Love Letters from a Chauffeur

by Bette McDevitt

After both my parents died, my sisters and I found a packet of letters which my father Louis had written to my mother Norma during the summer of 1920. I knew the letters existed because I came home from school one day, as a child, to find my mother reading them in tears. Now I know why — the letters were written in the blush of young love, before illness, daily life, and growing older ground away at their vision.

The letters were written from Atlantic City, where my father, Louis Leddy, was spending the summer as a chauffeur for the Frank Samuel Love family. My father was 20 years old; my mother, Norma Davies, was 24 and living at 710 Armandale Street on Pittsburgh’s North Side, expecting their first child. This was a precarious pregnancy — three months after their marriage in 1918, my mother contracted spinal meningitis and almost died. She was left with a double curvature of the spine and paralysis of her left foot. My father was frantic with worry about her.

Bette McDevitt is a freelance writer in New Castle, where her parents moved in the '20s. She has owned two travel agencies and worked for the Thomas Merton Center, a center for peace and justice. An interview with Frank Love’s nephew, George H. Love, is available at the Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh.

Bette McDevitt's parents, Louis Leddy and Norma Davies Leddy, were married in 1918.
My father was the lonelier one during this separation. My mother had various cousins, a brother and two sisters, aunts or her mother dropping in and sleeping over: a large, extended family, who held things together for her. At times, they all lived together, depending on who was married, who had work, who had been deserted by a husband, and who had need. It was rather fluid. Records show addresses on Buena Vista Street, Tripoli Street, Jules Verne Street, Monterey Street Extension, and Clifton Park, always on the North Side, or Dutchtown, as my mother called it.

My parents had met at the Commons on the North Side. Girls would walk around the park in one direction, and boys would go the other. From age 15 on, Louis only had eyes for Norma. My mother worked at Kaufmann’s department store, but in the evenings, magic took over and she was a dancing teacher at Beuchlers, above the former Kenyon Theater on Federal Street. She said my father used to place a heavy hand on her shoulder, “cutting in” on her dancing, and push her around the floor, not lifting his feet in their black high-top tennis shoes. He was so handsome, though, that she could not resist him. The ravages of spinal meningitis put an end to her dancing days and changed both their lives in a thousand ways.

Mr. Love, my father’s employer, was president of three companies: Union Collieries, Unity Railroad, and the First National Bank of Russulton. He was also a director of three companies: Bessemer Coal & Coke, Union National Bank of Johnstown, and the Indiana Coal Company. And he was chairman of the board of the F.S. Love Manufacturing Company. Mr. Love lived at 5657 Bartlett Street in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh with his wife and daughter Rebecca Frances, who was three years old in 1920. Now 80, she still lives in Squirrel Hill.

Most of the letters are written from the Hotel Brighton in Atlantic City, where my father and the Loves stayed. There was a side trip to New York City, where they stayed at the Waldorf Astoria. Most, but not all, of the letters appear here. As I transcribed the letters, I found few errors in grammar, punctuation, or spelling, although my father only went as far as eighth grade at Allegheny High School on the North Side.

A cautionary note for other recorders of family history: I wish I had my mother’s letters to my father, but there is no trace. When I asked my mother’s sister about those times, she was in a nursing home and her memory was gone. As I relentlessly pursued the questioning, another patient in a wheelchair behind my aunt put an end to it. She shouted, “We’re old, that was a long time ago, and we can’t remember!” Don’t wait to get the story.
A 1921 Pierce Arrow, near-identical to the model that the author’s father chaufèured for the Love family. In 1920, Pierce Arrow offered 24 models averaging about $8,200, when Model T’s cost about $750.

Hotel Brighton
Thursday Evening
July 1, 1920

Dear little wife,

Just arrived in Atlantic City at 9 o’clock tonight. I certainly miss you and I wonder how you feel. I hope you are not going to be sick while I am away. You dear little girl. I hope you have a good time over the 4th of July but no kissing games in the parks. I know you won’t but watch your mother.

