

"My dearest Gagie --

Owing to the fact that we are going to your fiance's house for dinner, I have a bit of time, for which I have been vainly searching ever since Raymond got home I want so much to talk to you that I can hardly wait, even until Wednesday. Yes, I confess I was a little surprised. I think chiefly because I have spent all summer telling folks "O no, you are mistaken, nothing sentimental, I assure you, just a common love for horses, out-doors, 'etc etc', until I had convinced myself, too. But I guess you don't need to see it splattered out in ink to know that nothing on earth that I know of could please me better. In fact, it is one of those things that seems so ideal that it can't possibly be true. Raymond I suppose told you how he broke the news: he came up to the house to bring the moccasins and baskets and being as Ellsworth and mother were there he just beamed around on folks in general. But I needed to go downtown so I went out to go with him, but instead of starting down he started up, and looking out of the corner of his eye, he asked me if I knew where I was going, and on my declaring complete ignorance he said nonchalantly, "To look over the old Curtiss place." He'll never know how close I came to grabbing him around the neck, but I thought that might be premature. So we went on up and climbed out and when we got inside by the creek I faced him and openly accused him of bringing Gagie Carter up here in the capacity of Mrs. Raymond McKennon, and he jubilantly 'fessed up'. He goes around in the most ecstatic fizz of happiness you ever saw. And I am only one peg behind him."

Letter J. B. to G. C.
September 11, 1914

"Raymond dear --

So you weren't able to surprise anybody. I don't see how people are such good mind readers. I guess it won't be a case of keeping people guessing, will it? Unless it is about the date. That was too funny about George greeting you with congratulations the minute you came in. I wish I could have been in hearing distance when you and Jinny were talking about it. Wasn't she even a little tiny bit surprised? Ding it, I suppose not. My, I am glad she is planning to come down soon. So, you think the Curtiss place will do? I'll bet Jean was tickled when you mentioned it. What is the house like? You'll have to get Jinny to sneak in there and size it up when no one is looking. . . ."

Letter G. C. to R. McK.
September 14, 1914

"Of course I might wait and see what Jinny has to say before I write to you but I reckon I'll just write a little note -- to sort of let off steam. I can hardly wait for Jean to come, there's so much to talk about. I got such a funny little letter from her today telling how tickled she was -- almost as much so as you were. She even said she was a little bit surprised. Well, that's something to have sorta surprised two folks -- her and Miles.

What do you suppose I've been doing this morning? Canning fruit for our cellar. . . . Strange, but canning never did seem so interesting before. Jean says that she finds she will have to bring me home with her. I guess you know how I would love to come. I hardly see how I can as I will have to make two trips to Portland but maybe it will work out some way. Wouldn't it be fine if I could be there all this fall to plan things with you? Don't you suppose you'll have to come down with cattle soon? I realize that you haven't been home a week yet, but of course it seems longer. . . ."

Letter G. C. to R. McK.
September 16, 1914

Grace and Raymond were married in January, 1915. They lived in La Grande and had three children, Jean, Martha, and Dallas. Now that Grace and Jean were both married women they began to organize 'Hen Party' camping trips with their friends into the near-by mountains. Over the years dozens of women joined the forays into the wilderness. Often men were banned from the expedition; the girls preferred to tough it out on their own. Sometimes George and Raymond went along, but they were usually set the task of wrangling the horses. (Once the English author Neville Shute learned of the trips, became intrigued, and managed to get himself invited along.) Grace loved these trips. She put together scrap books and albums documenting the outings. She loved to stand on top of Eagle Cap and look down on the rivers lacing away in all directions, like spokes in a wheel.

CAMPING ALONG THE MINAM



After her three children were born Grace's health became a little run down. She was so busy with her family she paid little attention to herself. A persistent bronchial infection would not leave her alone and eventually she had to be hospitalized for tests, and to give her a chance to put on some weight. She remained cheerful, mainly worried about Raymond and the kids. Grace spent her last year in La Grande. She had her friends Jean and George, Raymond and her sweet children to fill her world. Quite suddenly a bout of scarlet fever took the last of her energy and fight. Grace was forty-one years old. It was the 28th of August, 1926.

Jean Birnie stepped in and helped raise Martha and Dallas. For the rest of her eighty-seven summers, she continued to go on her Hen Party trips into the Wallowa Mountains, riding eighteen miles across the dusty Grande Ronde Valley to the foothills, then on up into the high mountain meadows. Soon they would wake up on a rough, springy bed of grass. Friend Mima would be cooking peaches for breakfast, words beginning to fly up inside her as she watched the sunrise brighten the forest. Jean would be saying good morning to the horses. They would spend the next few days on the high trails, where mountains carved of solid stone rose

up beneath their feet. They dropped down vertical trails to tiny, sweet meadows pocketed among the cliffs. A Stellar's Jay oversaw the setting up of their camp one evening.

