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New York Letters Enhance Libraries' Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings Collection

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Six hundred letters between Pulitzer Prize winning author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and her husband, Norton Baskin, have greatly enhanced the collection of Rawlings papers available to researchers in the Department of Special and Area Studies Collections. Recently acquired through a gift-purchase agreement with Jacksonville businessman Phil May, Jr., the letters join more than 700 existing Rawlings letters in the Smathers Libraries.

Most of the letters already in the collection were acquired three years ago from Baskin's niece (*Howe Society Newsletter*, Fall 1998). Rawlings, author of *The Yearling* (1938) and other books and stories of backwoods Florida, lived at Cross Creek in Alachua County from 1928 until her death in 1953. She immortalized Cross Creek in her book of that name.

While there are overlaps between the libraries' new letters and the existing ones in the collection, the two groups complement one another. The

bulk of the letters were written between 1947 and 1952 from Van Hornesville, New York. Particularly significant are 160 letters from 1947-1949, years that are hardly present in the existing collection. A few of the new letters date back as far as 1941, just prior to the Baskins' marriage. Some were written from Cross Creek, or Blowing Rock, North Carolina, while she was writing the story, "Mountain Prelude," produced as a Lassie-film, *The Sun Comes Up*

(1949). The existing letters in the collection were written before 1947 from Florida.

Rawlings spent her first summer in Van Hornesville in 1947, while working on what was to become her final novel, *The Sojourner* (1952). Retired General Electric executive and diplomat Owen D. Young and his wife Louise provided her with a cottage. Rawlings enjoyed the area so much



Wedding photograph of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and Norton Baskin, October, 1941. Photographs of the two together are rare. (Associated Press)

that she bought her own "Yankee home" there. For the rest of her life, she spent about half the year in New York, leaving Florida in May and staying until the weather became quite cold.

The themes of these new letters are of preoccupation with writing *The Sojourner* and with her domestic and personal life in Van Hornesville. Rawlings noted approvingly that the "folks" were similar in that they "don't have much to do with one another until there is trouble." Then everyone helps out (Oct. 24, 1950). The theme of the earlier letters was her relationship with Norton during the year he was in India in World War II and her life at Cross Creek.

The Sojourner was placed in a locale probably similar to the Van Hornesville area and was a novel on which she worked with difficulty from 1943 to its completion. The letters trace her progress as she wrote and rewrote drafts, completed the final manuscript, and finally revised the proofs. Her progress was slow and

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tedious. At one point, she complained, "I just can't write. Somebody else must have written 'The Yearling' " (Feb. 4, 1950). She resented friends who constantly inquired about her progress, noting to Norton and to the friends that such exposure was like being expected to make love in public. Alcohol was another distraction from



Above: Marjorie and dog Moe on the porch of her Van Hornesville house after she completed restoration



Right: Van Hornesville house before being restored

her work. Her custom was to try to get in at least a morning's writings before beginning to drink or yield to other distractions.

Rawlings was never good at being a recluse and life itself was a distraction. She managed to maintain a rather full social life playing bridge, partying and dining regularly with the Youngs and their large family, entertaining them and other guests in turn, remodeling and furnishing the old house with antiques, and gardening. She also spent time with her beloved pets. In addition to this, she always contended with serious health problems.

To help with the household, Rawlings attempted to employ a maid. Although her "perfect maid" from

Cross Creek, Idella Parker, made the trip a couple of years, she did not stay the entire time. And after their final break in 1950, she was not available at all. During this time, Rawlings hired a number of local people to work for her. Finding and keeping help was hard in itself. When she could find someone to work regularly, the relationship mirrored that with her maids in Florida. Enthusiastic praise of a new housekeeper was often quickly followed by displeasure, criticism, and even termination of employment. The letters show her sense of betrayal over the furtive way that Idella Parker finally left her service. She vacillated between hopes of getting her back and feeling glad that she was gone.

The Van Hornesville letters are not limited to domestic concerns, however. Highlights include her accounts of hosting Robert Frost when he received an honorary degree from nearby Colgate University in 1950, her reactions to the news of Margaret Mitchell's fatal accident in 1949, and her account of the radio broadcast she made for the Voice of America.