[My father loved his mother-in-law and was joking here. She was a single woman at that time. Her first husband had died when the meat wagon he drove collided with a train. The second husband was a drunkard who boarded a trolley one day and never reappeared. She scrubbed floors for a doctor and worked in a Rexall drugstore on Federal Street to support herself.]

I am going to try to get home sometime before the month is up because a month is a long time to go without seeing you.

I think I will go out and take a bath now as I am all dusty. Take good care of yourself and write to me.

Lovingly
Louis xxxxxxxxxxx

Pittsburgh History, Spring 1998
Saturday

Dearest Norma,

I apologize for not putting down the date, but I really don’t know what date it is.

... Mr. Love was talking about staying here next month also if the baby gets along alright but I won’t stay that long. [The baby was the Loves’ three-year-old daughter, Rebecca.]

I tested the Pierce Arrow out today to see how fast it would go on the new boulevard out here. It is a dirt road, good and wide, and no traffic. It went 63 miles an hour, over a mile a minute. That is pretty fast.

I certainly do miss you, honey, and every minute of the day I am thinking about you and wondering how you are feeling. Don’t hesitate to call Dr. Thoms if you get too sick.

... Well, goodbye, sweet baby. Lots of love, from Louis

July 1, 1920

Cuteness:

It is raining here and I wish you were here to hear it as I know you enjoy it so much. Lightning out over the ocean it is beautiful. [My mother loved rain and always went out on the porch for a storm, the bigger the better.]

I had a nice bath tonight, also a shave. Let me tell you about the bath. I don’t have a bath in my room so I go to the bathroom and find it locked. Seeing a chamber maid I asked her about it. She asked me what kind I wanted, hot or cold, salt or fresh water. I told her hot, fresh water and she directed me to call the office and tell them. I did so. They then sent a boy to her with an order to give me a bath. She filled the tub and called me and I took my bath. Some red tape. I don’t think I’ll take many baths. I hope the boss will get a bill for my bath for about $3.00.

Rebecca Frances Love, [Mrs. Love’s sister] Mrs. McCurdy and [the Love’s maid] Kate arrived today at 5:45. They left Pittsburgh at 8 o’clock this morning on the “Pennsylvania Limited” an extra-fare train on account of fast time and stops....

Lots of love and kisses from
Your loving husband
Louis xxxxxxxxxxxxx

July 4 - 1920

Sweetness:

... I really don’t care at all for this idea of being away from my honey but as I earn my bread and butter and your peace of mind that way we will have to put with it for a short time. I don’t intend to go away again.

... Atlantic City is swarming with cars and people here to spend the 4th and lots of money. The garage I stay at has 70 cars inside filling it to the doors and as many more outside on both sides of the street charging $1.50 for each and every one.

Well, it’s getting late. I get up at 7 A.M. so I bid my honey bunch good nite.

Lovingly,
Louis

July 6 - 1920

Dear little Sweetheart,

I don’t know what to do. I just received your letter. I realize how you feel and know it’s hard. I am almost persuaded to do as you say, quit and come home, as I dislike the separation as much as you do. It certainly places me in a quandary, love and duty....

From your loving husband
Louis

July 8 - 1920

Sweetheart:

... All I do in this town is — Get up at 7, have breakfast at 7:30, go to the garage until 9, come back to the hotel for orders. If the boss doesn’t want me before 12:30 I go in swimming. At 12:30 we go to Seaview Golf Club about 10 miles out. I come back to the hotel for dinner at 1:15. At 2, I take Mrs. Love and her friend until about 5 o’clock. At 6, I collect up the suckers for the usual supper party and am through for the day. To the hotel for supper and sometimes I dress and I don’t go back to the garage and sit there until 10. Back to the hotel, write your letter and to bed.

Was out for a sail on the ocean today for an hour. Mr. Love hired a sailboat and took the baby, Katy and I out.

... I really think your vomiting will soon be over now and all you will have to do is enjoy life.... For the love of Mike, don’t let that brother of yours sleep in your bed. If you do please have it fumigated before I get home.

... I’ll talk to the boss about coming home. Believe me, I want to.

