

A conversation with Elizabeth Emerson

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Interviewer: Susanna Coit (SC), Jen Hale (JH), Jennifer Arnott (JH)

[Zoom]: Recording in progress.

Susanna [SC]: Good evening, and welcome to the author talk with Elizabeth Emerson, author of *Letters from Red Farm -- The Untold Story of the Friendship Between Helen Keller and Journalist Joseph Chamberlin*. Before we begin, there are a few housekeeping notes. Closed captioning is available. Commands are located -- sorry, in the toolbar at the bottom of your Zoom room.

Hover your mouse to bring up the toolbar. This program is being recorded and we'll share a link to the recording in the next few days. To keep noise levels under control, we've muted your lines. We will have questions at the end, so please enter any questions you have during the conversation in the Q&A box. My name is Susanna Coit, Archivist and Research Library Assistant. Joining me are Jen, Lead Archivist, Jennifer, Research Library, and Robin Sitten, eLearning Program Manager.

We're thrilled to welcome Elizabeth Emerson this evening, a writer who lives in North Carolina. She has worked for many years as a grant writer raising funds for nonprofits serving children and families in several states. She is also an award-winning artist. In 2012 she began researching her great great grandfather's friendship with Helen Keller, a friendship she had known about for many years, but had not investigated in depth.

Letters from Red Farm is the result of that search. The book came out in September 2021 from University of Massachusetts Press, and she is delighted to join us today. Hello, Elizabeth. Thank you for being here.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Hello. Thank you for having me. I'm very, very excited to be here. I hope that this conversation both introduces you to the book and also highlights the work of the archives and the research library. They were so important to me in my research, and in the process of writing this book.

And so I feel like it's the culmination of a lot of work and conversations, and connections with one another. So, I'm thrilled to be here. I also sort of had a little sentimental moment as I was preparing because I thought how poetic and just amazing it is to be talking with you after over a hundred years' time lapse between when my great-great-grandfather was involved with Perkins as an advocate, and really, friend of the school, and also friends with Helen Keller.

So it's just really a privilege to be here. I'll start with some preemptive apologies in case my cat jumps into my lap as I'm talking, because invariably she hears me talking and sitting at my desk and she wants to be near me. So I apologize in advance if suddenly she leaps into my lap and into the picture.

Susanna [SC]: Not a problem.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: I'm going to use notes to move quickly so we'll have plenty of time for questions and answers at the end of the evening. But, in a nutshell, *Letters from Red Farm* tells the story of the 40-year friendship between Helen Keller and Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, Ed. They met when Helen was 8 and Ed was almost 40 and a prominent journalist and writer in Boston. Helen had just come to Boston from her home in Alabama with her teacher to attend school at Perkins. Little Helen was already an international celebrity, thanks to news reports that were broadcast widely by the director of Perkins, a man named Mr. Michael [Anagnos], who used Helen as sort of the poster child for the school's work with children who were blind and deafblind.

The newspapers hounded Helen and Annie. So as a respite from the attention and her schoolwork, Helen and Annie soon began spending weekends and holidays with the Chamberlin family at their home outside of Boston. Eventually, they even lived with the Chamberlin family for a year when Helen was 16.

So we have a few photos, slides. And I'm starting with a picture of Helen at probably about 8, because this is about the timeframe that she met my great-great-grandfather, Ed. And this is a photograph of Ed at about the time he met Helen and Annie Sullivan.

And he was sort of a middle-aged man. He's wearing a suit and he has a receding hairline. And he was the father of five children at that time. And then, again, this is a photograph of Helen as a young girl. This was in the Perkins collection and she's reading a braille book.

Here she is, this little girl has come to Boston from Alabama, and she's been invited to the Chamberlin's home, where there are children she can play with in a rural setting. And then the

next photograph is her a few years later at about 12. And again, this is also during the timeframe during which she was spending time at Red Farm.

