MSS. Collection #89

Puckett Family Papers, ca. 1910-1950 [bulk 1944-1945]. 2 boxes (53 folders), ca. 333 items.

NOTE: The numbers cited in parentheses, e.g. 1:5, refer the researcher to the Series#:Folder# in which that name/topic will be found.

INTRODUCTION

The Puckett Family Papers consist primarily of correspondence between Beth Norvell Puckett, a Greensboro resident, and her husband Lewis Puckett, who was stationed overseas with the U.S. Navy for over a year and a half during the latter part of World War II. Beth Puckett assumed the position as head of the household and raised their two children, Sherry and Steven, during Lewis’s absence. Beth had the help of her mother and father, Joy and D.W. Norvell, who lived nearby and ran the D.W. Norvell Tent Manufacturing Company in Greensboro.

Researchers interested in life aboard a Navy ship as well as life on the homefront in Greensboro will find valuable information in the letters between Beth and Lewis Puckett. Although his letters are censored, Lewis writes of his job as a Navy clerk, his movements from New Guinea, Australia, the East Indies and Shanghai, and of the entertainment provided by the Navy.

Beth’s letters speak of her anxiety from being thrust into the position of being the manager of the finances and a single parent. As time passes, however, she gains greater confidence in her abilities. She keeps Lewis informed of the children’s activities, and expresses her worries that he will disapprove of the way that she is managing money. Beth’s letters regarding rationing in Greensboro provide insight into the hardships of the homefront. Of course, both Lewis and Beth’s letters express their love and longing for each other. Beth fears for Lewis’s safety, and Lewis longs for home and family.

In addition to correspondence, other items of interest include family and war-related photos, as well as Lewis Puckett’s U.S. Navy papers.

Arrangement: This collection is arranged into nine series, and within each series folders are arranged alphabetically. The following are the nine series: Correspondence, 1929-45; Financial Documents, 1925-50; Legal Documents, 1925-40; Miscellaneous, ca. 1930-45; Newspaper Clippings, ca. 1945; Photos, ca. 1910-45; Printed, ca. 1921-46; Puckett, Lewis, 1944-45; and Scrapbook, 1923, 1925.

Provenance: The provenance of this collection was unclear until September 1995. At a meeting of the Belle Meade Society, Mrs. Adelaid Israel told the Director that she had found the trunk, or suitcase, of letters and memorabilia at a house at the corner of Wedgedale and Kirby Drive in Starmount. They had been placed outside to be trashed. Mrs. Israel brought them to the museum in 1986, and they were later assigned accession number 1989.153.1.

Processing: This collection was organized and the finding aid was prepared by Melissa Garrison, UNCG History Dept. Intern, in March 2000.
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Lewis S. Puckett was born on May 6, 1914 in Asheville. He attended UNC-Chapel Hill in the early 1930s. Lewis was inducted into the Navy on April 18, 1944 and served for the duration of the war, leaving at the rank of Yeoman/2nd Class. During his time aboard a Navy ship, Lewis traveled to New Guinea, Australia, the East Indies, and Shanghai. Some of Lewis’s letters indicate that he worked as a clerk for the Navy.

Upon his return to Greensboro, Lewis worked for his father-in-law, D.W. Norvell, in his business, the D.W. Norvell Tent Manufacturing Co. Lewis became president of the company, and later founded Puckett Supply Co. He also was co-founder and past president of the International Cemetery Supply Association. Lewis was a member of Revolution Lodge No. 552, as well as a Shriner and trustee of the N. C. Boys and Girls home in Lake Waccamaw. He died on September 19, 1986.

Beth Norvell Puckett was born on October 8, 1914 in Roanoke, Virginia, but she lived the majority of her life in Greensboro. She graduated from Sumner High School, in Guilford County, in 1929. Beth married Lewis on September 5, 1935. They had two children, Sherry (born January 13, 1937) and Stephen (born November 16, 1939). Beth was a member of the Eastern Star. She died on May 21, 1982.

Biographical Sources: The sources used to compile this note include the obituaries of Lewis and Beth Puckett, early correspondence to UNC-Chapel Hill, letters that include birthdays and anniversaries, certificates, and Lewis Puckett’s U.S. Navy records.

