

Editor's Note: The following letters were written by Joe Rockenbach in 1934 at the time he was in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Since Joe would not be able to join the family for Christmas that year, L.A. (Phil) Taylor suggested that Joe write a Christmas letter to the family. The first page below is the cover letter Joe sent to Phil, followed by the full Christmas letter to the family.

P- 176 Seiad
Seiad Valley, Calif.
December 17. 1934

Dear Phil:

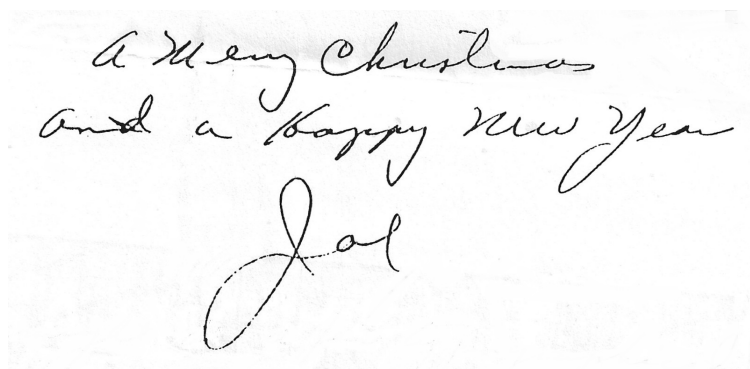
I sat up until 2 A.M. last night writing this episode so I hope it is what you wanted. I realize it is quite long but I tried to boil it down as much as possible. Too many interesting things have happened to put them all in one letter.

I am mailing the Christmas presents to you and in that way you can play Santa Claus. Ruth, will you please wrap up the two jackets, and the bath robe. I didn't have the paper nor tags here. I hope they arrive for Christmas. I have been so busy that I almost forgot to mail them and now I suppose they won't arrive in time. Please let me know if you don't receive them.

There is a small flat package to Elizabeth. I want you to give her that and have her open it before giving her the robe. I sure hope the robe fits and she likes it.

I am going to Bend for Christmas; I had a card from Dorothy yesterday and she wants me to come. Another fellow is going with me. I suppose you read all of the news in the camp paper. All of the old fellows, except six of us, are leaving for home tonight.

We are having swell weather. Quite different from what you are having if the radio reports are correct. Today has been a busy one for me. I've been typing out reports and records all day, and as I have more work to do to keep me busy until about mid-night I will have to close this with



A Merry Christmas
and a happy New Year
Joe

P- 176 Seiad
Seiad Valley, California
December 17, 1934

Merry Christmas to Everybody:

As much as I would like to, mountains, river, and a flat country keep me from attending your joyous Christmas dinner.

Phil has asked me to write a letter and in this way he thinks you will feel my presence. That might be true, but then it doesn't help me from thinking about the good time I might be having with you. On second thought maybe it is lucky, for some, that as I am not there, "Ike" will get more to eat.

Just what to write puzzles me so I will write a brief account of my travels since leaving home fourteen months ago.

After spending 17 miserable, cold, but happy days in Fort Sheridan, we boarded a troop train for Washington. The route took us thru St. Paul, Dakotas, Montana, Idaho, and then to the Vancouver Barracks, Vancouver, Washington.

Vancouver is located eight miles north of Portland, Oregon on the Columbia River. Three days were spent at the Barracks and then we were loaded on trucks and transported to our new camp fifty-four miles Northeast.

Coming to the end of the road we found our new home located on the Lewis River in the heart of the Columbia National Forest. For two weeks we had perfect weather, but on the first day of December 1933 it started to rain. For 22 days in succession it rained, at no time was the sun visible. After 15 days and nights of steady downpour the river began to swell. By the twenty-first of December it had overflowed its banks and water was flowing thru camp.

At that time we had Lt. Taylor, a Navy Officer, as commander. I can still remember him coming through the barracks on the night of Dec. 22. He said "I've lived on the water practically all my life, but I want to be in a boat when the water is surrounding me like this".

