

### **Book Review by Dan Reigle:**

*Affectionately Yours: The Civil War Home-Front Letters of the Ovid Butler Family.* Barbara Butler Davis, editor. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2004. 211 pages.

As Alan Nolan states in his Forward, “Barbara Davis has presented us with an unusual book. The typical Civil War soldier’s letter book is a collection of letters *from* the soldier in the field *to* his family back at home. This book is composed of a family’s letters *to* the soldier.” Sixty-three such letters provide a unique perspective about the concerns, activities, relationships, and life of an Indiana family during the three-year absence of their 18-year-old son. The primary figures are Ovid Butler, his wife Elizabeth Anne, and their son, Scot. The book’s editor is a great granddaughter of Scot, and will be our September speaker at CCWRT.

Ovid Butler, an early immigrant to Indiana from New York, became a successful lawyer in Indianapolis. He was active politically and in the Stone-Campbellite religious movement. He was an important promoter of educational development in Indiana, providing the political, legal, and financial support to found the school now known as Butler University. A widower with three children, he married a widow and Kentucky native, (Elizabeth) Anne McOuat, Scot being the second of their seven children. Scot, born in 1844, was rejected by several recruiters due to his slight build and youthful appearance, but finally succeeded in enlisting in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Indiana Infantry with his father’s consent in January 1862. The regimental commander, Col. John Coburn, Ovid’s longtime friend and fellow antislavery activist, assigned Scot to the newly-forming Signal Corps, from which Scot served Thomas’ and Sherman’s commands. Scot survived the war to become a classics scholar, serving Butler University as professor, twice President, and trustee from 1875 until his death in 1931.

The subjects in these fascinating letters range from updates on the activities and locations of the Butlers’ many family members and friends, including several in military service, to discussions of the politics of anti-war Democrats, tensions among relatives over political differences, the election politics of 1864, and the family’s long-distance farm in Illinois. Ovid and Anne are constantly asking Scot to write more often, and to be more specific about his health and conditions. These letters offer insight into their many efforts to get letters and packages delivered to the field, and into the elaborate informal communications networks used to get information about people and events. In one letter, Anne notes the contents of a box that she has just shipped to Scot, including “a new french novel, *Les Miserables*, a work which I have not read but have heard very highly spoken of.” As the war goes on, there are expressions of parental concern that Scot not reenlist beyond his three year term. The Butler’s son-in-law, Capt. Marion Anderson of the 51<sup>st</sup> Indiana, was severely wounded at Nashville in December 1864, and the letters describe how the family arranged for friends in Nashville to care for Capt. Anderson in their home until family members could get there to bring him home when he could travel; Capt. Anderson won the Medal of Honor for his efforts that day. There are discussions of soldiers being able to return home to vote in 1864, since Indiana was not a state that had provided for soldiers’ absentee voting.

Barbara Davis has gone well beyond the basic tasks of transcribing and editing the letters. She has provided extensive footnotes to identify people, locations, and events mentioned in the texts; an excellent introduction to the letters and to the family; an essay on “Indiana Supports the War Effort” describing the political and social dynamics of the state in the war; a collection of photographs of many of the people involved in the book; a description of the family’s post-war life; brief histories of Ovid’s and Anne’s families; a name-place glossary that is quite helpful for reference while reading the letters; several family tree charts that help to keep the relationships in mind among the many family members; and an excellent index. In short, the editor’s valuable efforts have made the letters far more understandable and insightful.

According to the editor, “Scot rarely wrote or spoke publicly about himself.” However, he did leave an articulate statement of the effect of the war on its veterans in an article published only after his death: “That was many years ago. The past dies? Ah, but its spirit lives and bears one silent company evermore.”

I encourage CCWRT members and friends to read *Affectionately Yours*. I believe that you will find that it adds a different perspective and additional depth to your understanding of the war and its effect on our ancestors, both in military service and at home.