SCOPE & CONTENT NOTE

Types of material in this collection primarily include correspondence, and photos.

The bulk of materials are correspondence between Beth Norvell Puckett, a Greensboro resident, and her husband, Lewis, during his time overseas serving with the Navy during World War II (1:6-35). Researchers will find interesting information about life on the homefront in Greensboro as well as life aboard a Navy ship. In addition, the letters contain news about the Puckett’s two children, Sherry and Stephen, which gives interesting insight into the impact of the war on Greensboro’s children.

The photos are primarily of the Puckett family—snapshots of Beth, the children and their house (6:3). There is a portrait of Lewis in his uniform as well as war related photos that feature military maneuvers and equipment and people and places where Lewis was stationed, such as New Guinea and Shanghai (6:3; 4).

Other material in this collection that may be of interest includes printed material (7:1-3), Lewis Puckett’s U.S. Navy Papers (1:1) and legal and financial documents (2:1-2; 1:1).

There are very few materials in this collection that will inform researchers about aspects of Lewis and Beth’s lives before or after the war years, such as Lewis’s return to the Greensboro workforce or Beth’s adjustments to her household role after Lewis’s homecoming. The strength of the collection is the detailed war correspondence; the weakness of the collection is the lack of information on the Puckett family beyond the war years.
SERIES DESCRIPTIONS


The bulk and main strength of the Puckett family collection is this series of correspondence. The majority of the letters are from Beth Norvell Puckett to her husband Lewis during his service overseas in World War II (1:6-30). Letters from Lewis to Beth are also included (1:31-35). Both Beth and Lewis’s letters are emotionally powerful, detailing their love for each other as well as their fears. A wide variety of topics emerge in their correspondence during the year and a half that Lewis was absent from the home.

NOTE: Described below are the major topics included in Beth and Lewis’s letters along with citations of specific examples. These topics, however, occur numerous times throughout the correspondence. A complete reading is suggested if the topics are of interest.

Beth on children: Sherry and Stephen, the Puckett’s two children, are often a topic of discussion in Beth’s correspondence. Beth tried to keep the children’s lives as normal as possible by keeping them involved with the church (June 24: 1:6; Mar. 3: 1:17), taking them on trips (Aug. 1: 1:27), and taking them to movies (June 10: 1:14; July 16: 1:7). Keeping Sherry and Stephen entertained and active proved difficult at times due to the infantile paralysis (polio) epidemic (July 5: 1:7; Aug. 3: 1:8; Sept. 5: 1:9). Nevertheless, Beth kept Lewis up-to-date on their progress. Sherry began taking piano lessons (Oct. 6: 1:10), and Stephen learned to tie his shoes (June 15: 1:23). During Lewis’s absence, both of the children had their tonsils taken out (Mar. 12: 1:17; Aug. 25: 1:28), and Sherry came down with scarlet fever (begins Mar. 23: 1:18). Despite such trials and tribulations, Beth often wrote of how brave the children were even though they sorely missed the presence of their father.

Beth’s activities: Beth kept herself occupied entertaining numerous roomers who stayed in her home while Lewis was overseas. She had mixed emotions about many of these boarders; she hated an empty house, but often got annoyed by her roomers and missed her privacy (Sept. 5: 1:9; Dec. 31:1:13; Mar. 3: 1:17; Apr. 7: 1:19). During the day, Beth filled her time shopping (Mar. 16: 1:18; May 4: 1:21) and making home improvements (July 22: 1:7; Nov. 7: 1:11; Mar. 8: 1:17; May 24: 1:22). She often lamented that Sunday was the longest and loneliest day.

Beth on holidays and celebrations: The Puckett family was forced to celebrate numerous occasions without Lewis. Beth had to describe the family events surrounding Thanksgiving (Nov. 26: 1:11; Nov. 22: 1:30) and Christmas (Dec. 10: 1:12; Dec. 25: 1:13) to Lewis in her letters. Sadly, Stephen’s fifth birthday (Nov. 17: 1:11), Sherry’s eighth birthday (Jan. 13: 1:15), as well as the Puckett’s ninth wedding anniversary (Sept. 5: 1:9) all passed while Lewis was overseas.

