

Thorstensen Family Papers

"We've known it was coming, of course. That's what we're here for. But now more than ever it can be clearly seen that we have a job to do. Each of us has a job to do; all of us have a larger job to do."

SO BEGINS A LETTER written by naval officer Robert E. Thorstensen to his wife, Marion, just days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Robert and Marion's correspondence, a collection of more than 200 letters, is now available for research through the Gale Family Library at the Minnesota History Center.

Robert met Marion Duggan in 1940 while both were students at the University of Minnesota. The two remained in contact when Robert entered the Naval Reserve Midshipmen's School at Northwestern University, Chicago, in 1941. The couple married in 1942 and soon moved to Coronado Island, California, where Robert was first stationed. When

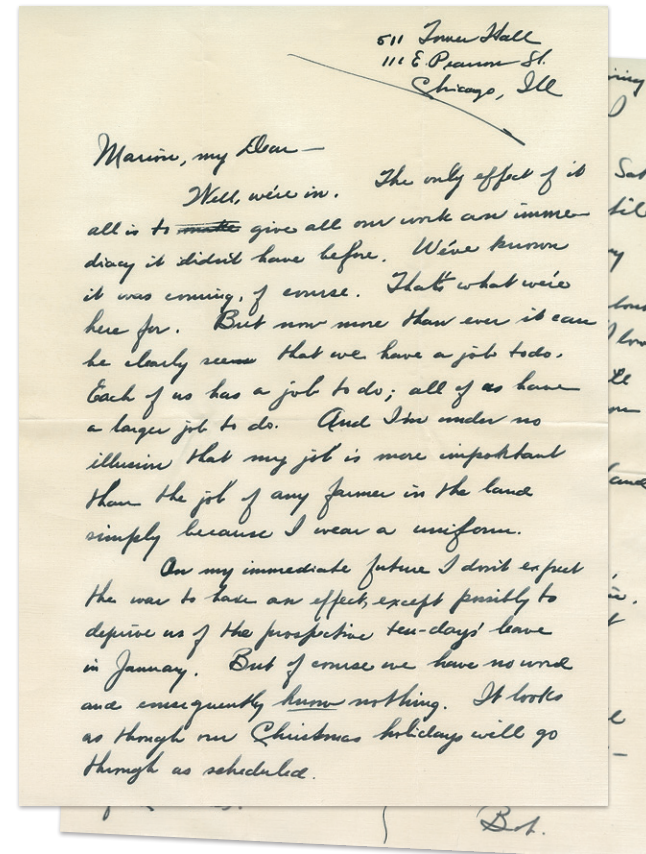


Robert and Marion Thorstensen with their young child. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

the United States entered World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Robert was assigned as a communications officer to the USS Wright and Marion returned to Minnesota to raise their young child.

Robert and Marion wrote to each other nearly every day from August 1943 until December 1944, and each of their letters is beautifully crafted and in remarkable condition. Having connected over a shared love of literature, both Robert and Marion were excellent writers. They painstakingly preserved each other's letters—a rarity for wartime correspondence; often such letters become lost or misplaced over time. The writing is not only extremely informative, providing vital information on naval practices and life in Minnesota during this period, but also incredibly witty, romantic, and moving. Their correspondence reads like a story unfolding.

Along with the extraordinary collection of letters, the Thorstensen Family Papers also include letters and remembrances written by Robert's father, Edwin B. Thorstensen, who was the superintendent of the S. B. Foot Company in Red Wing, Minnesota. As superintendent, Edwin oversaw operations at this tannery during a particularly tumultuous time in US history. He began working at S. B. Foot about a year before the stock market crash of October 1929, taking a 17 percent reduction in his own salary to help keep the business afloat during the Great Depression. In 1940, he successfully navigated a seven-



Letter from Robert Thorstensen to his wife, Marion, dated December 8, 1941.

(MNHS COLLECTIONS)

week strike at the tannery. When the demand for leather boots increased dramatically during World War II, Thorstensen and his colleagues unanimously voted to start seven-day workweeks to meet the government's demand. His letters to his son Robert provide insight into the tannery's business operations during the Depression as well as the company's role in Minnesota's contributions to the war effort.

The Thorstensen Family Papers reveal the hopes and struggles of a Minnesota family during an incredibly turbulent time in history. The collection offers lessons in hope and resiliency during even the most challenging times.

—Kate Hujda,
MNHS manuscripts curator



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

Students and researchers

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

Teachers

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

About Illustrations

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).