Your loving husband,
Louis

July 10, 1920

Dear little Wife,

I had a friendly little conversation with the Love family and they suggested that I might come home for two or three days in the middle of the trip. That will surely help some so dry up your tears and begin to look forward to that. I don’t know the day but I’ll keep it in their mind.

Mrs. Love’s sister Myra arrived tonight from Johnstown at 8:50. They suggested again that I bring you up here but I think it would be unwise as on the Pennsylvania Limited train, the fastest one on the line, you leave Pittsburgh at 8:30 a.m., arrive Philadelphia at 4 p.m., wait 1-1/2 hours for train to Atlantic City and arrive here at 7.

The Pennsylvania Limited is an extra fare train running from Chicago to New York in 18 hours. You would be ready for the hospital by the time you arrived here. Too much riding. Up here, one place, they want $20 a week for one room — no board. It is an impossibility, both financially and physically.

I was out to Seaview Golf club for lunch today. When F.S. [Love] sees the bill he will have a fit. First I had Clam Chowder 50 cents, Roast Spring Chicken $1.75 (two small pieces), mashed potatoes 30 cents, string beans 50 cents, bread and butter 15 cents, iced tea 25 cents, salad 45 cents, pie 35 cents and ice cream 50 cents, making a total of $4.75 for lunch.
This club is owned and controlled by a Mr. Geis of Philadelphia, a millionaire who built it for a plaything. He is very particular who he admits to membership.

... If I would lose you, I don’t know what I would do as you mean everything to me and I hope to the same to you. This trip will make us realize what we are to each other.

This may be a sentimental letter but it comes from the heart. I would write all night but I must hit the hay.

Best wishes to all from
Your own loving husband,
Louis

July 11 - 1920
Baby of Mine,

By the time you receive this, I’ll be in the “Big Town.” I wanted to talk to you over long distance today, but after I inquired about the rates, my blood rebelled and I sent you a night letter. The phone rates were $2.50 for the first 3 minutes and 50 cents for each minute extra. By the time I would have told you all I’d say ... a week’s salary would be gone. O’Sweetness, I would like to be home with you. “Never again.”

... There is a rat gnawing at wood somewhere in the walls around my room, but I don’t mind it.

I’ll bid you goodnight.

Lots of love from
Your own husband
Louis

The Waldorf-Astoria
New York City
July 12 - 1920
Dear Sweet little wife:

Arrived in New York at 7 o’clock leaving Atlantic City at 10 this morning. Have a nice room at the Waldorf on the 5th floor. Received your letter as I was leaving this morning.

... Believe me, I wish I was home tonight — in a strange town. Don’t know anyone or anyplace, tired, and it is raining cats and kittens.

... New York may be all right but give me Pittsburgh and you. Am wishing for my little brass bed at 710 Armandale St., North Side, Pittsburgh, PA but will have to be content with a mahogany single bed in the Waldorf. No one to fight with. When I get back I will be so glad to see you I don’t believe I will ever fight with you.

As always your,
Louis

July 13 - 1920
Mrs. E. J. Leddy
Dear Madam,

As you observe I am still at the Waldorf and will be tomorrow night also. Honey, I bought your birthday present today but I'll leave it be a surprise.

It is terribly warm here in New York. My clothes are all sticking to me. Went to the Rialto Theatre tonight at 42nd Street and Broadway, but didn’t enjoy the show — too much orchestra and high class music. That theatre is right at Times Square and Broadway, if you have ever heard of that place.

Mrs. Love, [Frank Love’s sister] Miss Love, and a friend of theirs went out for a ride this afternoon through Central Park, along the Grand Concourse and through Mount Vernon ... I never saw so much traffic in all my life. On the corner of 34th Street and 5th Avenue they have 7 policemen to handle it and every corner has two or more. The streets run every way. But I didn’t get lost. We are going out to Long Island for a drive tomorrow and back to Atlantic City Thursday. I’ll be glad to get back to the ocean again where it is nice and cool.

I notice a lot of stores here that have stores in Pittsburgh, such as McCreey, Speer, Oppenheim Collins, Hanan, Huylers, Bedells, etc. but I can’t remember all. [Oppenheim, Collins and Co. was a women’s ready to wear shop on Penn Avenue; Huylers was a candy store on Wood Street; and Bedell’s was a ladies apparel store on Fifth Avenue.]

