

THE SHERMAN LETTERS

I

W. T. Sherman's entry at West Point — Earliest letters to his brother — John a rodman in Ohio — Feeling towards England — Class-standing at graduation — Opinion of engineering and of law as professions — Partiality for farming — Letters from Fort Pierce, his first station — Description of Florida — Comments on the Indian wars — Impatience at their nature and prolongation — First promotion — Life at St. Augustine — On leave in Ohio — Account of his journey through Georgia — War with Mexico — Sails for California — Description of his voyage thither

In the year 1836 William Tecumseh Sherman, then a lad of sixteen, entered West Point as a cadet. He was appointed from his native State, Ohio. He travelled east by stage, spent a week at Washington, a few days in Philadelphia, and another week in New York, thus becoming, for his age and time, a much-travelled boy. He is described as being a tall, slim, loose-jointed lad, with red hair, fair, burned skin, and piercing black eyes. He himself says that in New York some of his relations looked upon him as "an untamed animal just caught in the Far West." He must indeed have had a rural look. That his strong individuality and intense interest in life were even then developed none who knew him later can doubt.

His earliest letters are labored and boyish. He had not acquired a vocabulary or the fluency of pen which later developed itself to an almost wonderful degree. He was nervous and quick in all his thoughts and actions. He wrote a running hand, difficult to read, and rendered so by the race his pen had to run with his thoughts. His boyish letters are interesting, therefore, only because they are his, and I have quoted but few of them. He was three years older than his brother John,

and in some cases assumed the rôle of adviser in an amusing way. In giving these letters to the public, I presuppose some knowledge of my father's and uncle's lives, and shall only note the chief events, in order to connect the letters. The first letter was written, as may be seen, eighteen months after my father's entrance at West Point.

WEST POINT, N.Y., Dec. 6, 1837.

Dear Brother: In compliance with your request I sent you a paper shortly after the reception of your letter, which I should have answered much sooner had I not been till within a few days past under the impression that it had been done. This excuse is sufficient, I suppose, for my long delay, especially as a letter from me is not very desirable.

I hope that you still have as favorable opinions as ever with respect to your employment,¹ for in my opinion a man's success in his profession depends upon the impressions he receives at the beginning; for if these are favorable, most undoubtedly he will endeavor to succeed, and success will be the necessary consequence. You have now been engaged at that employment about a year and must be by this time quite an expert engineer. I would not be much astonished if when I came home I would find you superintendent of some public work. I have not received many letters from home lately; in fact, I am almost too busy to write many, and if I do not answer all their letters immediately upon their reception, they follow my example apparently, which is the cause of it, I presume; but after our examination in January I will endeavor to be a little more punctual and

¹ John Sherman was then, at the age of fourteen, junior rodman in an engineer corps, engaged in the improvement of the Muskingum River, Ohio. Particulars of his life will follow in introducing his letters.

expect the same of my correspondents. At present we are very much engaged in preparing for the examination which takes place immediately after Christmas. I think I will still have about the same standing as I have now in Mathematics and French, but in Drawing I think I will be among the first five. Preparation for the Christmas spree is now all the go. I have joined in with about a dozen others and laid the foundation for a very good dinner costing about three dollars apiece. I wish we could get ahold of some of our western turkeys, chickens, and the like, which cannot be obtained here except at an enormous price, and as money is something to us like teeth, we are obliged to go without. Winter seems to be very reluctant about setting in. The weather at present is more like spring than winter. This time last winter, the river was closed, and we had fine skating, but no doubt it will soon set in with a vengeance, giving us our full share of north winds, which it generally deals out very liberally to the inhabitants of the Highlands. It is now about half-past nine, and we are obliged to go to bed at ten. You must, therefore, allow me to come to a conclusion, wishing you at the same time to give my best love to all the family when you next write home. Do not fail to write soon. From

Your affectionate brother,

JOHN SHERMAN, Esq.

W. T. SHERMAN.

The second letter was written when, at the end of his second year, he returned to Ohio on his two months' furlough. I have often heard my mother say how his training at West Point had developed him physically; how straight and strong he was, how clear and bright-eyed, and what light-heartedness and pride were in his bearing and tread. He evidently failed that summer to see John, who was at work in another part of the State.

WEST POINT, N. Y., Sept. 15, 1838.

