January 2003

Kimbrough, Mary Alice (Sexton), 1907-1991 (MSS 159)

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BIOGRAPHY

Mary Alice Kimbrough was born Mary Sexton on August 9, 1907 near Bethel, Tennessee, the daughter of Edward Harvey and Magdalene Jackson Sexton. Although the sixth of eight children, only five, William, David, Clara, Alma, and Mary, survived to adulthood. Soon after her birth, Mary’s family moved to an estate near Minor Hill, Tennessee, where they lived and farmed. Throughout Mary’s childhood, the family would alternately live in Minor Hill or on the farm.

Mary and her siblings attended school in Minor Hill, and Mary went on to attend the University of Tennessee. Although she was very involved in school life and excelled in academics, she returned home after one year of college and began working as a substitute teacher.

In the summer of 1928, Mary married William Joseph “Joe” Kimbrough, a clerical employee for the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company. A son, William Joseph, Jr., was born in 1930. A second son, James “Jimmy” Edward, was born the following year.

In the late 1930s, Mary began to lose the use of her limbs, and would occasionally fall down while walking. When doctors in Nashville were unable to diagnose her mysterious
malady, she traveled to the Mayo Clinic in October 1941 where doctors soon discovered that Mary was suffering from “Spinal Muscular Atrophy,” also known as Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) or “Lou Gehrig’s Disease.” At the time of her diagnosis, very little was known about the disease; within 9 years, she was in a wheelchair, and for the next 50 years the paralysis grew progressively worse.

In 1942, the family settled permanently in Bowling Green, Kentucky. William Joseph “Joe, Jr.” graduated from Indiana University and became an administrative librarian in Minneapolis, while Jimmy eventually settled in Nashville, Tennessee and became a lithographic printer. They bought their home on Chestnut Street in 1961, and though practically homebound, for the next 30 years Mary spent her time by maintaining a voluminous correspondence, collecting rocks, making postcards, and contributing to the work of the First Baptist Church. She died on January 31, 1991, in a Bowling Green nursing home.

**BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

The Collection.

Vertical Files. Kentucky Library.


**THE COLLECTION**

The collection consists mainly of letters written by Mary Kimbrough to her son, William Joseph “Joe” Jr. Other items include letters written to Mrs. Kimbrough from friends and family, church programs, magazine articles, newspaper clippings, an art course book, and a collection of handmade paper dolls.
Mrs. Kimbrough’s letters are full of references to local and national individuals and events, especially ones relating to Western Kentucky University. Her beautiful penmanship also makes this collection unique, particularly since her hands were permanently clenched as a result of her disease. Her letters are well written, inspirational, and provide a commentary on many different events and issues of the early 1980s.

**SHELF LIST**

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MSS KIMBROUGH, Mary Alice (Sexton), 1907-1991 1916-2003
159

Family correspondence, greeting cards, handicrafts, and newspaper clippings of Mary Kimbrough, Bowling Green, KY. Also items from various family members.

2 boxes. 32 folders. 333 items.
See Descriptive Inventory for details.

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SEE ALSO CARDS

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Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis see also A.L.S.
Drag racing see also Racing
Racing see also Drag racing