There are a lot of rubberneck wagons to see New York for a dollar but I cannot find time to take a ride...

Lots of love from
Your own husband
Louis

July 14, 1920
Well Sweetness:

My last night in New York City. I leave at 9 A.M. tomorrow morning for Atlantic City.

... At 4 o’clock, Mrs. Love, Miss Love and their lady friend went for a ride out on Long Island and stopped at the Forest Hill Inn for dinner on the way back...

... Mrs. Love said that I got along just fine in New York City.

Did not have a calling down from a traffic officer or get in wrong in any way at all which is saying something...

Well here’s lots of loving and kisses from
Your true loving husband
Louis

July 15 - 1920
Sweetness —

... Had a wonderful trip down from New York. Came down to the Battery and took a ferry across New York Harbor past the Statue of Liberty to Staten Island, crossed the Island to Tottenville and took another ferry to Perth Amboy, N.J. Crossed Raritan Bay
on a bridge to South Amboy and then up the Atlantic Highland over Sandy Hook where all the big steamers come in. On clear days you can see for miles out over the ocean and see all the ships as this is just a big cliff up over the ocean. But today a storm came up as we got there and I got soaked to the skin. We came down the other side and stopped at a little place called Highlands for lunch ... the bill was $6.00. Two dollars apiece. I told Mrs. Love they must have seen the Pierce Arrow.

... You are certainly getting to be a wonder, making all of your own clothes. That is fine. That shows you want to learn and are also putting up a front — some sweet wife.

... I can’t hold my eyes open any longer as it is 9:30.
Good night, sweet baby
Lovingly,
Louis

In the following letters, the Loves and my father are back at the Hotel Brighton in Atlantic City.

July 16 - 1920
Dear Norma,

... I had a talk with the boss today. He called me at the garage this morning and complimented me on my driving in New York. Mrs. And Miss Love said I drove around New York like a veteran. After he got through I asked him if he had thought any more about me going home and he said no, but asked me what day I had been thinking about and I told him Saturday night. He said he would talk it over with Mrs. Love and let me know. If I could go Saturday night, I would go to bed here at 9 o’clock and wake up in Pittsburgh at 7 a.m. He asked me if the middle of the week would do just as well as Sunday as Mrs. McCurdy coming and so on, etc. They would like to have time to get settled. So I will arrive by Wednesday morning at the latest, “unless there is a change in plans.” If there is much of a change in plans, I’ll change some of his.

... To avoid suffering from the heat take lots of baths and drink cooling drinks such as Coca Cola, and orange juice, and ice cream. Don’t eat soups or much meat or greasy food. Buy oranges and squeeze the juice out and add cracked ice - makes a delicious drink. In New York they sell it on the streets 10 cents a small glass. I bet I drank a gallon of it when I was there. No sugar unless the oranges are real sour.

I was waiting for F.S. today and when he came out he said he would drive the car for the experience in case he wanted to use it while I was gone. I patiently explained to him how to start it as I have done 25 times before and he got in and drove it down to the Ambassador Hotel to pick up another man. We got there taking about 3 times as long as I would take and he explained to this fellow about me going home and him driving the car. They went inside and came out in about 10 minutes. F.S. said “Louis, you better shoot us out there,” so I know how much driving he will do while I am gone....

As always yours
Louis
July 17 - 1920

My Wife:

Mr. Love told me today that they were talking of going home in a week or ten days and that it would not be necessary for me to go home and that it would be a pretty expensive trip for me home. I didn’t say anything then but thought the matter over very carefully and later told him that I was going home on Monday. He asked me if for good, and I said “If you care to pay for my transportation I will come back. If not I will stay there,” and off he went. Told me if I was the kind of a man to leave him stranded in Atlantic City, the sooner I left the better. And all this and that and so forth and ended up by saying “Think it over and I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

I am giving him every chance to do what’s right and if he gets stranded here it’s not my fault. He suggested my going home, I didn’t. Then he puts it off for a few days and then says no. If he wants me back he’ll pay my fare both ways as I am coming home Monday if I have to pay my own fare and I’ll be damned if I’ll pay it back. He got pretty sore, but what do I care.