So, how did I discover this story? I'm going to read a shortened version of the preface of the book, because I feel like it's the best way to just bring you into this project and to understand what my relationship to it was:

As it turns out, our family's best memory-keeper was a deafblind girl named Helen Keller. I grew up fascinated by books about her. I was captivated by the story of the wild child, so to speak, who could neither see nor hear and whose inner potential and delightful personality were revealed by her teacher, Annie Sullivan. While millions around the world also read these stories, I had a unique and personal relationship to them.

Books about Helen frequently mentioned times she spent with a family named Chamberlin at their home called Red Farm in a suburb of Boston. She had spent those happy hours with my great-great-grandparents, Ed and Ida, and their children. Ed and Ida's fourth child and second daughter was Elizabeth, my great-grandmother. The fact that Helen spent parts of her childhood with my ancestors was the extent of my knowledge of the relationship until I came across copies of two letters that had been passed down to me through four generations of family.

One was a letter of sympathy Helen wrote in 1935 on hearing that her Uncle Ed had passed away. The other, Helen had written to Ed a year earlier along an intimate document that illustrated a lengthy history and close relationship of more than 40 years. It was clear that not only were they friends, but the bond between them was deep and lifelong, and their friendship appeared to have weathered both good and tumultuous times.

I felt compelled to find out more. In 2012, I called the AFB in New York City where most of Helen's personal letters and papers are archived. From an online search I knew there existed a box of letters related to the Chamberlins and their collection. I reached Helen, the head archivist at the AFB. I told her I was the great-great-granddaughter of Ed, a man who had been a journalist in the Boston area and friends with Helen Keller for many years. And I was interested in doing some research. And I should mention that at this point, I did not have any idea whether I had any business at all making this phone call and felt really a little foolish about it. Like, these people are going to just say, who are you? But I could hear the phone being jostled and repositioned and Helen said, "say that again?"

I repeated my story. “Oh, my goodness,” she said. “The Chamberlins were huge in Helen’s life. It’s so amazing to hear from you. Are you really of the family?” She was eager to help me. Five days later I received a 20-page list of hits in the Foundation database that involved the Chamberlins. It was immediately obvious from the entries that the narrative revealed would not be the one I had expected. Somehow I had imagined I would discover a pleasant, straightforward tale about my friendly family inviting Helen and Annie for dinners and holidays. Instead, I found a complex and multilayered story that told of joys and talents, but also of controversy, tragedy, and personal and systemic failings.

Six months after my first call, I visited the AFB offices in New York City. The Helen Keller Archive file room was filled floor to ceiling with neatly labeled boxes of letters and photographs, movie reels and monographs related to Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan. Helen had already identified key boxes where she thought I should begin my research. She loaded my arms and hers with folders and showed me to a cubicle. The hundreds of letters were organized by author and in chronological order. The earliest was a March 1892 letter from Ed to Annie asking if Helen was giving thought to an earlier request from him to write a little written account of her instruction for the popular periodical that he editing called *The Youth’s Companion*.

I was thrilled to see the small, flowing handwriting of my great-great-grandfather. Helen and her teacher were already acquainted with him, for he wrote, “you know me, I do not want a long story.” Those files provided the perfect starting point, but I would find countless other sources. The AFB documents led me to the Alexander Graham Bell Family Papers at the Library of Congress, which provided copies of more letters and more illuminating details.

As a journalist for more than 60 years, Ed left a rich trail of his own. A number of biographies of artists and writers who frequented Red Farm mentioned the Chamberlin family and aspects of their life. The Perkins School archive, with its materials and records and carefully kept scrapbooks of over 100 years of newspaper clippings was tremendously important. But the writer who gave the most consistent breadth and detail of life in the Chamberlin household was Helen Keller herself. She was a prolific and generous writer, and often described events and people at Red Farm. In Ed Chamberlin, a man she met when she was just eight years old who lived in the service of words and cared deeply about people and social issues in the natural world, Helen found a friend, mentor, and advocate. This is their story.

