

PAST TIMES: STORIES FROM THE SHELDON'S PAST

Love Lost and Won

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There is a classic joke about the Victorian husband who “loved his wife so much that he almost told her.” The stern images of nineteenth century couples we see in photographs do not lend themselves to romantic fantasies. It is difficult to picture them gazing hungrily into one another’s eyes. With Valentine’s Day coming up, it seems a good time to ask what our more reticent progenitors could possibly have known about love.

The Sheldon Museum has a beautiful little ring—gold, its flat, oval face set with a ruby or garnet, surrounded by 14 delicate seed pearls. We know that it belonged to Sarah Guernsey, who would become the first woman from Cornwall to earn a college degree. The town historian, Mary Peet Green, remembered Guernsey coming to her house once, where, “It seemed to me she was always saying, “I can’t pump the water” or “I can’t lift this, for I have my ring on.” It was clearly a cherished possession, as well as a useful excuse.

The speculation in Cornwall was that this ring was so important to her because it was “the engagement ring the Indian gave her.” After earning her BA (Mount Holyoke, 1883), Sarah had taught at Mount Herman, and then headed West to Indian Territory to teach in the mission schools. (One of her students was a talkative young boy named Will Rogers). While she was there, Miss Guernsey fell in love with an Indian man and wanted to marry him. When her Cornwall cousin, Lyman Peet, got wind of this, he reacted with horror, telling her the marriage would be a disaster. In the face of strong opposition, she was persuaded to break it off. She lived to be over a hundred, treasuring her pretty little ring. She never did marry.

As this story shows, the course of love did not always run smooth then, either. In our Research Center, there is a letter from around 1870 containing a sheet of old paper and a tiny (less than 3-inch) dark green, knitted mitten. The letter is from Betsy Jane Ward, and it is written in a tone of high dudgeon. It opens, “No, Sir! I am not hasty in sending you a negative answer to your marriage proposal. It don’t take me six years to decide whether I will marry a man or not...Hope this mitten will satisfy your anxious heart, as you term it, and incline you to urge your suit no further.” After signing all three of her names, she added an emphatic. “Thermometer 25° below zero.” Sounds even colder! Why did she send him the little mitten? In the 1800s, the phrase “to give him the

mitten,” meant to jilt a man or turn down his marriage proposal. It carried an implication of slapping his face with a mitten—probably considered more feminine than the male insult of slapping with a glove. An American folk song, “The Young Man Who Wouldn’t Hoe Corn,” includes the verse:

Well he went down to a pretty little widder
And I hope by heck that he don’t get her.
She gave him the mitten as sure as you’re born,
And all because he wouldn’t hoe corn.

Common sense tells us that not all love stories of the period ended badly or we would not be here. Our archives are full ardent letters and diary entries that remind us that love is nothing new. In July 1845, for example, Henry Sheldon’s brother Horace, of Salisbury, wrote what was probably the most serious letter of his life, a proposal of marriage to Miss Marilla Parkill.



Portrait of Horace Sheldon.
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum



Portrait of Lydia Marilla Sheldon.
Collection of Henry Sheldon Museum

Horace began by saying he was writing this rather than speaking to her, because, “it is more embarrassing to some persons to converse upon some subjects than upon others.” Then, under cloak of pen and ink, he began to tell her how he felt about her:

“Time seems to pass slowly away while I am waiting with impatience the return of another opportunity of seeing you, and enjoying the pleasure of your society. I think I can truly say the more I become acquainted with you the more I become convinced that you hold my destiny in your hands. I feel confident I have never seen a person possessing so many virtues which I should esteem in a companion as you possess and I feel as though there was a chain of affection connecting our hearts to which every day seems to add a new link.”

He then asked her to marry him, assuring her that this was not something he ventured into without a great deal of thought. “[Marriage] is not like the every-day business transactions of life, in which a horse or farm bargained for, if they do not answer the expectations of the purchaser, may be exchanged or parted with.” The ramifications could be eternal. “It is an engagement on which to a very great extent depends our prospects and happiness during life, and may I not truly say, that it is one on which may depend that which is far more important—our eternal destiny.” The letter is signed, effusively, “Your affectionate love, Horace W. Sheldon.”

You sense that Horace had a pretty good idea he was in no danger of getting the mitten. Of course Marilla said yes. They went on to live long, happy lives together, producing two children. Marilla died in April 1891, and her loving Horace followed her two days later.

What a privilege to share in the engagement of this young couple. Local history has the capacity to touch the same emotions that art and literature evoke: those universal feelings that are such an important part of our shared humanity. To those of us who love history, there is the added bonus that these experiences really happened, to people like, or sometime unlike, ourselves, sharing this place we know so well.