Biscuits were started and the girls lay in the flowers, washed in the icy stream, and Jean scaled a pine tree further up the trail to better visit with Grace.

The moon began to tip over the ragged inky horizon and paused elegantly for a timeless moment in the prickly spear of a fir. The stew murmured gently in a black pot over the flames and trout browned in a skillet. The Dutch oven squatted, steaming, half-buried under glowing embers. Someone shook out a blanket. Nearby, a horse sneezed into the dusk, starting up a toad's grumbling down by the creek.

Up in her pine tree Jean's head was careening with memories and voices and people, and most of all, spinning clearest of all, were the words of a nine-year-old girl.

"I write you this with a happy face. Goodbye,
with love, your true friend Grace"



The span of life is not long enough
Nor broad enough the sea
Nor broad enough this weary world
To part my friend from me

-- From Jean Birnie's notebook

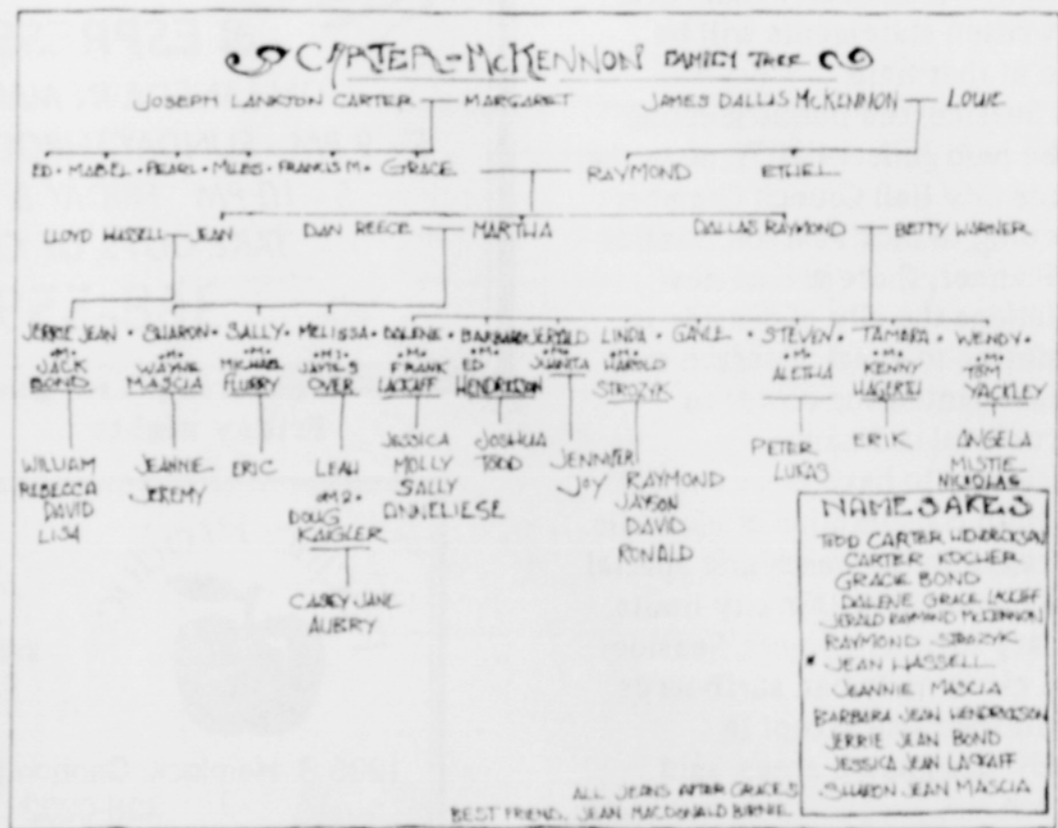
There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who toil for gold.
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold,
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake LeBarge
I cremated Sam McGee

-- Robert Service

Cloistered, welcomed, wooed by the Minam,
Dreaming, drowsing, stamping of horses,
Sun on the high peaks -- and we must be going

-- Mima G. Cooper

Stand on the corner of Eagle Cap,
Gaze on the Basin of Lakes.
Those are the places I'm going to,
Pack trips the 'Hen Party' takes.



This ends our three-part series on Grace Carter McKennon. We think Grace is the type of person whom we would enjoy spending time with, no matter which time we may be living in, and we wish we could have known her ourselves. But her memory and her story still remain and for that we are grateful. All three copies of "A Short Trip to Alaska in 1914: The Journey and Life of Grace Carter" are readily available through the Upper Left Edge or at Jupiter's Rare and Used Books in Cannon Beach. We should mention again that the story was compiled and written by Marti Reece and Jessica Lackaff, Grace's daughter and great-granddaughter, respectively and respectfully.