

Chapter Six

Halcyon: December, 1937 – January, 1938

December

At some point along the way, Herb and Louise would have to have this discussion; the one that involves getting an agreement about how to behave, socially. Louise had just learned from one of his letters that he planned to “get practice” dancing at the cabarets in downtown Manila. Louise responded that she had a difficult question to answer. “I don’t think it’s right for a man ‘to pick up a little experience’ (as he had written) any more than it is for women” (*December 4*).

She closed that paragraph with “I also think sex should be discussed frankly, at any rate, between the two people most concerned with it.” A few weeks later, Louise wrote “I know that what you are doing for me by resisting all those temptations, is something to be proud of ... it makes me love you all the more” (*December 23*).



One of Louise’s male friends, Herman Volz, had been acting strangely toward her ever since she and Herb got engaged. Herman appeared to be unsure how to act around her lately.

Louise writes to Herb that maybe it was because Herman had a crush on her since 1933, when she was about 16 years old (*December 4*).

Herman had lived in Halcyon since 1920, arriving there from Washington state with his mother, who was interested in the Temple. Their home in Halcyon was built in 1926, and Herman now operated a poultry and egg business on their property with hundreds of chickens. He was soft spoken, and about 13 years older than Louise, who nevertheless wrote about him often.

Louise's letters also contained anecdotes about the harsh weather that winter. They had been getting a lot of rain. "Twelve California towns flooded, up around Sacramento, and the Russian River overflowed. I love it when it rains hard" (*December 13*).

During the winter of 1937-38 the Great Depression was still a major influence in the lives of ordinary people. Reading between the lines of Louise's letters we learn what impact it had on Louise, her family, and Halcyon friends. She writes to Herb "I think you had better stay in the Navy even if you don't get as far as you want. Especially in these times" (*December 20*).

Louise was a member of the Temple Choir, and in one of her letters she boasted "We have a wonderful Temple choir." They had been practicing Christmas songs lately, preparing for the Christmas service in the Temple. and she writes that on Christmas night there would be a turkey dinner in the Lodge. "Santa Claus will be there for the kids, and there will also be a tree" (*December 13*). They had a large number of people attending, and "After the presents were distributed, we had dancing" (*December 26*).

On Christmas Eve the Whitney's [Fred, Ebba, Bob, Louise] went down to Pearl's home to join Pearl, Flamore and those living at the Sanatorium: Bernard Lentz, Clarence Dennis, Otto Westphalt, and Mrs. Varnot (*December 13*). "Every Christmas we draw names to see who we give ten-cent presents to at the Christmas tree. We also have to write appropriate rhymes for the gift" (*December 21*). She described the gifts she received. She really liked the scarf and manicure set Herb got for her (*December 26*).

Going dancing was one of Louise's favorite pastimes. A type of dance popular in those days among teens/young adults was called "trucking." "I get a kick out of watching others do it" she wrote, "but I get too tired when I try to do it" (*December 27*).

Louise struggled with trying to balance her social life with taking care of her own health. In her letters she complains that she is bored in Halcyon and nothing of interest happens there. But she also admits that she likes to do things all the time, making it hard to rest as her doctor had recommended.

Then, with indirect reference to her relationship with Herb "Of course, now it's different. I've got every reason in the world for taking care of myself. And I am doing my best although it's awfully hard to be quiet when I love to do things all the time" (*December 27*).

Louise wrote about her perceived social activity dilemma: "I haven't done anything interesting since the last time I wrote. Nothing to do around here, anyway." "Oh, I keep pretty busy down at Pearl's but aside from that I do nothing but play solitaire, read or listen to the radio" (*January 6*).

It seems that her desire for adventure and excitement is partly a result of what she perceived as a boring life in Halcyon. Writing to Herb that nothing ever happened there may have been because she was comparing her life to what he was experiencing, and writing about, in the U.S. Navy. While his confident attitude taking on bold adventures was something that may have attracted her to him, this disparity between their life experiences is something neither of them could totally ignore.

“Here’s something that makes me so mad! Mrs. Varnot and Herman both think that I can’t be true to you for two years. Herman would think that! Oh they make me so mad! It makes me all the more determined to love you for two years” (*January 8*).

Local theaters usually showed newsreels of current national and world events prior to beginning the featured movie. On one occasion Louise saw a news report about an incident that occurred in Shanghai, China involving the Japanese. She writes “We also saw the bombing of the Panay¹. That also made me angry. Those darned old Japs! Gosh, I’d better remember that my girlfriend is Japanese” (*January 8*). Louise knew that Herb had been in Shanghai in late October, 1937, so she would naturally be quite concerned.

On the beautiful central coast of California, one of the most popular things to do was (and still is) going to one of the many beaches in the area. “I love to swim in the ocean, and I love to dive under great big waves – breakers.” “I never did anything fancy, but I love to dive off the high diving board in the plunge at Avila” (*January 8*).

On one occasion that winter the Whitney’s entertained the Dower’s for supper. The Dower’s included Pearl and Flamore, as well as Bernard, Clarence, and Mrs. Varnot, who were living at the Sanatorium. For that dinner Louise made a cake that she describes as “twice as good as hers [referring to Mrs. Varnot]” (*January 16*).

