SCARLET FEVER and a MURDER

HOW THE McCLELLAND FAMILY HEARD THE NEWS
By Jennifer P. Garner

Sarah Collins McClelland was born in Shadyside, a neighborhood of Pittsburgh, in 1885. Her parents were Rachel May Pears, daughter of a prominent glass manufacturer, and Dr. James Henry McClelland, Jr., a successful homeopathic doctor who treated upper class families of the city. Sarah had a younger sister, Rachel Pears McClelland, born in 1887. The two had a happy childhood full of play, a healthy diet of exercise and good food, and the luxury of traveling away from the hot, sooty summers in Pittsburgh. Sarah grew up and lived most of her life in the same house, Sunnyledge, in Pittsburgh. Besides adoring parents and two uncles who practiced at the McClelland home, she was surrounded by an extended family of aunts and uncles on her father’s side, many of whom lived at Sunnyledge for periods of time.

James and May McClelland encouraged their daughters’ education. Sarah and Rachel attended Dilworth Academy, a girls’ school located on the campus of Chatham College. Sarah also attended the prestigious girls’ boarding school, The Miss Master’s School, in Dobbs Ferry, New York, and went on to further her education by earning a bachelor’s degree in political science and completing coursework for a master’s degree from the University of Pittsburgh. Sarah was a pioneering women in Pittsburgh politics; her career began in 1926 when she was elected as City-County Committee person of the Republican Party, a position she held until 1958. Although Sarah traveled the world with her sister Rachel, she worked for the improvement of women and children in Pittsburgh, where she lived until her death in 1979.
This article focuses on a time at the end of the 19th century when Sarah was a precocious 14-year-old. In January and February 1899, she was sent away with her Aunt Mamie for a hotel stay after her sister Rachel contracted scarlet fever. This four-week microcosm of letter writing in the McClelland family is a great example of how correspondence was used at this time to maintain close emotional bonds, relay news, tease, grieve, and generally keep abreast of mundane daily activities, even as letters crossed each other’s paths and arrived out of chronology or weeks after an event occurred—from Erie to Pittsburgh to Honduras and back.

The advent of the telephone and telegraph were still several years away from opening lines of “live” communication between people. In 1899, the only way to talk, other than in person, was through writing. This mailed correspondence was a major part of everyday life for the middle and upper classes. Men and women composed daily letters to family and friends, detailing where they were and what was going on in their lives. These letters announced family births and deaths, daily news and gossip, as well as important travel, financial, and business information necessary for the planning and running of family enterprises and the multiple households of the wealthy. It is easy to track where a person was writing from, as most hotels and resorts had their own stationery. Many establishments listed not only the hotel’s location and a sketch of the building and grounds, but also its amenities, such as running water, private baths, and fresh eggs.

There was twice daily mail service in Pittsburgh with postal carriers picking up and delivering letters (which cost two cents an ounce to mail) in the morning and afternoon from private homes.

While these family letters contained a wealth of information, they were not timely. Letters crossed in the mail, asking for important news or instructions already sent. When a family member was sick or dying, the wait must have been excruciating. With only boats, trains, and horse-drawn carriages as
means for travel, visiting a friend, relative, or business partner was not a quick, or comfortable, process. Most times, a family could only sit and wait for news.

In the early months of 1899, the McClelland family faced two life and death situations and struggled to deal with the details and planning through the mail. May McClelland learned of the violent death of her brother while at the same time her younger daughter struggled to survive scarlet fever and her eldest daughter was sent away for her own safety. Their only outlet for the grief, frustration, fear, and uncertainty were daily letters sent between family members, stretching out over a network of loved ones across the country and the ocean.

The letters of the McClelland family have been preserved in the archives of the Senator John Heinz History Center and detail the daily life of the McClellands, and in particular the unconventional life of a young woman: Sarah Collins McClelland (1885-1979), who had a sharp sense of humor and a fiery personality to match her red hair. Her many letters to her parents, sisters, extended family, and friends over the years reveal her compassion for others and a spirit for living.

The first letter Sarah wrote to her parents, dated June 15, 1892, was while they were visiting Washington, D.C., at a medical convention. With sentimental pride, her mother May noted on the back that it was Sarah’s first letter to her “Mama and Papa.” The note was written on a small square of paper in pencil with large childlike block letters, “Dear Sweet Mamma. We are very good. We love you and Papa. Sarah.”