So that is the opening to the book. And again, I had no idea that -- where this would take me and what this story would be. It was sort of like creating a giant puzzle and plugging in little bits now and then as I worked. It certainly didn’t happen in a linear way. Things just kind of came very sporadically. And I sort of had to fit them into where they made sense is and figure out the

story. As you probably -- some of you saw my cat just joined us, but she's now gone away. So, who was Ed Chamberlin? Almost everybody knows about Helen, knows her story. I rarely encounter someone who doesn't know at least something about her.

But hardly anyone knows anything about Ed Chamberlin. So, that is really the question that I myself was trying to answer when I began this project. I wondered, what kind of man would bring little Helen Keller home to meet his family? I just felt like he must have been a very unique person. So the first chapter of the book begins, by the time Ed met Helen Keller in 1888, he had quietly and unintentionally become famous. He was a beloved Boston journalist who wrote a daily column in the *Boston Evening Transcript* for decades. He was known as the Listener of the *Transcript*.

His eloquent, gentle writing and observations of life in the city and country were followed eagerly by a New England reading audience. At the same time, he was also an editor and writer for the Boston-based youths companion magazine, which had a broad national circulation and published stories by prominent writers, including Mark Twain, Emily Dickinson, and others. And he considered this magazine actually his primary work, though he was best known for his work with the *Boston Transcript*.

He had been born in Vermont in 1851 to one of the founding families of Newbury, the youngest of his parents' ten children, and his oldest sister was 24 years old when he was born. The family moved west to Wisconsin in 1857 when Ed was six years old and it is likely that they went west to serve as agents on the Underground Railroad, as the area where they moved was known to be an active route to Canada. His parents were congregationalists and staunch abolitionists and he grew up in a household characterized by political and social activism and fearless opposition to what they believed was wrong and unjust. It was a family of conviction and patriotism. And little Ed grew up as an apt listener to the adults in his family and their acquaintances, and perhaps this role led to his future byline for the *Transcript* -- the Listener.

At 17, Ed graduated from the local one room schoolhouse, but his parents couldn't afford to send him to college, which disappointed him. But he took the train to Chicago and followed his older brother, Everett, into the newspaper world, starting out as a copy holder at the *Chicago Evening Post*.

He worked his way up to cub reporter and immediately became almost a household name, both in the Chicago area and elsewhere, because he was one of the first eyewitnesses on the scene of the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. His reports were some of the first to go out into the world and

if you Google historical accounts of the great fire, they still feature his vivid reports from the scene. Ed also at that time married the lovely Ida Atwood in 1873. And we have a slide of her.

Susanna [SC]: We do, here.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: And the photograph of Ida, she's about 17 years old. And she's very lovely. She has long, very quaffed hair, very styled, pulled away from her face, and jewelry, and a lovely brocade jacket. She must have -- if she's attractive by today's standards, she must have really been considered beautiful in her day.

And so Ed was about, I believe about 23 when he married Ida. So there were about five or six years between their ages, but they soon began a family. And Ed quickly climbed the ranks of the Chicago newspaper world and became a managing editor of the *Chicago Times* by the time he was in his late 20s.

After suffering what was described as a nervous breakdown, Ed left Chicago journalism and returned to the east coast in 1880, eventually settling in Boston with his family and taking on literary, not managerial roles with Boston newspapers.

So, what was Red Farm and where was it, and what was it like? I'm going to read -- this is an excerpt from the first page of the introduction, and there is a slide on the screen, and it shows a large farmhouse on a hill overlooking a lake.

And so I'm going to read this. And this sort of should introduce you to that place. At some point in time, the place became known as Red Farm, as idyllic spot a short train ride out from Boston in Massachusetts. In the late 1800s it was a working farm situated on 30 or so acres of open fields that straddled the crest of a hill and overlooked a small lake called King Phillips Pond.

The property featured a large red-painted farmhouse with a wide front porch that commanded a view of the lake below. Multiple red barns and outbuildings peppered the property and a tall windmill on scaffolding dominated the front yard. To the rear, a deep vine-covered ravine dropped away from the house and main barn. Several large trees close to the house provided shade in summer months. For those at Red Farm, it was little trouble to shift from farming pursuits to boating and swimming in the summer, or ice skating and sledding, by crossing the dirt lane and strolling to the lake. It was a perfect combination of waterfront resort and rural farm life.