While Rawlings is firmly identified with her love of Cross Creek, she found many pleasures in her Van Hornesville home. The house, the people, quaint countryside shops, cool weather, fall colors, and snow all appealed to her. Had she lived longer, she might have chronicled the village as she did Cross Creek.

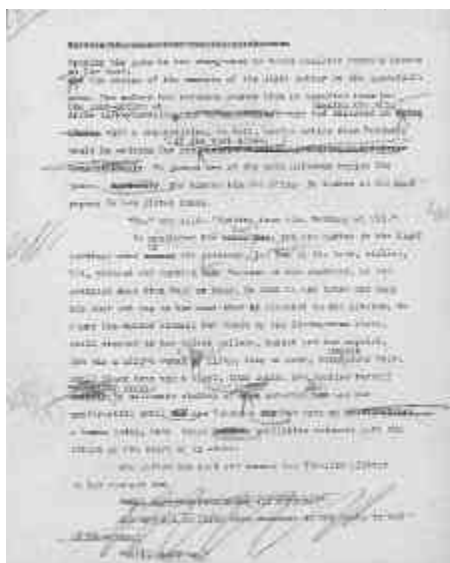
Three hundred letters by Baskin to his wife are a bonus to the libraries. Previously the Smathers collection contained less than a hundred. Written during his wartime experience or while she was in Van Hornesville, they

record his own activities and present an interesting complement to Rawlings's letters. ~

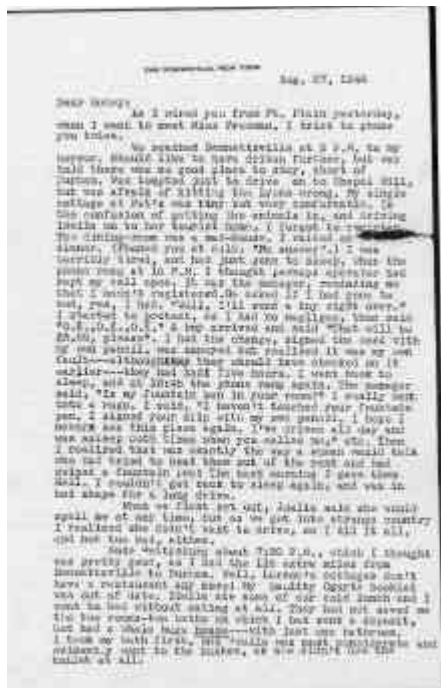


Above: Marjorie with Owen D. Young

Below: Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's account of her drive from Florida to Van Hornesville in August 1948. (Department of Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries)



Draft page from the *Sojourner* manuscript in the Department of Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries.



Owen D. Young (1874-1962)

Owen D. Young was one of America's most prominent industrialists of the early twentieth century and among Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's closest personal friends. Founder of RCA and chairman of General Electric, Young was considered a contender for the Democratic Party nomination for the Presidency in 1932. He played a major role in the shaping of European reconstruction after World War I. *Time Magazine* named him Man of the Year for 1929. The University of Florida awarded Young an honorary doctoral degree in 1948 and he was a guest of honor at the library dedication in 1950 when Rawlings spoke and presented her papers to the university.

The circumstances under which Rawlings and Young met are not known, but Young and his wife Louise wintered in Florida near St. Augustine, so their becoming acquainted is not surprising. Correspondence in the Rawlings papers indicates that the relationship went back at least to 1945. In 1947, knowing that Rawlings was looking for a quiet place to work on her current novel, the Youngs invited her to come to their northern home town, Van Hornesville, New York, and provided a cottage for her use.

Readers of Rawlings's letters will note that she was often flippant about many of her close friends. Owen Young, whom she always referred to as Mr. Young, was different. She wrote of him reverentially and commented on how wonderful it was to hear his wisdom. The awe she held him in was like that which she felt for another elderly friend, poet Robert Frost. Unfortunately she could never entertain these two eminent friends together, as the two great men did not get along with each other.