The three-story red brick house named Sunnylegde was home to Sarah Collins McClelland for most of her life and still stands at the corner of Wilkins and Fifth avenues in Shadyside. In the latter part of the 19th century, Shadyside was a new destination, far away from the hustle, bustle, and riverfront commerce of downtown. A streetcar connected the new suburb to the rest of the city. In 1887, Dr. James Henderson McClelland, Jr., moved his family into this new home he had designed and built especially for them. It was constructed for a total cost of $49,923.70 (today: $1,025,000), which included the house, stable, and the price of the land. Frank Alden designed what would become Sunnylegde for the Boston
architectural firm of Longfellow & Harlow in 1886. The contract for the design in the family papers, was $1,180, which Dr. McClelland paid in three installments.

By this time, the three doctors McClelland had settled into practice. James, Robert, and John were busy seeing patients in the Sunnyledge office located at the side of the house with its own patients' entrance of Mercury. Patients weren't allowed to bathe or wash their hair and were made to stay in bed and rest. Due to these long periods of not washing their hair, patients' heads were often shaved. Other children living in the infected homes were frequently sent away so as to not contract the disease.

In the McClelland family files, a note added in Sarah's handwriting on the back of a stack of letters reads: "1899 January. When Rachel had scarlet fever Aunt Mamie and I were at Cambridge Springs. Letters were dictated to girl in office and she type wrote them." Sarah was 14 and Rachel 12 at the time. A photo from this period shows the two sisters with long hair, the front of which was pulled back behind their heads with large floppy bows. A woman named Miss Tiers was brought in to nurse Rachel and seems to have typed her letters in the evening. They continue from January 11-30, 1899. Miss Tiers was then dismissed, and Rachel again wrote her own letters. They say "The Nursery" at the top. Rachel and her mother sent them to Mamie and Sarah, who were made to stay away until the threat of disease had passed.

With the medical knowledge available at the time, a strict quarantine was seen as the only way to prevent the spread of the disease and save other family members. In a testament to Sarah's strong defense against 20th-century contagions, or her pure luck, she escaped another infection in her family seven years later. In December 1906, Rachel and May had typhoid. Sarah was staying with the train for the Rider Hotel in Cambridge Springs without a chance to say goodbye to her sister.

James McClelland's older sister, born Mary Watson Pentland in 1841, called Mamie, never married and lived at Sunnyledge until her death in 1904. Mamie frequently traveled with the family and took care of her young nieces. She often visited the Rider Hotel; it was an easy train ride from Pittsburgh to Cambridge Springs, just south of Erie. Aunt Mamie's health was not good and so she "took the waters" from the Gray Mineral Spring. Mamie wrote to Sarah on the hotel's stationery, extolling the virtues of the Spa at Cambridge: "the mineral springs are free to its guests and are certain to perform all the good effects claimed for them ... the water cures all stomach, liver and kidney disorders, also rheumatism, neuralgia, gout and similar afflictions and is a general diuretic and tonic." The Rider Hotel was the largest and nicest of the 10 hotels in the area with two tiers of open-air porches and acres of grounds for strolling.

Mamie and Sarah traveled to the Rider on January 10, and immediately wrote home
to Sunnyledge to let the family know of their safe arrival. Sarah's first letter to her sister (p. 45) shows an adolescent girl trying to be cheerful with her sick sibling, but still not able to resist poking fun, calling Rachel "Chicken or Shorn top" due to her shaved head:

I hope you feel better soon and get well quickly little ----. With love give Mamma Papa and Uncle Rob my love with love to the girls, Miss Albreitz, Miss Tiers and all the rest. So with much love and greeting for your quick getting well with love your loving sister Sarah McClelland.

P.S. do you know this is the first letter I have ever written to you. Boo hooo you have never written to me."

While in exile at the Rider, Sarah would have missed her daily German classes with Miss Albreitz. James McClelland loved the German language and had hired the German governess in 1895 to teach Rachel and Sarah every day in the Sunnyledge schoolroom.