Red Farm cast a spell over its residents and guests. Over many years, it was the gathering place for a lively and diverse crowd of intellectuals and creative minds drawn to the location and the hospitality of Boston journalist Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, his wife Ida, and their children. Poets and writers, artists and musicians, naturalists, theologians, social reformers and celebrities all flocked to Red Farm, captivated by its brilliant atmosphere. Guests were invited to help with farm chores and meals if so inclined before gathering in the evening for readings and performances by young and old alike. Indoors in front of a large fireplace in cold weather months, or outside on the lawn in summer. Chamberlin himself presiding over these assemblies, gently encouraging and mentoring aspiring writers or reading his own work.

This was the atmosphere into which Helen and Annie were welcomed and embraced. So I think there's another slide as well that's a little bit later in time, probably the 1930s or '40s, just a different view. You can see there are telephone lines in the photo and several outbuildings. The property had a cottage on it in addition to several small barns, and I think there's a water silo in the photograph as well. It was also known for having several very large trees that offered a lot of shade. Some of those were lost in storms over the years. So, what is unique about this book for readers who thought they already knew Helen Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan? I think this book -- well, the book presents both a much broader and more intimate view of Helen in the context of a long and close friendship.

And it is really told in her own words in many ways, as it springs from the letters exchanged between Helen and Ed, as well as letters she wrote about Red Farm to others. But the book is more than a string of letters. The narrative follows a number of dramatic episodes in Helen's life and Ed's life, many of which they navigate together.

So there is drama, tension, twists, and turns in the story. And I always have to have a spoiler alert when talking with people who've read it and people who haven't, because if you haven't read the book, you would not want to know exactly what is going to happen. So I always ask people who have read it to just be mindful of that.

The book also introduces a hidden figure in Helen's life to modern readers. Helen Keller adored Ed Chamberlin, whom she called Uncle Ed. She credited him with what she called her education in literary ways, and she wanted his influence on her life to be known. In 1898 she wrote to a friend, "I wish you knew Mr. Chamberlin better." I think you would find much to admire in his character.

He runs through life's maze of joys and woes so peacefully, with such kindness towards all living things that one cannot be with him and not feel something of his gentle influence. And that

same year in the spring she wrote in her journal: "Betty," who was my great-grandmother, "and I went off to the swamp after violets and there were just millions. We picked the largest and brightest, crowfoots, white-scented and yellow, and so many others and came home with our arms full. Uncle Ed exclaimed when he saw the violets, where did you get them? I have never seen wild violets of so many kinds and colors, and I thought I knew the woods very well." Helen wrote, "I wish we could do more things like that, just to see him so surprised and pleased."

Ed, in turn, wrote about Helen in a way few people could, advocating for her education, writing about what it was like to spend the day with her, writing about her favorite pastimes, praising her published works, and many other subjects for nationally syndicated newspapers and magazines.

Furthermore, the book illustrates the many challenges Helen faced in her pursuit of education. It also emphasizes the importance of advocacy. Ed was a tireless advocate for Helen, the work of the Perkins School, the students of the kindergarten for the blind, and other marginalized members of society. And Helen in turn became a tireless advocate during her lifetime as well. The book follows Helen's growing interest in social issues. She learned deeply from Ed Chamberlin, and it demonstrates the influence that he had on her politics, her social activism and her belief in her own voice and power as an agent for change.

Along those lines in 1912, she wrote -- this was after she had graduated from college -- a lengthy article about Ed for *American Magazine*. The article ended with this statement: "I understand that newspapers are not hospitable to radical and progressive ideas. Mr. Chamberlin's thought, as he expresses it to his friends, is far in advance of his written work. His conscience is alive to the wrongs and perils of our social institutions. The work of a journalist is for the greater part anonymous, so that Mr. Chamberlin's name may be unknown to many readers. The affections and services of friends are also anonymous. The influences which most enable and sweeten my life may be hidden from fame, but they live immortal in other lives."