Dear Brother: I did go to the salt works, as I proposed when you were at home, and was there three or four days. While there I made arrangements to go with the Misses Clark to a relative of theirs (Mr. Walker), from thence to Beverly; but unfortunately it rained, and we got several duckings before we got to Mr. W.'s (twelve miles), and when there was told it was thirty miles farther. Consequently I was obliged, much against my wish, to relinquish my design of visiting you. After a few days' stay at the salt works, we returned to Lancaster. When I had been home a few days grandma and Taylor¹ came down from Mansfield on the way to Dayton. Mother, Lamp,² and I accompanied them, and had a very fine trip. Lamp and I went to Oxford College to see Phil,³ from there to Cincinnati, where I stayed a couple of days, then returned to Dayton, where I found them all ready to return home. We travelled together until we got to Columbus, where we found Mr. Ewing. Mother and the rest went on home. Phil and I remained until the next day, and then went home in the carriage. My furlough had nearly expired, and I could only stay home two days more, at the end of which time James,⁴ grandma, and I went to Mansfield, where we found them all well except Mr. Parker, who was not very well. We stopped at Mary's and Uncle John's a few minutes on our way up. From Mansfield I went with Taylor in his buggy to Sandusky on the lake. We stopped all night at Uncle Daniel's, whom I saw for the first time. He is a very fine old man, but I do not

¹ His eldest brother, afterwards called Charles.

² A younger brother, Lampson.

³ Philemon Ewing, eldest son of Hon. Thomas Ewing.

⁴ Still another brother.

think he resembles father (if you recollect him). From Sandusky I went to Buffalo by water, then to Niagara Falls, thence to New York City, where I spent two days with our relatives, then to West Point, where I have been a little more than two weeks studying very hard indeed.

Your affectionate brother,

W. T. SHERMAN.

In the next letter, dated October 15th, is a touch of elder-brotherly advice. The one following, of June 9, 1839, begins to show greater fluency and ease of expression. He is evidently worried over rumors from home of John's speculations in salt. Considering John's age and his own, respectively not yet sixteen and nineteen years, the trouble of mind seems premature. The speculation did not turn out successfully, but would have done so had not the river refused to rise at the proper moment. But the risks were so small that they failed seriously to cripple John's prospects in life.

In the next letter, of April 13th, the young cadet expresses his satisfaction at the failure of his brother's speculations, fearing that success might have lured him into greater temptations. The belligerent spirit shown against Great Britain was very shortly outgrown.

WEST POINT, N. Y., Oct. 15, 1838.

Dear Brother:

I suppose that by this time you have become quite an expert engineer, — much better acquainted with "Jacob staffs," chains, compasses, etc., than you used to be with Euclid and Virgil; and I hope to hear from you soon that you have become highly pleased with your occupation.

I presume that you will not be able to work all winter, on account of the cold, and during this time no doubt

you will go home; and if you are detained there by the weather, which will probably be the case, I would advise you to continue your study of the mathematics or whatever else may be connected with your business. You must write to me soon, and tell me all about your campaign or trip, and what particular office you fill in the company, etc., etc. Excuse the shortness of this.

Your affectionate brother,

W. T. SHERMAN.

MILITARY ACADEMY,
WEST POINT, JAN. 9, 1839.

Dear Brother: I am now writing upon the risk of your not receiving this, for I hear that you are engaged in speculating in salt, and are waiting for the river to rise to take a load down to Cincinnati. Are you doing this on borrowed capital or not? Or does it interfere in the least with your duties as engineer? If it does, I would advise you not to engage in it at any rate, even if you can make a fortune by it; for a reputation for a strict and rigid compliance to one's duties, whatever they may be, is far more valuable than a dozen loads of salt. If, however, you do engage in it, of course I wish you success, a pleasant trip to Cincinnati, and hope you will make a long stay, for Lampson's sake.

I suppose you know that we have two examinations here every year, one in January and the other in June. At the latter a number of gentlemen from all parts of the United States attend by invitation of the Secretary of War, and of course we all endeavor to be well prepared in our studies, both for our own good and that the persons (always influential) may carry off a good opinion of the Institution. The course of studies we are engaged in this year has always had the reputation of being

the most difficult of the four, and that justly; therefore to be prepared for the coming June examination I expect to be very studious and busy, and if between this time and then I be not very regular in my correspondence, you may know what to attribute it to and excuse it.

Your affectionate brother,

W. T. SHERMAN.

MILITARY ACADEMY,
WEST POINT, N.Y., April 13, 1839.

Dear Brother:

It appears that although you were pleased with Cincinnati as a city, you were not with the visit, taken all in all. From this I judge that your speculations did not turn out as well as expected. You must not be astonished if I say that if such be the case I am glad of it, because, had you succeeded, your attention would have been turned from your present business, with your success in which so many are interested. I presume by this time you must be nearly done with the works on the Muskingum. Those dams and locks of which you have spoken will no doubt be some of the finest specimens of workmanship in Ohio, and the more I think of it, the more I regret that I did not go and see them last summer. By the arrangement I suppose steamboats will be able to go up as far as Zanesville. I presume you have heard of these Maine difficulties before now. All is now calm in that quarter, the troops having been withdrawn from the disputed territory by both parties, and as far as our Government is concerned the thing is in a fair way of being amicably adjusted, but doubts are entertained with regard to the course which England will adopt. All anxiously await the return of the steamship *Great Western* which carried out the news, and as the time of her

usual return has passed by several days, it is supposed that the time of her departure from England had been delayed in order to receive the news by the ship *Liverpool*, that left New York about eight or ten days after her; and as among the latter were the proceedings of Congress and the President's message, there is every reason to expect by this vessel some decisive news, and if they are ready for war, I think we will soon be. For my part, there is no nation that I would prefer being at variance with than the British, in this case more especially as our cause is plainly right and just. If anything occurs soon, I will write again or send the paper containing it. . . .

