Are you coming home
this week? I should like to just have
a hug and a kiss this morning.... I
did my washing yesterday and today
I must bake and clean up a little. I
want to make my pickles this week if
I can. Ruth has written you a line.
Eva is too much of a fly away to
write this morning. With love,
Bessie

Montpelier, October 21, 1908

Dear Bess: I wish I could see you
all this morning but as I cannot, will
do the next best thing and write you
a few lines... I went down to the
State House last night and saw
social stars Governor and Mrs.
[George] Prouty and a lot of society
women gave a reception in the
executive chamber. I took in the
parade in corridors but did [not] go
up for formal presentation — felt
that I had got my money's worth....
Mrs. Hannant is down which causes
[Charles Hannant, Representative
from Irasburg] to be happy and
makes me envious, however we will
look forward to pleasures and
diversions in the future.... May God
bless and keep you. Ellis

to have a hug is morning”

Brownington, Vermont, October
24, 1908

Dear Ellis: The children have written you this morning so I will just add a line.... Sollie has got his house banked, and ours.... I brought in 8 pails of water this morning so that the well will fill up by the time he wants to water the calves and horses.... We are all well and getting along all right so do not worry about us.... With love. Bessie

Dear Papa: Why didn't you send me a postcard? Mamma put the clockshelf up yesterday.

The writing desk looks very empty. I had my eyes and ears tested yesterday at school....

Good-bye from Ruth H. Robinson

Dear Papa: Where is Ethan Allen in that picture you sent me! I like that card. I wanted you to come last night. Are you coming tomorrow?.. Good-bye. With love, Eva E. Robinson

Brownington, Vermont, October
26, 1908

Dear Ellis: The time since Friday night has been so long that it seems a month.... Did you go to church? Sebia [Ellis's sister], the children and I went to church yesterday.... Hitchins has left the warning for Election and I have recorded it. Uncle John O'Hara is very hard sick with a fever and not expected to live. He is growing weaker every day....
With love, Bessie

Montpelier, October 26, 1908

Dear Bess: ...Some of the members were going to Waterbury so I joined the bunch and had the time of my life in a way. We left Montpelier about 9 a.m., arrived in [Waterbury] in due time and proceeded to the Asylum. The Superintendent was very anxious to show us everything so we started our travels.... That institution is the greatest thing I ever saw in the line of buildings. We literally walked miles. There were corridors and halls, wards and dormitories, dining rooms and staircases in endless succession. There are 575 inmates and 70 attendants.... We saw a big crowd of men inmates out in the fields for afternoon exercise, listened to orations from some of them and came away feeling that I had seen a great revelation and that any man who has health and reason for himself and family ought to thank God and take courage.... With love,
Ellis

Some spelling and punctuation have been changed for clarity. This is the first of a two-part article.