And she made the point earlier in the article that he -- Ed Chamberlin preferred to remain in the background. His name was attached to what he wrote, but most people didn't know who he was. He was just really a byline and a name in newspapers and in magazines. And he preferred it that way.

As he self-described himself, he was the Listener. So, not only is this Helen and Ed's story, but it is really a social portrait demonstrating how life at the time was fraught with challenges, struggles, triumphs, tragedies, failures, and losses. And one of the things I most enjoyed was

really braiding together Helen and Ed's life stories. Helen had her challenges. Meanwhile, Ed and his family were experiencing the same.

And so that was one of the things I enjoyed most. I'll close with just an excerpt from the letter that Helen wrote to Ed's widow, his third wife, Jennie Chamberlin, in July 1935. And this is the last letter that really -- the last letter Helen wrote, and the letter that really piqued my interest in this story, because it was so touching and obviously they had such a deep friendship.

Helen wrote, "dear Aunt Jennie, I received with tender sorrow up here the telegram with the news of dear Uncle Ed's death. When I last saw him so brave and interested in everything, I could not think that he would leave us so soon. If I could take you and the others who loved him in my arms, you would feel the sympathy no words can utter. I realize that there can be no consolation for the loss of one whose life was a part of your own, but affection will speak -- the affection my teacher and I have had for Uncle Ed during many years. We remember how he always understood and appreciated us both. The tears come as I think how bound up he is in the faithful experiences of our lives."

So those faithful experiences are really what Letters from Red Farm captures. And I hope you'll read it and enjoy it. There are two last photographs, I believe.

Susanna [SC]: Yes.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Okay. So this is a picture of Ed Chamberlin in later life, probably around 1915. And he looks very casual and relaxed. He's actually wearing what looks sort of like a denim shirt with a white scarf tied at the neck and he has a hat on and he has glasses and a mustache.

And wearing dark pants and sort of what must have been hiking shoes in the day, boots that are laced up. And he's sitting in a field. And from what I understand, the hat he has on, which is sort of a slouchy hat, was something that he always wore. And he was sort of known for this hat even when he was in New York, people would say oh, there's Ed Chamberlin with his hat. So it was a distinctive feature, something he always wore. And then the last photograph is Helen in later life as she was portrayed in the recent PBS documentary *Becoming Helen Keller*. And she's looking very elegant, with it looks like a fur stole around her neck and a large black hat, very dramatic-looking.

So, Susanna, did you have anything? I was going to talk more about the archives and the work, but is there anything you want to say at this point?

Susanna [SC]: No. I'm just sitting here really enjoying this. It's a treat. So, yeah, by all means.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Okay. So as I said in the preface, when I began this project, I really had to depend on hard copies. I had to wait for the Foundation for the Blind to send me hard copies of the letters that they had. And if I wanted to go to an archive -- if I wanted to explore what was in an archive, I actually had to go to the archive.

But over the literally eight or nine years that I was writing, more and more materials became digitized. And I know that there were a lot of foundations that funded that process for various archives. I know that the Foundation for the Blind had funding and I believe Perkins did as well, to accomplish that. And I can't emphasize enough how important that was for me, not being located in Boston, and certainly not able to travel every single place that there might be a letter or to get somebody to send me letters. So the digitization just really opened the archives to me at home. And I believe more materials also were probably donated in that timeframe as well.

So, again, things didn't happen linearly. Incrementally, information came together. But one of the things that the Perkins Archives really did for me was a few years ago I did some blog posts. And so those articles that I had written about the project and about Red Farm and Ed Chamberlin were discoverable by other people as well. One day out of the blue, I got a message from a couple in Chicago. And they're writers. They had been textbook editors. And they reached out to me and they said, we read your article that was online. And just wanted to tell you that we have information for you, because we're writing a biography about somebody who was Ed Chamberlin's officemate.