The next day, Sarah and Mamie received a letter from Pittsburgh typed and dated January 10, 1899. Sarah's uncle Robert McClelland had loaned nurse Tiers the typewriter. This first news from Rachel must have been a relief to Sarah and Mamie:

I am feeling better this morning and slept better last night. Papa got me Harper's Round Table for year of 1898. I am sorry it will have to be burned up, but I must have something to amuse me and to look at. I am teasing everyone and say I want sausage. Mary would have given me some but Mama would not let me have it. I eat soups and broths, and am hungry. I can't have Welsh-rabbit, lobster ala-newburg."

Mrs. McClelland and the nurse continued to care for Rachel, closely watching the progress of the illness, while keeping Mamie and Sarah apprised. Two weeks after Rachel contracted the fever, Mrs. McClelland wrote: "We cannot keep her looking spotless when she is greased so much. Her face will not peel any, as she did not have any rash on it. She is peeling a great deal on her hands and feet, and takes off pieces of skin which we burn immediately." While only 120 miles away in Erie, Sarah and Mamie were isolated from the daily news of the McClelland home. It fell mostly to May to update her sister-in-law and daughter on the latest prognosis.

May McClelland was also concerned about Sarah and Mamie but was glad to have sent them to Cambridge Springs. While a sound medical decision, living without her eldest daughter during this stressful time must have been difficult for May. Her letters tell of her concern over Sarah's wellbeing and desire to make sure that she was keeping to a healthy regime:

We miss you so much. I don't know when I felt as badly as I did on Monday morning when you went away, but felt if you and Aunt Mamie stayed at home it would be bad for both of you. If you only escape being sick and don't need to come home we know we have done all right. I know the good air will do you both good and some physical culture if it is mild."

The idea of physical exercise for the girls was important to the McClellands and is
Rachel wrote Sarah from the nursery at Sunnyleidge, January 17, 1899. Here a sisterly truce is offered: "If you do not call me any more names I wont call you snuff box." MC LA, MSS 113.83

January, 17th, 1899.

Rachel

Fifth & Wilkins Aves., Pittsburgh, Pa, January 17th., 1899

Dear Sarah:

If you do not call me any more names I wont call you snuff box. Don't you think that is fair? Do you want me to have my hair cut off? I have not had much fever, and have not had any rash on my head. Papa never says anything about it. If he thinks it best I will have it done, but I don't want to. Would you like to have yours cut?

Why do you play so much with the little girl if you do not like her. I suppose she wants to be with you. She must be a nuisance if she wants to be in the room so much.

What kind of exercises do you take? Do you think you will remember some of them so you can show me? What do you do in the middle of the day and afternoon? Do you stay up late?

I am eating my lunch now which I do not think is very much, chicken broth with barley, a roll and apple sauce, about three o'clock I will have an orange or some grapes, and at six o'clock a cup of chocolate and some rice or hominy or something of that kind. Before I go to bed I will have a cup of sleum-bullion which I like very much.

I have slept well for three nights. I get awake two or three times, but go asleep soon after. Mama stays in my room with me until one o'clock and then Miss Tiers comes in. She can sleep some on the lounge, but it is pretty hard, then Mama goes in the nursery and sleeps until morning. In the afternoon they are together some, but Mama often goes out of the room. Miss Tiers is going out for a walk now, as it is a little rest for her, and Mama will go this afternoon. I have to tell the same things as I don't know any news. I enjoy reading stories in Harper's Round Table. Some of them are very good. I hope I will be fat when I get out of bed. Prada King telephoned the other day to inquire how I was getting along, and also Mrs. Reed.

I feel very glad Aunt Mamie's cold and sore throat is better. Am glad you are looking better. I hope you are having a good time and are very happy. I see a good deal of Mama and Miss Tiers, and while I am not tired of them I am tired of bed. Well Mama has a letter to write to Aunt Mamie, so I will send you many kisses and much love, and much love and many thanks to Aunt Mamie for her nice letters. I like your letters so much, as they are very interesting. Am sorry we cannot hear the howler.

