

Box 27-B Emilie Cohen letters to sons Alfred H and William 1867-1895

- 1867 Folder: Ten Letters between Emilie G Cohen and her sons Alfred H and William Cohen while they were boarding at 'Brewer's Academy' a.k.a. Saint Matthew's Military School in San Mateo, CA under the direction of Rev A.L. Brewer;
Three letters from William G Cohen to his parents from Academy
One letter from A.A. Cohen to "Billy"
- 1868 Folder: Seven letters-Two from AA Cohen, four from Emilie, and one from Willie to Alfred. In April 1868 letters reveal that Willie was convalescing at Fernside from some illness. Letters from 'Papa' (AA Cohen) were infrequent, but he was equally instructive as his wife to their sons. He told them they were to remain in San Mateo for Thanksgiving, and he expected them to "make good use of your time to be able to show some improvement when you come home at Christmas. I will be very much disappointed if you don't." He did however send some turkeys to Rev. Brewer for the Thanksgiving holiday.
- 1869 Folder: Seventeen letters-Four written by Alfred H; five written by William G Cohen; seven written by Emilie G. Cohen; 1 written in morse code by ?
Alfred H, age 11, is still in school at Rev. Brewer's Academy in San Mateo, and William, age 14, is at University Mound School in San Francisco.
In a letter of Aug 8, 1869, Alfred H wrote to Willie telling about seeing a full solar eclipse day before, viewing it through some glass that he 'smoked'.
Two letters from AA Cohen to William
- 1870-1872 Folder: Nineteen letters written by Alfred Henry Cohen-thirteen to his brother William at University Mound college in San Francisco; one to his Grandmother Gibbons in San Francisco; and two to his mother in Alameda; two to his father in Alameda. There is varying quality of penmanship which might indicate that AH had someone else write his letters to the adults.
- 1873 Folder: Six letters from Alfred H Cohen to his family from University Mound College in San Francisco, where his younger brother Edgar was also in residence. Older brother William had graduated and was living at Fernside in Alameda. Alfred reports that he and Edgar had the mumps in late April 1873.
One letter from AH Cohen to William in original envelope 4.5x 2.75 inches; stamp has been cut off [William collected stamps]

- 1875-1877 Folder: Twenty three; three report cards for AH at Exeter Academy, New Hampshire; one Account Sheet dated December 21, 1875 for college expenses at Phillips Exeter Academy.

There are several letters from Alfred H to his father Alfred A Cohen that reflect an ongoing conversation regarding A.H.'s study habits, handling of money, writing home, and whether or not he belongs in college. Eighteen year old Alfred H offers counter-arguments in his defense. After traveling to Ireland with his mother and siblings and a stay in London in July of 1876, Alfred decides to return to Exeter under certain conditions, but also makes some concessions to his father's wishes and writes up a short promise contract. The contentious correspondence continued for the duration of 1876 and included a letter from Edgar who was attending Exeter. In Nov 1876. Edgar pushed back on his father's criticism of his attention to studies by pointing out that there 'were only so many daylight hours that he could apply to studying' after all other activities of the day were completed. He reported that the Exeter faculty had "petitioned the Trustees to put in gas lighting, but they said it was unnecessary." The faculty made a suggestion to students that if they could "get their parents to contribute two or three hundred dollars" that they would cover the rest of the amount. Edgar also mentioned that he was having trouble seeing and he wondered if he needed new glasses.

- 1879-1883 Folder: One telegram dated Aug 25, 1879 to Wm Cohen from AA Cohen that appears to be in code as it makes no sense; one letter presumably written by Alfred H with salutation "My dear friend" chronicled a trip to Chicago and Boston on business in Feb
- 1882; three letters from Oct-Nov 1883 from Alfred to his mother discussing carpet measurements for the home at 1440 29th Street in Oakland that he would share with his new wife Emma Bray. [His wife Emma Bray's parents had the house built for the newlyweds and the Cohen parents had the home furnished]
- 1895 Folder: One letter to Emilie Gibbons Cohen from her daughter in law Emma Bray Cohen dated Feb 17, 1895, addressed to EGC c/o Wm Bancroft, Wilmington, Delaware where Emilie was visiting her Gibbons family [dried violets sent by grandchildren were included in the envelope]; one letter from Mr H. B. Laidlaw to Alfred Henry Cohen re: \$75 payment mix up 1895.

[Archivist's notes]

This collection of letters gives readers a snapshot of the values, the interests and the characters of the writers in the context of their era and within the dynamics of their family. The primary correspondents are Alfred Henry Cohen and his mother Emilie Gibbons Cohen, however there are also letters to Alfred's older brother William Cohen, from his younger brother Edgar Cohen, and a few letters from their father Alfred A Cohen. The correspondence starts in 1867 when Alfred H, age 9, and his brother William, age 12, are attending boarding school at what they called 'Brewer's Academy' in San Mateo. The school was also called St. Matthew's Military School and was affiliated with the Episcopal Church and under the direction of Rev Alfred L Brewer.

Alfred's parents Emilie Gibbons Cohen and AA Cohen were both from educated families with prominent social standing so they had high expectations for their children. Their letters were instructional and often chastising. Emilie particularly addressed penmanship and grammar. In one letter after expressing disappointment in Alfred's spelling, she listed the misspelled words and told him she expected to see the words written correctly in his next letter. She followed up in a later letter asking "Where is the list of misspelled words?" AA Cohen was concerned about getting a good return for his investment in his sons' education and he expected to see measurable improvements and good results, which is reflected in his letters. His focus was on good study habits and using time wisely. William was told at age 14 that he would be out on his own soon having to earn a living so he best pay attention and learn as much as he could.

The letters span ten years of Alfred's education at three educational institutions—Brewer's Academy in San Mateo, University Mound College in San Francisco, and Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. As Alfred matures, it is interesting to read some push-back to his parents' criticism as he defended his diligent efforts at school.

When something was sent from home (Fernside) such as clothing or food, it came with expectations attached: "My dear children, I send this time a large barrel of fruit, take care of it, do not be wasteful, but be generous." Emilie sent new combs for them with the note: "Do not use the other boys combs and brushes or let them use yours. Mind what I say about it!" Emilie's letters did include family news about siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles, which no doubt pleased and comforted her boys, however she also expected letters promptly in return. She mused in one letter: "I do not think the San Mateo Post office is very prompt in sending letters, for I do not get yours regularly, or is it because they are not posted regularly?"

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