... Will leave here 8:50 Monday night and will be there Tuesday morning unless something very unexpected occurs.

Well You Know
Louis

July 23 - 1920
Sweetheart,

I didn’t realize how badly you felt abut my going away until you started crying but I couldn’t help it. I positively will never go away on another trip because you and I cannot bear to be separated. So you can rest assured that when I get back I won’t go again. Brace up and be brave as I will soon be home.

Went out to Mr. Kepler’s last night. He gave me four quarts of liquor for F.S. wrapped in paper. [This was during prohibition.] I could not get it into my bag so I carried it down to East Liberty Station and waited until 11:45 for my train.... Arrived in Atlantic City at 9:40 and the bus from the hotel was waiting. Went to my room in the hotel and wasn’t there 5 minutes until F.S. called me to go to the golf Club. Quick work.

F.S. had the car out once while I was away. The garage man had to start it for him and he went out to the Golf Club. When he started home some of the boys out there had to start it again for him, so that settled it. He won’t drive it again.

The waitress here at the hotel said I tried to kill myself at noon today over eating. I was pretty hungry. I had a bowl of cream of celery soup, some fish, and roast beef with rice, baked potatoes, string beans, about 3/4 of a loaf of bread, head lettuce salad, two dishes of lemon ice, two pieces of cake and a glass of iced tea. You don’t think that was much, do you honey? I don’t....

Your loving husband
Louis

July 25 - 1920

Sweetheart:

Received what I believe are sailing orders today. Leave here Monday, August 1, for New York City. Arrive NYC Monday night. Tuesday morning drive the Hudson River as far as Poughkeepsie and back. Wednesday morning leave New York City for Baltimore, Md. Stay in Baltimore Wed. Night. Thursday drive to Bedford Springs and stay there over night. Home Friday night or Saturday at latest.

Write me no more letters after Saturday the 31st, as I don’t know where I’ll be. Not that I don’t want the letters.

Worked pretty hard today. Took the baby to Sunday School at 12 o’clock and brought her back at one. Had lunch and went out for a drive at 2:30. Watched the seaplanes for a while and then went on the British Prison ship “Success” which was in Pittsburgh for so long. It took 4 months to come from Pittsburgh to Atlantic City — down the Ohio River, to the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico, across the Gulf, around Florida, and up the Atlantic Coast.

Bought some Brown’s Mixture tonight for my cough. Put that mustard and onions on last night and it burned so bad I had to get up and wash the mustard off the onions and put them back on....

Lots of love from your lover
Louis

Louis went home and returned. Hard feelings obviously passed.
July 27 - 1920

Dear Little Girl,

... I received some different information today as follows. I leave here Sunday afternoon alone for Philadelphia where I have some work done on the car. Meanwhile, F.S. and Mrs. F.S. will come over on a train ... go to Baltimore. Leave Baltimore Tuesday morning and go to Bedford Springs. Leave Bedford Wednesday, and go to Pittsburgh, Pa., if you know where that is. My better half lives there.

Now those plans are subject to change and most likely will be changed. So don't count too strongly on seeing me before Friday.

You certainly had a fine birthday if you consider presents. 24 years old. My, you are grown up. [My father always liked to remind my mother that she was older than he.]

Lots of love and kisses on paper until then
Friend Husband
Louis

July 28 - 1920

Well Cuteness.

... Had kind of an argument with F.S. this morning — asked him for some money and he asked me what I do with it all, and I told him I spent it. He asked to see my list. When he saw it he told me I was smoking too much, and asked what the tips were for and told me I was cheating him out of $10. I am, but he doesn't need to know it or brag about it. If he gets wise, I owe him $10 and if he doesn't, why, it's gone anyway. He sent me back to get a shoeshine and complained about the car. He had me getting pretty hot under the collar. I'll get all I can when I get back, and goodbye.

... I haven't been in bathing since before I went to New York. F.S. told me before coming down here I didn't need a room with bath so I took my bath in the ocean. I don't care for moon light bathing so I don't bathe.