Beth on the homefront: Beth also described in her letters to Lewis the effects that the war had on the homefront. Rationing seemed to bother her the most. She primarily complained of lack of meat, particularly beef, and often spoke of going to numerous stores in search of cigarettes (Jan. 5: 1:14; Mar. 8: 1:17; June 5: 1:23; Aug. 1: 1:27). Beth had to replace the tires on the family car many times, and due to the shortage of rubber, the replacement tires were almost as bad as the flat ones (June 15: 1:23). In one letter, Beth admitted that the rationing drove her to become a thief. Tired of the lack of pepper, she even stole a pepper shaker from a restaurant (Feb. 5: 1:16).

In addition to a shortage of food and commodities, Beth informed Lewis of the lack of experienced workers. She wrote that due to the shortage of mill workers, a number of soldiers,
who were experienced workers, were sent to Cone Mills temporarily. While there, the soldiers worked under military control (May 29: 1:22).

Beth’s other trouble on the homefront was handling the difficulty of balancing her new duties as head of the household and manager of the finances (Mar. 8: 1:17). For example, during Lewis’s absence, the family furnace died, and Beth had to make the decision to replace it herself (July 16: 1:7). She worried constantly that Lewis would disapprove of her money management including her inability to save (Dec. 5: 1:12; June 2: 1:23; July 20: 1:26).

**Beth on war and politics:** Major political and war related news was also mentioned often. She commented on her grief over the death of President Franklin Roosevelt (Apr. 12 & 15: 1:19) as well as her feelings about the atomic bomb (Aug. 6 & 8: 1:27). On December 7, 1944, Beth wrote of her memories of Pearl Harbor Day (Dec. 7: 1:12). Months later, she was upset over false news of a surrender, but was elated shortly thereafter by the confirmation of a real surrender (Aug. 10: 1:27; Aug. 15: 1:28; Sept. 2: 1:29). Her thoughts then turned to demobilization in the hopes that Lewis would return home soon (Aug. 27: 1:28; Sept. 6: 1:29).

**Lewis on Navy life:** In a few letters, Lewis described his duties as a clerk aboard a Navy ship (May 11: 1:31; Sunday, n.d.: 1:35). Although the letters were censored, Lewis was able to tell Beth when he was serving in New Guinea (Aug. 14: 1:32), Australia (Oct. 2: 1:33), the East Indies (June 9: 1:34) and Shanghai (Oct. 19: 1:34). He described the natives on the island of New Guinea (Aug. 19: 1:32), and a visit to a Buddhist temple in Shanghai (Oct. 19: 1:34). He praised the entertainment that the Navy provided for its men, which included movies, bands and boxing (Aug. 14: 1:32). Lewis also described his feelings about the bomb (Aug. 7: 1:34) as well as his frustrations with the Navy’s point system (Aug. 19: 1:34). He wrote one other letter home addressed to “Pro and Junior” (unknowns, but see below) in which he described life on a Navy ship (Dec. 3: 1:36). This letter described the drinks aboard a Navy ship, including “Beer Call,” as well as the blazing heat.

**Lewis on family:** Lewis missed Beth and the children, and always tried to buy gifts for them whenever possible (Oct. 2: 1:33; Jan. 8: 1:34). His letter to Beth on their wedding anniversary expressed how much he missed her and appreciated how she accepted full responsibility for raising Sherry and Stephen (Aug. 4: 1:32).

**Additional correspondence:** Other family members have correspondence that is included in this series. Sherry wrote short notes and drew pictures for her father (1:37). Stephen also has one picture that he drew for his father included in this collection (1:37). Joy Norvell, Lewis’s mother-in-law, wrote numerous letters to Lewis overseas. Most kept him informed of the progress of his family as well as the management of the family business, the D.W. Norvell Tent Manufacturing Company (1:5). D.W. Norvell, Lewis’s father-in-law, wrote him as well (1:4).

Miscellaneous 1940s correspondence is included in folder 1:3. The majority of the letters are war-related. Included are letters to Lewis from friends, primarily Dr. H.L. Johnson, the Puckett family doctor, and his son, Harry Johnson, Jr. (these two may have been nicknamed Pro and Junior by Lewis in an earlier letter 1:36). There is also a letter from the Home Building and Loan Association of Greensboro.