Ever your dear little sister,

Rachel.

mentioned frequently in their letters. James and his brothers practiced what was called homeopathic medicine, a scientific method of therapy based on the principle of stimulating the body's own healing powers in order to accomplish a cure. This system of medicine was founded in the early 19th century by a German physician Dr. Samuel Christian Hahnemann and was practiced in the U.S. by 1825. By the turn of the century there were 22 homeopathic medical colleges, and one out of five doctors used homeopathy, a practice of examining the physical, mental, and emotional needs of the patient before prescribing a medicine unique to the patient's needs, and in a very small dose, to stimulate the body's natural healing powers. In keeping with homeopathic theory, Sarah's mother encouraged her daughter to stay active at the hotel:

I only wish I could look in upon you every morning and see just what you are doing, and especially when you take your physical culture lesson. You must look very funny with those big bloomers, but it is such a good thing to have. I think it would be very nice if we could have a small gymnasium, and I think the attic would be the best place.

While exercise was touted for the health benefits of young women, it was still limited and restrictive by today's standards. Cutting-edge girls would have worn big, woolen bloomers, with their arms and legs completely covered. Regardless of the restrictive costumes, Sarah enjoyed the fencing lessons she took at the Rider Hotel that winter and May took notice of Sarah's enthusiasm: "I am afraid you will want to be fencing with everyone when you come home."

Rachel continued to improve and by February was typing her own letters to Sarah. Rachel's first letter to her sister is dated February 9, 1899, and is in jumpy, all capital letters on a small piece of paper:

Dear Sarah –

I am writing my first letter on the typewriter that Uncle Robert gave me. I got
me your letter this morning. It is very cold here and we are all hovering about the fire.

Miss Tiers is here and Mama and she and girls and Mrs. Hastings are busily cleaning the nursery. They won't let me go in the nursery hard at all for fear I may take cold so I cannot help them.

I think I will have to close. As I am nearing the end of my page.

With lots of love from all.

Your loving sister
Rachel

After Rachel and her mother had been quarantined for a month, there was hope for Rachel's total recovery and thus the return of Sarah and Mamie. May McClelland finally wrote to Sarah of some good news from Sunnyledge:

Your Uncle John was out this morning and I asked him when he thought Rachel would be out. I like to get the opinions of different ones. He says the danger is nearly over now, but to be on the safe side to keep her in the room for another week, which of course we expect to do. Her hair is to be washed tomorrow. I suppose at the end of the fifth week anyway we will begin to fumigate. It is not quite as bad as I thought it would be. Miss Tiers says she will come out and help us.

Sarah obviously took this as good news and believed she and Mamie would return to Sunnyledge soon. Sarah's body of letters throughout the years reveals first a girl, then a woman, who had a good appetite and wrote about meals that she had already eaten or was looking forward to enjoying. Kate, the McClelland family's cook for many years, is often mentioned in family letters. It is obvious Sarah was excited to be coming home after a month away and wrote to Rachel in detail of the feast she wanted to eat upon her return to Sunnyledge:

Dear Rachel,
I wrote to Grandma this afternoon. We received your letter this morning. It is frightfully cold to-day 2 degrees below zero still the hotel is very comfortable there are 2 big fires downstairs in the office they are very nice. This is the bill of fare I want Wednesday for dinner. Black bean soup or bullion, pickles, olives, and celery, turkey with cranberries, succotash, sweet potatoes, spinach and baked squash in the skin, then some rich pumpkin and mince pie and chocolate ice cream. Fresh cake almonds and other nuts, is that not a nice one? We took Physical culture this morning... I hope Billy goat, fishes and chickens are all well. With a great deal of love to all. I hope all are well with love you dear sister Sarah.
These tender letters contain the emotion and compassion the sisters obviously felt for each other during this difficult time but could only express through frequently sent, carefully crafted correspondence. Before the family was finally reunited, after a month apart, an even more traumatic experience struck, all the way from Honduras.

May McClelland received word of the shooting death of her brother Francis Pears on February 2, 1899. May’s brother, Benjamin Pears, was the general manager for the Pittsburg and Honduras Company, specializing in exports and imports of lumber and other merchandise, located in Puerto Cortez, Honduras. Their other brother Harry Pears was listed as secretary on the letterhead with the office in Pittsburgh. (The official spelling of Pittsburgh did not contain the final “h” until 1911, although both spellings were used until then). Their brother Francis, or Frank as he was called, appears to have traveled to Honduras to help his brothers Ben and Harry in the family business.

