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## Mystery in a Trunk

By Sophie Braccini



Carole Sinclair and the steamer trunk that held a mystery. Photos Sophie Braccini

A love letter sent before World War II, hidden in a steamer trunk. A mystery, but this one's not found in a movie or romantic novel.

Farmyard Darlings co-owner Carole Sinclair had never seen anything so touching among the collectibles she and partner Kim Berry purchase for their shop. Behind a compartment in an old trunk were wedged a spectacle case and a letter. A pair of spectacles still lies in the case; one of the lenses is loose. The letter is written on frighteningly thin, yellow paper, and when Sinclair opens it up it looks like it could turn to dust.

The letter is addressed to "Jane." The main text is typed, with the slightly awkward looking block capitals that typewriters imprinted. Handwritten lines have been added at the bottom, as if someone was keeping notes on his or her own life. "I started to obsess with this letter," recounts Sinclair, "the letter talks about love and trust, and was dated 1937. One of the handwritten notes reads, 'I became engaged to you and I hope and pray that we will be very happy' - it was dated April 17, 1938. I had to find out what happened to these people."

With a few clicks and phone calls, it only took Sinclair about three weeks to identify the writer, his family and his wife. But the veil has not been completely lifted - the writer's wife was not named Jane; the enigmatic fiancée has not been found.

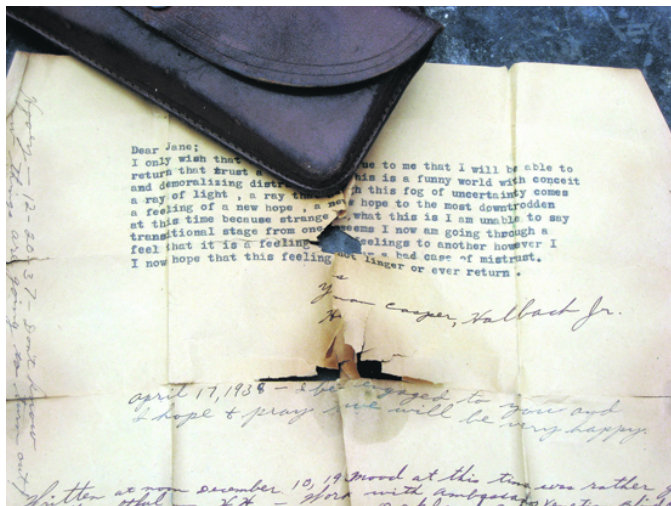
The letter was written by Herman Casper Halbach Jr. When Sinclair entered the name in Ancestry.com she immediately got a trail. "I started with our Facebook page where some of our fans tried to help. Many recommended Ancestry.com so I became a member," explains Sinclair, "I posted my request for information on this family and within 24 hours I had responses, within 48 hours I was talking with people on the phone and tracing back Herman Halbach."

Sinclair first talked to a cousin living in Germany. She corresponded with a grand-nephew and a grand-niece who lives in Tracy and was born in Hayward. They all knew about Halbach and were very interested in the discovery. It turned out that Halbach was originally from Oakland. He was in WWII, survived, and was stationed in Germany for a few years; one of his granddaughters lives there.

Halbach died in 2009. His wife, Loraine, lives in Yuba City.

"Since the letter is not addressed to Loraine, I decided not to try to reach her," says Sinclair, "but his daughter, who lives locally, is coming and we will give everything to her."

Sinclair hopes to find out more about the mysterious Jane to whom the letter was addressed. For now, the steamer trunk is still in Sinclair and Berry's store, in the back of Mt. Diablo Nursery & Garden in Lafayette.



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[back](#)

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