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Readers Nostalgic for Letter Writing

By Bob Davis

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Sam Fink doesn't own a computer. He types all his letters, illustrates the envelopes, and trusts them to the U.S. mail.

But to read the story of my cousin Sam, a 93-year-old illustrator, and our letter-writing relationship, readers had to go on-line. When they felt moved, they e-mailed me their comments. Still, I think Sam would approve of the technology-enhanced communication. The tone of the correspondence matched Sam's urgency to create and his clarity of outlook.



Doris Davis, the author's mother, in a family photo taken around 1942 when she was about 21 years old.
FAMILY PHOTO

"As I write this note, the sun is rising over a gentle Iowa morning," wrote Bob Roelf in Iowa City on Friday morning. "All the relatives went home last night, and I look forward to a mellow day." Speaking of the story, the 72-year-old retired computer professional said "thanks for such a fine gift."

Many of the two dozen or so writers contacted me to say how much they miss the letter writing they had done before e-mail. "I used to write to my grandmother and my husband's grandmother weekly," wrote an Arlington, Texas woman. "They are both gone now and I miss their written conversations with me so much." Then she ended with a brio with which

Sam could identify: "Drink some good coffee; you can sleep when you are dead."

(I'm taking some liberty here in speaking for Sam. So far as I know, he hasn't actually seen the story yet. I printed a copy and mailed it to him Thanksgiving night. It will be some days before he writes me back.)

Others resolved to start snail-mail writing again. A Stockholm, Sweden resident wrote to say she planned to "get some really nice stationery, lots of color pens, stamps of different value and start exploring my family through corresponding with my elderly relatives. Good-bye Facebook." Another called Sam "my new hero" and said she too likes drawing on the envelopes of letters she sends

A few of the correspondents were friends and relatives of Sam. One said he has known Sam for 45 years and had saved all his letters and especially likes the ones illustrated with birds. "The man is proof that there is a second and third act in life," he wrote. Another, a woman whose daughter had married one of Sam's grandsons, says the couple's four-year-old son, "is already displaying some of his great-grandfather's imagination and enthusiasm in his colorful drawings."

Others wished they had a Sam-like family historian in their lives. Sandra Sammons, a healthcare worker in Memphis, said that after her mother died last year, she discovered a one-page story that her mother had written about her grandfather, who had immigrated from Germany at age 16. After he fell off a building and broke his back, his mother came to retrieve him. When he refused to leave America, the woman "disowned him," she wrote. The richness of the story left her wanting more, but he had no relative to turn to. "The older I get (54), the more I appreciate the history and experience of those even older than I am," Ms. Sammons wrote.

But younger writers identified too, including some that I work with. One 26-year-old Dow Jones newswire reporter Jared Favole told me he had received Sam's latest book as a graduation gift. It illustrates Annie Dillard's challenge to writers: "Give it all. Give it now." He rued that people of his age "never got

the chance to write letters with anyone. People just don't do it much anymore."

But another young reporter, the Wall Street Journal's Conor Dougherty, who is 32, e-mailed to tell me of a letter-writing relationship he has conducted since high school with a young woman who lives far way. "The weird or maybe not-so-weird part is that we have met in person, say three or four times and it instantly becomes clear that we do not really know each other," he wrote." But in letters, and now email, we remain old friends."

Most gratifying to me were the responses of my children. My 24-year-old son Daniel, who lives in China, wrote to say that Sam "looks just like I always imagined him," the first time I realized that he had mused about my relationship with my elderly cousin, who he has never met.

My 21-year-old daughter Joanna, back from college for Thanksgiving, went through old family photos with me after she read the article. She picked out a battered photo of my mother Doris when she was about Joanna's age, in a kind of Marilyn Monroe pose with the wind blowing through her dress and she looking ecstatic.

Joanna never knew my mother, who died in 1970, but she has her red hair. Joanna scanned the photo, touched it up and printed it at 4 inches by 6 inches. Then she went shopping. "I want to frame this," she said. None of this would have happened if I hadn't told Sam's story.

Write to Bob Davis at bob.davis@wsj.com