In January, Yoshiko came up to Halcyon to visit Louise. She talked all about her relationship with Gabriel, who was 7 years older than Yoshiko (who was 18 at the time). Louise writes “It seems Gabriel is very domineering” (*January 18*). That afternoon she and Yoshiko went shopping in San Luis Obispo. Yoshiko had her father’s car, a brand new 1937 Plymouth. Louise had to drive because Yoshiko didn’t have a license (*January 18*).

The Stenquist-Whitney family had to live very frugally, as did most people during the late 1930s. Louise writes that Fred would turn 65 in October, and then he would be entitled to a pension. “And if it weren’t for that, I’m afraid we wouldn’t go very far. But my mother works hard – it’s not the same as WPA” (*January 23*). Her mother was able to earn a supplemental income by teaching music at the high school in Arroyo Grande, an activity sponsored by a government program.

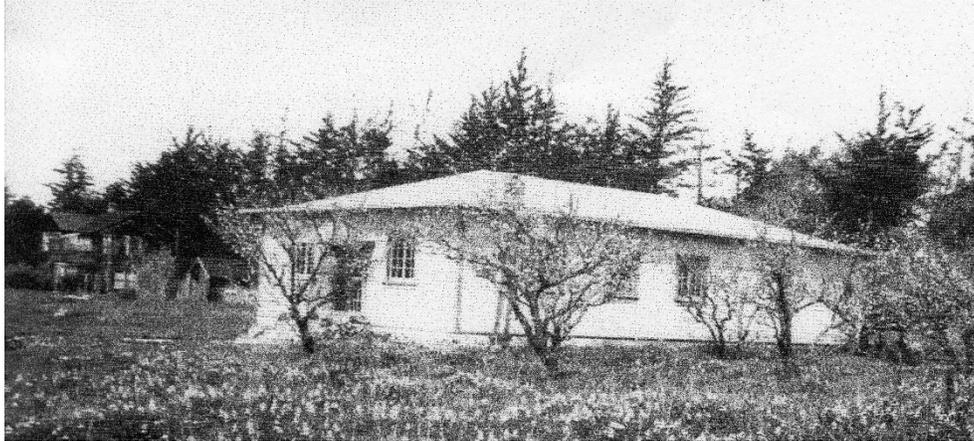
Bernard Lentz had a job at the county library in San Luis Obispo. It was a Works Progress Administration (WPA) job, and he was quite happy with it. Because of it he was able to buy a used car and was learning to drive (*January 23*).

A week after Yoshiko visited with Louise, she and her fiancée Gabriel came to visit. Louise writes “Tonight, Jean and I entertained Yoshiko and Gabriel out in my room” (*January 23*).

Yoshiko and Gabriel were planning to move to the Philippine Islands, so that Gabriel could help care for his ailing mother. He tried to convince Louise to come with them, explaining that she would then be closer to Herb. Louise said she didn’t have the money, and even after Gabriel offered to pay, she thought it wouldn’t be right. “After they were gone it suddenly struck me as being very odd to be entertaining a Japanese girl and a Filipino” (*January 23*).

¹ The U.S.S. Panay was a river gunboat that was sunk by Japanese aircraft on December 12, 1937 on the Yangtze River, near Shanghai, China. Historical newsreels are available at www.usspanay.org.

Louise's busy social calendar included Temple dinners. She wrote about a supper in the Lodge and how she and her friend Jean set the tables and put the food out. After supper they also did the dishes (*January 23*).



Halcyon Hiawatha Lodge

Louise expressed her disappointment about having to wait so long for Herb to return.

"Here's five months nearly gone – they went quickly and now it still seems like only yesterday that you left – isn't that right? Well, why can't the next ten, fifteen – or is it 24? - months go just as quickly? But gosh, Herb, 24 months is two years, and I don't care what you say, if only you could come back in 1939. Oh well – right here and now I'll become very philosophical and say that time doesn't matter. Two years, or a year and a half – there is no difference whatever, and I don't mind waiting. (January 25).

She wrote that she now "walks down to Dowers" every afternoon. She thought it would be good to get the exercise (*January 28*). This was a walk of about seven tenths of a mile from the Whitney home: heading south around the temple, then right past the lodge, downhill across the village of Halcyon, heading west around the eucalyptus-covered hill into Oceano, and walking another three blocks.

Louise is looking forward to going to a benefit dance at the end of the month at the Oceano Pavilion, and she is planning to go with the Holman's. A friend of the family persuaded her to sing a duet with Jean for the benefit. The day after the dance, she writes that she and Jean sang, and after the dance she got home at 1:30 a.m. (*January 31*).

Louise and friends also enjoyed going to see movies, referred to in her letters as "the show." Within a two-month period that winter she went to the show seven times. Usually, she went to the show with her close friends; sometimes with her mother; sometimes several Halcyon folks all went together. Films she saw that winter included "The Good Earth," which she liked; "Ebb Tide," described as a wonderful picture; "Topper," which she thought was quite funny; "Damsel in Distress" with George Burns, Gracie Allen, and Fred Astair, which she liked very much.