

Anne Frank's American Pen Pal

Required Annotations		Student-Created Annotations		Summary / Questions / Reflection	
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Although it was only a one-time letter exchange between two girls – one from a farm town in Iowa and the other living in Amsterdam – the surviving correspondence speaks volumes.

Because one of those pen pals was Anne Frank.

Danville, a city in south-eastern Iowa just over 10 miles from the Mississippi River, is where the story of this brief correspondence began. Now, it is being retold inside the Danville Station, a museum and cultural centre, through a permanent exhibit that will open on 16 April 2018.

The exhibit's design will involve a convergence of two worlds: one being Anne Frank and her family, and the other Juanita and Betty Ann Wagner, two girls from Danville who received letters from Anne and her sister, Margot. It will feature a timeline starting from the 1920s up through 1945, comparing events in Europe to those within the United States. There will also be a replica of the top floor of the Secret Annex that housed the Franks and four other Jewish people for two years.

"We've known about the letters for many, many years," said Janet Hesler, a high school secretary with the Danville Community School District who is involved with the exhibit. "It's very historical for Danville; the letters originated here."

Facsimiles of the letters will be on display, as will a 2008 video interview with Betty about the exchange. Betty passed away in August 2012; her sister preceded her in 2001.

The credit for the story lays with Birdie Matthews, a Danville Community School seventh- and eighth-grade teacher who was also a world traveller. She took summer holidays to Europe and introduced her classes to what lay beyond their hometown through letter correspondences with other schoolchildren.

"Each year, she would have her middle school history students write letters across the world to begin a pen pal exchange with an interested school," Hesler said.

In January 1940, Matthews got a list of student names from the 6th Montessori School in Amsterdam, which included Anne Frank.

At the Danville school, 10-year-old Juanita Wagner picked Anne's name; Anne was the same age as her. In their letters, each shared some details about themselves. In Juanita's introductory letter in the spring of 1940, she mainly wrote about living on a farm with her mother and her sister Betty; her father was deceased.

In Anne's response to Juanita, dated 29 April 1940, she wrote about her school and living with her parents, sister and grandmother. She said her birthday was on 12 June, and asked Juanita to send her picture so Anne could see what she looked like. [...]

There was one more item enclosed: a letter from Anne's older sister, Margot. Margot's letter differed in that it spoke to what was happening in Europe at the time and mentioned that they listened to the news on their radio.

"Margot was much more aware of worldly events," Hesler explained, "and even talked about having a cousin in Switzerland but not being able to visit him, as no visas out of the country were permitted."

Anne and her family had previously uprooted their lives. The Franks had fled from Frankfurt to the Netherlands in 1933 due to rising anti-Semitism in

Nazi Germany. Then on 10 May 1940, German forces attacked the Netherlands with an invasion so swift and brutal that the Dutch army conceded defeat five days later. No more letters would come to Danville from Amsterdam.

In July 1942, Margot received **call-up papers**; she must report to a German work camp. The Franks went into hiding along with four other people in the Secret Annex, the back of a building where Anne's father, Otto Frank, had his business. The group was discovered during a raid on 4 August 1944 and taken to various concentration camps. Otto would be the only family member to survive the Holocaust. Anne and Margot would succumb to typhus at Bergen-Belsen in 1945; their mother, Edith, died at Auschwitz the same year.

Over the course of World War II, the Wagner girls worried about the Frank sisters and wondered if they were safe. "I remember that we would talk about Anne and Margot and wonder how they were doing," said Betty Wagner in the video. "Are the bombs dropping there? Did they have enough to eat? We didn't know, but we always thought about them."

Betty said that she and her sister didn't know that Anne and Margot Frank were Jewish, and couldn't remember hearing about the Holocaust during the war.

After the war ended, the Wagner sisters wrote to the address they had for the Franks. Otto sent a reply, explaining what the family had gone through and what happened to his daughters. Their father would be also instrumental in getting Anne's diary published in 1947, which would go on to be produced in multiple languages and turned into a play.

Otto was also the reason why the letters are written in English. He knew the language well as he'd visited New York City and worked at Macy's Department Store and then a bank for two years before returning home in 1911. He read the letter from the Wagner sisters to his daughters in Dutch; Anne and Margot wrote their replies, which Otto then translated into English for the girls to hand copy.

Following her school years, Betty held on to the letters but got wrapped up in her new life in California. It wasn't until 1956, when Betty heard news on her car radio that a play based on Anne's diary – which became a smash hit on Broadway – that she thought about the letters again.

"I said, 'oh, that's my Anne Frank'." Betty and her mother went out and bought copies of the book. "We spent the evening reading it and crying too because we just had no idea."

The Wagners kept the Franks' letters mainly private for years, only discussing them with relatives and acquaintances. It wasn't until Betty had dinner with a friend who collected World War II memorabilia that this changed. The friend suggested that she might consider putting the letters up for auction.

In October 1988, Swann Auction Galleries in New York City sold Anne and Margot's letters for \$165,000 to an anonymous bidder. The buyer donated them to the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, where they are still kept.

Response

On as separate piece of paper, write a letter to Anne. You can pretend you live in her time; you can pretend you are writing somehow from the future; you can do anything you want. Just write a letter to Anne.