

Gift of early Florida letters enriches Smathers Libraries Rawlings Collection

The earliest letter known to have been written from Cross Creek by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings has joined more than one thousand of her other letters in the Department of Special and Area Studies Collections at the George A. Smathers Libraries. One of a group of seven letters recently acquired by gift, the letter of July 29, 1929 was written to Ethel Snyder Fairmont Beebe, and is noteworthy because of its early vintage and because it provides so much insight into Charles and Marjorie Rawlings' decision to leave Rochester and settle in Florida. Most significant for Rawlings' future literary work, the letter offers her impressions of their first year of life in Florida.

Writing less than one year after their arrival at Cross Creek, Rawlings described their greatest concern as the threat to their orange grove caused by the nearby presence of the Mediterranean fruit fly, or the "Mederrain-yuh



Cover of Ethel Snyder's *Rhymes for Kindly Children* (revised edition, c. 1927), a popular children's book that emphasized kindness to animals and other forms of considerate behavior. Illustrated by Johnny Gruelle, most famous for his creation of Raggedy Ann. (Copy from the Baldwin Library of Historical Children's Literature.)

'cross-the-sea fly,'" as it was sometimes called locally. She indicates that she and Charles saw life in the city as a maze leading, at best, to an im-proved standard of living, but to no meaningful satisfaction, whereas Florida, despite the risks, offered "possibilities of the almost-perfect life." As is typical in many Rawlings letters, she describes at length her current pets, but writes more briefly about the Cracker natives, "a strange breed, speaking quaint Elizabethan English," and "worth writing about." The only work mentioned was a rejected submission to the *Atlantic*, "Blood of My Blood," the still unpublished biographical sketch of her mother. By the date of her



Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings in her garden at Cross Creek, about 1939. (Copy from Department of Special Collections.)

next letter to Beebe, about eighteen months later, she had indeed written about the Crackers, referring to the sale of her first stories "Cracker Chidlings," and "Jacob's Ladder" to *Scribner's Magazine*.

Five of the seven letters were written between 1929 and 1933, a range of dates for which there are only three other letters in the Smathers Libraries Rawlings

collection. Another letter — even more rare — was written in 1925 or 1926, while she and Charles were living in Rochester. No other letter from this phase of their life is known to exist. The seventh letter, written after a long gap, is from 1949. The gift also included a block print Christmas greeting, believed to be from 1923.

The recipient of the letters was Marjorie's friend from the University of Wisconsin, Ethel Snyder. Already married and some ten years older than the typical undergraduate, Snyder attended Wisconsin for only one year, and along with Rawlings, she was a member of Red Domino, a women's theatrical club. By the time of the letters, she had remarried to Murray Beebe, a University of Wisconsin engineering professor. Rawlings' letters abound with references to Wisconsin friends and to Beebe's own activities. She was the author of two popular books of poetry for children, *Rhymes for Kindly Children* (1916) and *The Lovely Garden* (1919), and was active in the humaneness to animals movement. Although the letters also buzz with suggestions that the two women might meet again, either in Florida or New York, their friendship after college was carried out, as far as is known, solely through correspondence. Beebe died in 1978 at the age of 96, long after Rawlings's death in 1953.

The Smathers Library received this valuable addition of letters in June 2000, donated in memory of Ethel Fairmont Snyder Beebe, by her great-great niece, Nancy S. Weyant of Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. The letters were published in the 2000 issue of the *Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Journal of Florida Literature*. ~

Frank Orser
Manuscripts Librarian
Department of Special and Area Studies Collections