And I had no idea. Well, I didn't know if Ed had an office mate. I know he had an office at newspapers that he worked at. But this person had been his office mate, was about 30 years younger than Ed. So Ed had kind of been a mentor to him. And this particular individual had written letters to his sister and then his personal papers were archived in the Kansas State Historical Society.

So they gave me these bits of information that I would have never gone looking for, would have never known where to find. And they were just really, really -- real gems. I won't spoil the story, but they were so important. Had I not had that information, it just would have left a big hole in the story.

So the fact that Perkins connects writers, researchers, with one another -- Perkins also connected me with a person who's working on a book right now about Helen Keller. And so it

puts us in touch with one another in addition to being such a resource for materials and information.

The other thing that I want to talk about is that late in the process of writing this book, the book had been acquired by University of Massachusetts Press and I was working on copy edits and getting everything just so, but we were all in lockdown because of the pandemic. And so I really wanted a sensitivity reader. I wanted to make sure that I wasn't putting something out there into the world that was offensive. Obviously back in the late 1800s and 1900s terminology and education for people with disabilities was different than it is today.

And I just wanted to be aware and sensitive. So I started listening to an autobiography of the first deafblind woman who graduated from Harvard Law School. This is her book, I'll just hold that up. And Haben -- I think the book was published -- I'm going to say -- 2019. So in listening to it on audiobook, I loved it. Haben has a wonderful sense of humor, but yet was very, very serious about accessibility and disability rights. And so as I'm listening, I thought you know, she sounds so nice. I wonder if she'd read my book and give me feedback and give me the confidence to put it out there and know that this was going to make a contribution to what we know about Helen, and also to disability's history and that whole realm.

So I emailed her. And I explained my project. And I asked her, would you be willing to read it and give me feedback? And I thought, again, I have no business asking her, but I will anyways, because I'm just stuck here at home anyways. So I emailed her, and that night she got back to me and she said, I would love to read your book. She said, but I'm just afraid that I'm not going to like Helen Keller as much after I read it. She said, because she was always my heroine. I said I think you will. I think you'll like her just as much. And I would love it if you would read it. And I said my only request is since the book has so many episodes and there's so many twists in the story, tell me where you are as you're reading so I know, Haben is getting close to this and I can anticipate. So it started over two weeks, every evening she would send me some feedback and her reaction. And I like to think that we became good friends during the process. And I was able to make a lot of suggestions that she made. And I was able to incorporate them into the final version and the manuscript I am sure is better because of it. I learned so much.

And I shared that information with both my literary agent and with UMass Press so we all learned from it. When I do book talks, with able-bodied people I always give some mentions of the suggestions that she made so that the education can continue and we can all benefit. And Haben has been so generous about promoting my book on social media. She gave it five stars on Amazon. And so, again, I'm going to -- this is Haben's book, because they're good companion books, because remarkably -- or not -- the challenges that Helen encountered in

trying to get into Radcliffe and to gain an education, go to college, were some of the same challenges, unfortunately, that Haben encountered over a hundred years later, really. And so they actually really work well together. And I adore Haben. She's a lovely person and she's doing very important work. And so I really want to highlight that and mention it. So, I think that I've talked long enough.

Susanna [SC]: No, this is wonderful. And I just want to help promote Haben's book. It's H-A-B-E-N, and that's the title of her book as well.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Thank you.

Susanna [SC]: Thank you so much. That was wonderful. So, I think we are ready to take questions. If anybody has questions, please put them in the Q&A box so that we can hear -- you can also ask questions about the archives if you'd like. We have people here who can answer that as well.

Jen [JH]: I have a question here. And it is, was Ed friends with anyone else in Helen's circle? This is for Betsy.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Yes. He was, actually. In particular, Alexander Graham Bell and his colleagues come to mind. And initially I didn't know that they were friends, and it really was late in my writing process that I discovered some really key letters from Alexander Graham Bell to his wife and various colleagues. That one comes to mind most importantly, because Alexander Graham Bell at the time was very involved with deaf education, and was close friends with Helen and Annie.

Jen [JH]: Thank you. I have another one for you. What was your favorite thing in the Perkins Archives? What thing did you find that surprised you the most, or was most helpful?