The remaining correspondence was written in the 1930s. There are numerous letters from Lewis’s father, W.L. Puckett, which were written while Lewis was attending UNC-Chapel Hill. His father was working for the Southern Railway System and lived in Asheville (1:39). Other miscellaneous correspondence from the 1930s includes information regarding Lewis’s
applications to UNC-Chapel Hill and Duke University (1:1; 2). Letters from friends are also included among this miscellaneous correspondence (1:1; 2).


   The financial documents include bills, checks and receipts. There are Guilford County tax receipts for the Norvell Tent and Awning Company, a Duke Power receipt, a dog tax notice, and the business license issued by the City of Greensboro for the Norvell Awning Company. Other documents include a receipt for Lewis Puckett’s board at Swain Hall in Chapel Hill, and checks from the Greensboro Bank and Trust Company and the Greensboro National Branch American Exchange National Bank. There are also bills from the Central Carolina Convalescent Hospital and L. Richardson Memorial Hospital for the care of Geneva Scales.

3. **Legal Documents.** 2 folders (8 items). 1925-1940.

   This series contains a birth certificate of Lewis and Beth Puckett’s son, Stephen (3:1), and numerous deeds (3:2). The mortgage of D.W. Norvell to Rawls Chevrolet and Lewis Puckett’s Travelers Insurance are also included (3:2).

4. **Miscellaneous.** 1 folder (10 items). ca. 1930-1945.

   The items in this series include Lewis Puckett’s luggage tags, a graduation program from Emma High School, letters from friends (including Beth), and a letter from the North Carolina Emergency Relief Foundation in 1935 in response to Beth’s inquiry about a job.

5. **Newspaper Clippings.** 1 folder (4 items). ca. 1945.

   One clipping announces that Sherry Puckett was crowned May Queen by Simpson Street School in 1945. Sherry’s picture is included in the announcement. The other clippings consist of an advertisement for a Norvell play tent and an article regarding military awards that were presented to four North Carolina servicemen.


   The photos are divided into four folders: Family/Friends, Guilford County Students, the Puckett Family, and War-Related photos.

   The Family/Friends folder (6:1) includes informal and formal pictures of Lewis Puckett as a child and a young man, as well as portraits of young women. A large photo (6:2) of Guilford County students, who appear to be Beth’s class, was taken during their visit to Washington D.C. in 1929.

   The Puckett Family photos (6:3) consist of pictures of Lewis Puckett’s wife, Beth, and their children, Sherry and Stephen. In addition to family snapshots, these pictures include a photo of the Puckett house, a picture of Beth and Lewis eating out with another couple, and a portrait of Lewis in uniform.
The war-related photographs (6:4) consist of pictures of New Guinea natives, military maneuvers and equipment, photos of people and places in Shanghai, and pictures of fellow servicemen.

7. Printed. 3 folders (20 items). ca. 1921-1946.

The printed material is in three groups: certificates and diplomas, greeting cards, and pamphlets.

The certificates and diplomas (7:1) include: a star of service from Rehobeth Methodist Church to Lewis Puckett; a National Salesmen’s Training Association Matriculation certificate awarded to D.W. Norvell; Lewis’s membership to the order of United Commercial Travelers of America; and Beth Norvell’s diploma from Sumner High School.

The majority of the greeting cards (7:2) are birthday, Christmas and Valentine wishes that Beth sent to Lewis during his overseas service. There are also cards from Lewis to Beth, as well as cards sent to Lewis from other friends and family members. Lewis received a few postcards while he was studying at UNC-Chapel Hill—one of which was sent from the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933—that are included in this folder.

The last group of printed material contains three pamphlets (7:3): George Washington: The Man of Action in Military and Civil Life; Southern Rural Life: The Problem, The Solution; and instructions for the use of a Smith-Corona portable typewriter.


This folder contains multiple copies of Lewis Puckett’s U.S. Navy papers. They include Lewis’s orders in 1945, as well as the Navy’s response to Beth’s questions regarding Lewis’s pay. This response includes a full detail of Lewis Puckett’s account. Other papers pertain to the proper paperwork needed to mail a package as well as a list of the contents of one package that Lewis mailed home.