On the morning of the 23rd the hill to the north of camp suddenly became one mass of sliding rock, trees, and soil. The steady downpour had loosened

the soil to such extent that even the large trees and brush could not stop the landslide. Water and mud washed in one end of the mess hall and out the other. The food cooler, directly below the hill, was washed 50 feet and nearly into the swelling Lewis River.

That climaxed the misery we were going through and Lt. Taylor gave orders to pack and get ready to vacate camp. At 3 P.M. orders were given to take our blankets (leaving everything else behind) and start for a camp nine miles away. As the roads had become impassable and all telephone communications had been severed, we were compelled to walk.

A few men were needed to stay in camp and come out the next day a very humorous incident happened in connection with this ----- the Liuet sent his negro orderly over to the barracks to tell Howard Beatty (Crystal Lake fellow) that he was to stay. Beatty said "You tell him I am packing and leaving right now.

The little black fellow ran back to the commander scared half to death, himself, he sputtered out "Boss man, that fella am scaad to death. He all say hees leavin. I done all wanna go myself".

Well after walking thru water, mud and feeling our way in the darkness we finally arrived at a higher elevation. At times we would be walking along and without any warning would fall in water holes up to our waist. Travel was like this for four miles and the last five were continued in the steady downpour of rain. At nine P.M. we arrived at the other camp wet and hungry, but still in good spirits. Lack of room necessitated 100 of us to sleep in one building.

The next day everybody was on edge. Cramped quarters, little to eat, and general conditions accounted for this. As it was still raining, everyone was compelled to stay in the one room still trying to dry out from the previous day's journey. The place reminded me of the prison conditions across the line during the World War (at least like those shown in movies).

On the afternoon of December 24th we were transported by truck to the Vancouver Barracks. What a Christmas Eve? The cooks (I was one of them) spent all Christmas Eve and Christmas day cooking the Christmas Dinner. After a swell dinner with a big variety and

plenty to eat everybody felt better.

On January 9th we were moved back to camp where we found conditions very different. One creek that was but 10 feet wide before the flood had been washed out to a width of about 300 feet and about 60 feet deep. In order not to make this too long I must refrain from telling about the usual things that the flood had created.

While at this camp I spent many enjoyable week-ends in Vancouver and Portland where I visited Betty Catlow. The camp commander took some of us on a trip to the seashore in May. We spent two days by the shore of the Pacific. On April 2nd I went to Bend, Oregon and spent six days with Dorothy and Bill at the beach.

On April 16th I was detailed to take a gang of sixteen fellows, truck drivers, and deliver ten trucks from Vancouver to Spokane. This was a tri well worth taking. We traveled on the North side of the Columbia River. We saw some very scenic country and some not so scenic. After spending two days at Fort George Wright, Spokane we left for our new camp and to join the rest of the company, who had been transported by train, at Growden 110 miles northwest of Spokane and but 20 miles south of the Canadian border.

July 27th found the entire company fighting forest fires. Sweating, boiling, with axes, saws, shovels, or grub hoes, being trapped in between two fires, running from fire traps, working 24 to 30 hours without sleep and then sleeping on the ground were only a few of the obstacles we had to overcome until September 10th. "Great Balls of Fire" is the phrase that describes some of the scenes.

One of the instances: Three of us were patrolling the fire after we thought it was corralled, but a strong wind came up forcing the flames into the tree tops and it jumped the trail. Within fifteen minutes we were trapped. Which way to run? What to do? And other questions flashed through our minds. Two things could be done ---- go through the old burn and take the chance of burning our feet and legs or running up the trail and try to get above the fire. We chose the latter so as fast as our legs could carry us with the fire creeping up on all sides we climbed,

crawled, and dragged ourselves up to a high peak where we were safe. From there we could see the fire rapidly gaining headway. It would go to the tree tops and leap 50 to 150 feet above the tops and then we would see a big ball of fire travel 3 to 4 hundred feet through the air to settle in another place igniting more timber. What a sight. In one hour it travelled four miles and the 500 men on the fire line were helpless against such a menace.