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: My favorite thing ... You know, I mentioned the scrapbooks. And since Ed was a newspaper man, a journalist, the newspaper scrapbooks were like amazing to somebody, apparently. You archivists will know more about this, but somebody spent a lot of time tracking down nearly every newspaper article that was written about Helen Keller or Perkins. And I've actually heard since then that there were like services that you could hire to find newspaper articles like all over the country, sort of like pickers. They'd look for these articles. So these scrapbooks that I could access digitally -- I could just go through, you know, years and years of newspaper articles.

So to me, that was great, because, you know, it was hard to imagine how I would have found all of those otherwise. And then there were actually -- I'm trying not to give away the story too much, but there were a number of letters that were really kind of shocking that were in the archives.

And I know that you archivists who have read will probably know which ones I'm talking to, what they were talking about. But they were letters from some very, sort of, cranky men to the Perkins -- to Mr. Anagnos at Perkins School. And those were sort of stunning to me.

Susanna [SC]: I will say, the clipping service, I think Perkins had a clipping service for a number of topics. So we have those scrapbooks. It's like any mention of Perkins School for the Blind, war-blinded, kindergarten. Like, there are just volumes and volumes of newspaper clippings that really are a treasure-trove. And thankful they are relatively searchable, which I'm sure you found helpful instead of having to go through page by page.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Yeah. And, you know, it was like a virtual book, scrapbook that you're going through. And so it's like the next best thing to being there, I guess. So those were really amazing to me. Very, very helpful.

Jen [JH]: All right. I have a comment and a question for you as well: I really enjoyed your book. It was a fresh perspective on Helen Keller. Were you surprised at how so many men in positions of authority and in some cases people who were supposed to protect Helen exploited her for their own agendas and fundraising?

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Yes. That was eye-opening. And I know that that really disturbs a lot of people when they read it. And when you're investigating something like this or excavating, you have to put all of that in there. So there were some unfortunate episodes.

Jen [JH]: Okay. I have another one: So much of this book is about the places. While the places have changed, were you able to visit any, and what did you find most interesting about the visit?

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Yeah. So I have been to Red Farm. And I've been in the house. It's still there. And the family that owns it has owned it since about 1971, I believe. It's been in the same family. And so it was amazing to go in the house and think oh, this is where my great-great-grandparents lived. And make the place come alive. I've been -- I think I've been most of the places. I haven't been to the Chicago sites. What was the other part of the question, something about . . .

Jen [JH]: Were you able to visit and what did you find most interesting about the visit?

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Okay. Most interesting. Well, I mean, just being in the house, meeting the family who lives there. I will say that I was a little worried, after putting the book out, how they would feel about their house, all of these things that happened within the walls of the house. And fortunately, they loved it. They love it. And, you know, it's a responsibility, I think, when you're trying to make the past come alive, to be true and not make things up. And so I think I really tried to sort of use the clues that were there and tell a very honest story about the place. But Red Farm does not look like it did. It's been remodeled. There's no longer the acreage around it that there once was. There are homes between it and the lake. So it looks very, very different than it did.

Jen [JH]: Okay. We have another question: Is the spirit of collaboration like Ed, Helen, Alexander Graham Bell experienced as feasible today? How did they master that skill better than we do in current times and without social media and mobile technology?

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: A lot of letters. A lot of letter-writing. I think that's another aspect of the book, just the devotion that people put into letter-writing. They wrote eloquently. They wrote often. It was how they stayed connected to one another. I wish in so many ways, it would be nice if we could have reproduced some of the letters so that you could see the handwriting, because you really did sort of become -- you became so familiar with Ed's handwriting versus Ida's handwriting.

And even though a lot of the letters were typed from Helen, the handwriting -- I love handwriting anyways, and seeing the actual letters. And people usually used letterhead. So again, it was just like a whole culture, a letter-writing culture that I really enjoy and find interesting.