The Pears brothers had worked originally with the family glass company, before closing that and going into land speculation, mining, and lumber in South America. John Palmer Pears, May’s father, was a partner in the Pittsburgh Glass Company, Bakewell, Pears and Company, which was one of the few producers of the now rare yellow canary flint glass, a process that used uranium oxide to produce a yellow color.14 The Bakewell, Pears and Company operated from 1808-1882 and manufactured dishes, inkstands, and ornamental glass designs.

With letters having to come by boat from Honduras, it was two weeks before May learned of her brother’s death, which had occurred just 10 days before the onset of Rachel’s quarantine. Benjamin Pears wrote to his sister of the details and told of how brave Frank was during the ordeal, as he lived through the night after he was shot, dying the next morning. It seems there was some question that he may have been shot over a business deal gone bad. The Pears family pushed for a formal inquiry. Benjamin wrote to May, “We have asked all our friends to use their influence at home to have justice done. Our government has been very slack about protecting their citizens abroad. If this matter is allowed to go, it will be impossible for any American to do business here.”15

Frank was only five years younger than May, and it is obvious from the correspondence that he was much loved by the entire Pears family. Sarah was still at the Hotel Rider with Aunt Mamie when she heard the news. Sarah wrote to her mother with the language of an innocent child facing death:

Dear Mamma,

We received yours and Rachel’s letters this afternoon. You cannot imagine how sorry I am Uncle Frank was killed, I can hardly believe it, it seems to [sic] sad to be true. I think it was very nice of Mrs. Ferguson to send the flowers. I remember very well the time Uncle Frank taught us to ride the bicycle, and I shall always keep my bicycle to remember him by... I feel very sorry for you and Grandma... It is the first death in the family for so long and that makes it worse too. I hope it will be the last....

The entire Pears family, shocked by the news of Frank’s death, sent letters of sympathy to May. Her brother Tom Pears’ wife, Ada, expressed disbelief at the whole situation:

I do really think the whole affair is too terrible for anything. Poor Frank just going down there to be murdered in cold blood. It certainly was nothing but a murder... I can not feel from the paper accounts it was any thing but murder for if Frank threw up his hands as they say he did of course that means surrender.”
Sarah doodled where she and Aunt Mamie were frost bitten in this letter dated January 21, 1899. The Hotel Rider and its walking paths can be seen to the left. 

While not in the files, letters that May wrote to her Pears family members must have contained the heartache, anguish, and questions she struggled to understand.

It is hard for people today to imagine not being able to share family news or comfort a far-away relative with a phone call. Today, hospitals post up-to-the-minute news of patients to inform families and friends, and air travel allows same-day visits. For the McClelland family and others of the time, difficult news and situations were dealt with via letters with disjointed delays. Perhaps the depth of emotion poured into those letters provided a great comfort to them. A letter can be reread and cherished and pulled out again to experience sympathy, support, terror, and grief. Even 108 years later, the words of the McClelland and Pears families resound with the same emotions and concerns families share today.

The McClelland correspondence examined in this article is filed within the McClelland Family Papers, mss#111, box 1 (handwritten) and 31 (typed) in the Library & Archives of the History Center.

Abbreviations:
Sarah Collins McClelland SCM
Rachel McClelland Sutton RMS
Rachel Pears McClelland (May) RPM

1 SCM to RPM June 15, 1892
2 RPM to SCM, February 6, 1899 saying they fumigated the big nursery and were able to move Rachel for a change of scenery.
4 SCM to RMS, January 10, 1899
5 RMS to SCM, January 10, 1899.
6 RPM to SCM, January 23, 1899.
7 RPM to SCM, January 11, 1899.
8 Background on homeopathic medicine from The National Center for Homeopathy website: http://www.homeopathic.org/history.htm.
9 RPM to SCM, January 16, 1899.
10 RPM to SCM, January 24, 1899.
11 RPM to SCM, February 9, 1899.
12 RPM to SCM, January 30, 1899.
13 SCM to RMS, February 12, 1899.
14 Information on the Bakewell, Pears and Co. from the web site: http://www.mindspring.com/~reyne/canary.html
15 Benjamin Pears to RPM, February 27, 1899.
16 SCM to RPM, February 5, 1899.
17 Ada Fahnestock Pears to RPM, February 17, 1899.

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