I happened to be trapped three other times and each time it seemed a miracle we all escaped. Very few realized the grave danger until it was all over.

As my job required me to draw clothing from the fort and to distribute it amongst the men of our company, I was only on the front lines for about 18 days. The rest of the time I spent travelling from one camp to another seeing that the men had clothes to wear.

The fire covered a total of 37,000 to 40,000 acres. The largest fire since the Tilamook fire in 1931 which raged in the vicinity of Portland and it covered nearly a million acres.

On September 12th twelve of us were permitted to leave the fire line and take a trip that we had planned 3 months before. On a Wednesday morning at 5 A.M. we left camp with an army truck loaded with our bedding, grub and 12 fellows. We travelled thru Spokane, Walla Walla, home of the state penitentiary, and then to Pendleton, Oregon. Pendleton was all decorated and alive with people as it was Round-up time. It was the 25th annual round-up which is always one of the 3 best in the U.S. We spent a day and one half at the Round-up watching the bronco busters, calf ropers, fancy riders, bull-doggers, wild steer riders, Indian parades, horse races, and admiring the beautiful horses. It was a marvelous, splendid and wonderful performance. Words cannot express the beauty one beheld when gazing at the Indian robes, beaded jackets, and other finery.

A parade consisting of 2000 Indians in their frontier costumes, about 4000 beautiful western horses, stage coaches of 1860, covered wagons drawn by 12-mule teams, cowboys and even clowns was staged the second day. The Round-up is worth many miles of travel to see.

From Pendleton we travelled to Portland over the Columbia River Highway on the south banks of the Columbia River. It is said to be the most scenic highway in the West if not in the entire United States.

Early Sunday morning we left Portland to travel to Ranier National Park. We drove to the foot of Mt. Ranier an elevation of 5000 feet. Mt. Ranier is 14,721 feet above sea level. All through the National Forest the scenery was wonderful. Time kept us from seeing more of the scenic places in the Park. On to Seattle, Washington we motored going thru Olympia and Tacoma. From Seattle we started across the mountain range, travelling to an elevation of 4,700 feet and then down into the Wenatchee Valley. There we saw the great apple orchards. Miles after miles one could see nothing but trees loaded with big red apples. (Yes we had plenty to eat).

Leaving the orchards we travelled thru wheat country which is one of the best in the Northwest. Our route took us into the Grand Coulee Canyon and the highway continued down thru the center of the canyon. We followed this road to the Grand Coulee Dam site arriving there Monday at noon.

Small towns were springing up all thru the surrounding country within a radius of 20 miles. It reminded one of reading about a gold strike. This dam, when completed, will back the water up one hundred miles upstream, flooding out many small towns along its banks.

Late that afternoon we arrived back to camp a happy, tired group of fellows. A trip never to be forgotten which covered a total of 1400 miles and practically circled the state of Washington.

These two incidents were the most important things that happened during my stay at Growden Camp, although we spent a number of week-ends at Christmas Lake. B.C. This lake is set in amongst the hills and high bluffs surround it on all sides.

November 1st found us loaded on the train headed for another new camp site ---- Sunny California ----. We had a swell trip enroute stopping over in Spokane, the Dalles, Oregon and Portland. Arriving in Portland I was able to say that I had travelled on

both sides of the Columbia River both by train and by motor transportation.

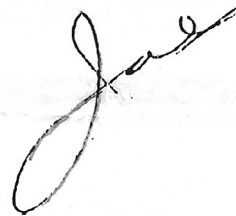
Our new camp ----- We are now located about 70 miles south of the Oregon state line. We have a swell camp with good buildings and plenty of recreational grounds. We are 53 miles from Yreka, Calif. our closest town.

The weather so far has been swell except for a few days of rain. Most of the days have been warm enough to permit the men to work comfortably in their shirt sleeves. The nights are really beautiful with the moon shining on the snow covered peaks.

While you folks are spending your enjoyable Christmas I am at Dorothy's (that is where I plan to go at this writing).

So with best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

From

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to be the name 'Joe', written in dark ink on a light background.