Susanna [SC]: One of the things I noticed in the Arthur Gilman Helen Keller Collection, the collection that matches up most with the time, is that very often, the letters will clearly have crossed paths. And so they indicate at the top which letter they're referring to. So they'll say, I got your letter dated January 8th. Responding to this. And on the page before you see that they wrote a letter already. And so I think it was one of those challenges. With email, you get that instant reply and you can see the challenges in the collection with letters that, you know, crossed paths or are outdated by the time you're replying to it, or something like that.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Yeah. You know, at that particular time, there were a lot of opinions flying around and people inquiring of one another. Some of them were in New York, some of

them were in Boston and they were sort of cross-referencing. And there were a lot of heightened anxiety. So that's a really good point to make.

Jen [JH]: I have another interesting question: Have you, Betsy, been in touch with any of Helen Keller's relatives?

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: No, I haven't. But I haven't been in touch with her relatives. It would be really interesting to do that. Again, I was a little limited by the pandemic, so couldn't travel. And I did email -- I don't know if it's Helen's great-niece, but didn't hear back. I regret that. But I have been in touch with somebody -- you get connected through these projects. And met somebody whose grandfather had been the banker for the Helen Keller Fund in New York. And he is mentioned in my book. He's a figure, not a very big one. But it was a really interesting connection to think about that your grandfather, my great-grandfather, they maybe knew each other. So little things like that. But I haven't actually met any of Helen's relatives.

Jen [JH]: Okay. Let's try another one: How much of Ed's story did you know from your family before you started doing the research?

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: I didn't know any of it. [Chuckling] And I know that seems strange, but, you know, I was thinking I like the PBS series *Finding Your Roots*. You know how he'll lay out a whole family tree for people. And I knew the family tree, you know. I knew the names of my ancestors, but you don't know -- you don't learn that much from just a family tree.

And so nobody -- my grandmother would have been Ed's granddaughter. And number one, I never really no knew to ask my grandmother about that, and number two, my grandmother didn't live that long. She died when I was 13. So it just was sort of lost. The story was lost to generations. And it was four generations ago.

I guess I knew that Ed had been a journalist, but that was about all. And then I knew from when I was a child I read Helen Keller biographies and saw my family's name there and I asked my mother. I said, "is that our family, the Chamberlins in Boston?" And my mother said "yes." But that was all I knew, that Helen went sledding with them when she was a child.

So it was much, much later that I saw the letter that Helen wrote when she heard that Ed had passed away. That's when my interest was really piqued.

Jen [JH]: Okay. Last question before we run out of time: In your opinion, is one of the most interesting or unusual items in the archives related to Helen Keller?

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: What is?

Jen [JH]: Is one of the most interesting or unusual items in the archives related to Helen Keller?

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Oh, gosh. I was so focused on letters and paper materials. I did visit Perkins a few years ago and got a wonderful tour. I thought the Tactile Globe was fascinating. I don't know. I guess I'd ask you archivists what you think is the most interesting thing in the archives. I probably haven't seen it.

Jen [JH]: I guess I'll go first. For me, when I started at Perkins, the thing that knocked me off my feet was Helen Keller's first letter. It's handwritten and a child writing and it personalized her and made her so real that it still overwhelms me when I see it even digitally. It's the thing I like to show people if they want to see something in the archives. It's one of the top three. Susanna, anything? You're on mute.

Susanna [SC]: Jen took my answer, so I'm going to have to go with the I can't pick a favorite answer and say it's a collection. Nella Braddy Henney was a friend, editor, agent to Helen as an adult and she kept everything. She kept a journal. And there was just so much in that collection about Helen's day-to-day life and activities as a young adult, and then as she grew older. So I think that that's one of the most unusual things as a collective collection. Jennifer?

Jennifer [JA]: Jen stole mine, too. It's seeing the sequence of letters. That first one and then seeing how Helen's writing improves over the next year or so. We have this collection of letters where you can see that happening and I find that so fascinating. Then you get the one where she's writing in French. And it's a year after she's learned English again. And it's so impressive and you can see that spark of creativity there in a way that I really love.

Elizabeth Emerson [EE]: Mhmm.