... I guess I have bronchitis which I will cure when I get home. The waiter who waits on F.S.'s table had a bad cold and was off. F.S. sent him some liquor to cure it. I don't see him sending me any....

You know
Louis

Thursday

Sweetness,

... Had fine time tonight. Took Mrs. and F.S. and Mrs. E.M. Love and Mrs. McCurdy to a theater. Mr. McCurdy came along but as he is so deaf he didn't go to the theater and F.S. fixed it up for him to hang around with me. We went back to the garage and put the car away and went to a moving picture show (the first since I have been here). We saw the "Sea Wolf" and two comedies. The old man promptly went to sleep but I woke him up and he enjoyed the picture.

Had the carbon burnt out of my car today and tuned her up. Went out on the boulevard and opened her up to 65 miles per hour! It would have done better than that but the road is so rough I didn't have the nerve to see how fast it really would go. But that is fast enough, over a mile a minute. It just looks like a blue streak when going that fast.

We are positively leaving here Monday and expect to arrive in the Smokey City about Wednesday. It is funny, just as soon as you say Pittsburgh to anyone they say the "Smokey City."...

You know
Louis

July 30 - 1920

Well Sweetheart,

... By the time you receive this Monday morning, I will be crossing the ferry from Penn's Grove, New Jersey, to Wilmington, Delaware. "Homeward Bound." If Loves would only go on a train and leave me come by myself, I would be there in one day, but with them, it will take 3 days. I wouldn't stop until I hit Allegeny, Pa.

You want to be very careful now and have Dr. Thoms come and see you. I told F.S. about it and he told me to leave the doctor examine your urine every once in a while for signs of Uremic Poisoning, just as a measure of safety.

He wished me all the luck in the world and so on and so forth.

Now you remember and do as I tell you and be good girl and I will see you Wednesday.

You Know
Louis xxxxxxxxxx

July 31 - 1920

Dear Little Girl,

... I don't really know what day I will be home. F.S. said to me tonight that we are leaving here Monday and that we would either go home or go to New York and then up the Hudson to Poughkeepsie and then home.

... You certainly imagine you are larger than you really are as you are self conscious. After you have had 10 or 15 [children], you won't mind it at all....

You Know
Louis
August 1 - 1920

Well Sweetheart,

Here I am again on Sunday night and do not know where I go tomorrow.... They seem bent on going to New York and up the Hudson, crossing over to Shawnee-on-the-Delaware. I certainly am sick and tired of the touring. I would like to ship the car home and come home on the train, but no chance. I am so darn lonesome all day. Nothing to do.

... We are leaving tomorrow morning for somewhere. I don’t know where. We leave at 8 o’clock and believe me, I’ll be somewhere when supper time comes as I am going to cut loose, so the faster I go, the sooner I’ll get home and I won’t wander any more.

I want a good night’s sleep tonight as I work tomorrow.

You Know
Louis

Hotel Belvedere

Baltimore

August 2 - 1920

Sweetheart,

I’ll bet I’ll beat this home.

Louis

This was my father’s last letter from this trip — home at last. My oldest sister, Lois, was born in a hospital that November. By then, my parents had moved to 1706 Buena Vista Street, around the corner from their Armandale home. Another daughter, Doris, was born at home two years later, and I came along 10 years after that. Considering my mother’s health, it was a triumph.

My father worked for the Loves another four years. He observed the ways of the well-to-do and knew what to do in later years when he had a successful auto parts business. We traveled a lot and always “stayed in the best hotels,” as he liked to say. He always drove a Buick or a Cadillac.

My mother’s health continued to deteriorate, but in later years, Louis took Norma to New York City, up Fifth Avenue in a cab, and stayed at the Waldorf Astoria. They also went to Atlantic City and stayed at the Traymore, an elegant hotel beside the Brighton. My mother, wearing a red fox jacket and a black hat with a veil, rode with my father in a rickshaw on the boardwalk. Louis had come full circle.

The family dining aboard the South American, a steamship, early 1940s. From left, Lois, author Bette, Doris, Louis, and Norma.
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