Beth Norvell Puckett’s scrapbook is the main item in this series. The scrapbook begins with articles and pictures clipped from magazines about authors such as Virginia Woolf, John Masefield and Sinclair Lewis. Later pages of the scrapbook contain Beth’s creative writing. The final pages of the scrapbook contain journal entries written by Beth pertaining to events in her daily life—her wish to return to school and her desire to forget Dave. The other items in this folder include a get well card for Beth, an article about the writer, Katherine Mansfield, and an essay Beth wrote on popularity.
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American Exchange National Branch (GSO): 2:1 (1925)
Atomic Bomb: 1:27 (Aug. 6 & 8), 1:34 (Aug. 7)
Australia: 1:33 (Oct. 2)

Bolton Dixie Leather Co. (GSO): 4:1 (1934)
Buddhism: 1:34 (Oct. 19)

Carlton, Phil R., Inc. (GSO): 2:1 (1935)
Central Carolina Convalescent Hospital: 2:1 (1950)
Chicago World’s Fair: 7:2 (1933)
City of Greensboro: Business License: 2:1 (1931)
Cone Mills: 1:22 (May 29)

Duke University: 1:2 (1932)

East Indies: 1:34 (June 9)
Emma High School, Buncombe Co., N.C.?: 4:1 (1930)

Greensboro Bank & Trust Company: 2:1 (1929)
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Johnson, Dr. H.L.: 1:3 (1944-45)
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L. Richardson Memorial Hospital: 2:1 (1950)
Lewis, Sinclair: 9:1 (ca. 1935)

Mansfield, Katherine: 9:1 (1923)
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Morris Plan Bank (GSO): 2:1 (1931)
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Pearl Harbor Day: 1:12 (Dec. 7)
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  Roomers: 1:9 (Sept. 5), 1:13 (Dec. 31), 1:17 (Mar. 3), 1:19 (Apr. 7)
  Shopping: 1:18 (Mar. 16), 1:21 (May 4)
Puckett, W. L.: 1:39 (1933-35)
Puckett Family: Anniversary: 1:9 (Sept. 5), 1:32 (Aug. 4)
  Birthdays: 1:11 (Nov. 17), 1:15 (Jan. 13)
  Christmas: 1:12 (Dec. 10), 1:13 (Dec. 25)
  Finances: 1:17 (Mar. 8), 1:7 (July 16), 1:12 (Dec. 5), 1:23 (June 2), 1:26 (July 20)
  Gifts: 1:33 (Oct. 2), 1:34 (Jan. 8)
  Thanksgiving Day: 1:11 (Nov. 26), 1:30 (Nov. 22)

Rawls Chevrolet Company (GSO): 3:2 (1927)
Rehobeth Methodist Church (GSO): 7:1 (1946)
Roosevelt, Franklin D.: 1:19 (Apr. 12 & 15)

Scarlet fever: 1:18 (begins Mar. 23)
Shanghai, China: 1:34 (Oct. 19), 6:4 (ca. 1945)
Smith and Corona Typewriters, L.C., Inc.: pamphlet: 7:3 (n.d.)
Southern Railway System: 1:39 (1933-35)
Sumner High School, Guilford Co., N.C.: 7:1 (1929)

Taxes: 2:1 (1935, 51)
Typewriters: 7:3 (n.d.)

United Commercial Travelers:3:2 (1938), 7:1 (1938)
UNC-Chapel Hill: 1:1 (1932), 1:2 (1932), 2:1 (1933)
  Clerk: 1:31 (May 11), 1:35 (Sunday, n.d.)
  Drinking: 1:36 (Dec. 3)
  Entertainment: 1:32 (Aug. 14)
  Point System: 1:34 (Aug. 19)
Weaver College: 1:2 (1932)
Woolf, Virginia: 9:1 (ca. 1923)
World War II: Atomic Bomb: 1:27 (Aug. 6 & 8), 1:34 (Aug. 7)
  Demobilization: 1:28 (Aug. 27), 1:29 (Sept. 6)
  Rationing: 1:14 (Jan. 5), 1:17 (Mar. 8), 1:23 (June 5), 1:27 (Aug. 1), 1:16 (Feb. 5)
  Rubber: 1:23 (June 15)
  Shopping: 1:18 (Mar. 16), 1:21 (May 4)
  Surrender: 1:27 (Aug. 10), 1:28 (Aug. 15), 1:29 (Sept. 6)
  Workers: 1:22 (May 29)