Your affectionate brother,

W. T. SHERMAN.

The following group of letters carry the cadet through his graduation and into his twenty-first year. They are already very consequential and full of ideas of affairs, even discussing State debts and the advantages of farming life. But they show his life at West Point to have been happy and contented. As he says himself in his memoirs, he never rose above the ranks; was never chosen to be an officer; and yet, except for his demerits, his standing was excellent. And he seems always contented with his treatment, though looking forward to freedom from duties after graduation. His grave reasoning on a choice of army corps is most natural, as every young cadet knows, and the reasons that influenced him are still about the same.

MILITARY ACADEMY,
WEST POINT, N.Y., Aug. 31, 1839.

Dear Brother:

The encampment (my last) is now over, and we are once more in barracks and to-morrow will commence our studies, commencing with Civil Engineering. This year's

course of study is by far the most important of the four, as well as the most interesting, embracing as it does Engineering both Civil and Military, the construction of fortifications as well as the manner of attacking and defending them, Mineralogy and Geology, Rhetoric, Moral Philosophy, International and Common Law, Artillery and Infantry Tactics, as well as many other minor studies, which the scientific officer requires. When these shall have been completed, and the next nine months shall have passed away, we will receive diplomas and commissions in the army, and I hope a furlough along with them. Of course we look forward with no common pleasure to so fruitful a time as that; indeed, every circumstance which marks its approach is duly celebrated and remembered; instance, the last night of our last encampment.

MILITARY ACADEMY,
WEST POINT, N.Y., Jan. 14, 1840.

My Dear Brother:

The examination is just over; the result is favorable toward me, as usual. In Engineering I am fourth in my class, in Geology and Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy each sixth; as to demerits I have also a respectable number, about one hundred. The studies and exercises will be for the remainder of the academic year exclusively military and important, and will engage us sufficiently to make the time pass pleasantly and rapidly. You may well suppose that we are all anxious for the arrival of June; the thoughts of graduation, the freedom from academic labors and restraints, already engross our minds and form the subjects of all our conversations and talks. Already have we given directions for a class ring, for graduating trunks, for swords, epaulettes, hats,

chapeaux, and feathers, and in a couple of months the military tailor will be here from the city to take our measures for uniform dress and undress coats, cit's clothes, pants, etc., etc. Thus you see that by adding things of this nature, which will constantly keep the future before our minds, we break in upon and enliven our otherwise monotonous life.

What have you been doing all winter? Studying, or nothing? I am beginning to think that engineering is not the thing it is cracked up to be. It does not give constant employment to the engineer, who cannot, therefore, rely upon a sure and constant reward for his labors. His duties, whilst engaged, are exceedingly laborious and irksome, or of the other equally disagreeable extreme; beside these, the prosecution of the different improvements depends upon the States within which they lie, and there is but little doubt that the policy of most of the State governments will soon change in reference to their internal works, to paying more and borrowing less, and allow the improvements to grow with their wealth and population. By examining the public records you will see that the State debts are truly enormous, and if they attempt to pay them, they will undoubtedly stop all expenditures which are not absolutely necessary. I noticed in yesterday's paper that the governor of Pennsylvania vetoed six or seven bills granting money for different purposes, and returned them to the Legislature, assigning as a reason the absolute necessity of paying the debts. I have mentioned these things to you that you may reflect, while there is still time, of the propriety of selecting means to be resorted to in case of necessity. What more naturally suggests itself than a farm? Who can be more independent, more honest and honorable,

who more sure of a full reward for his labor, who can bestow more benefits on his fellow-beings, and consequently be more happy, than an American farmer? If by any means you may be able to get some land in Ohio, Iowa, or Wisconsin, you should do so by all means, and more especially if it is partially improved. I do not mean for the purpose of speculation, but to make use of yourself.

Give my love to all the family, and oblige me by writing soon.

Your affectionate brother,

W. T. SHERMAN.

MILITARY ACADEMY,
WEST POINT, N.Y., March 7, 1840.

My Dear Brother: I acknowledged the receipt of your last in my letter to mother, since which time I have been waiting in hopes that something might turn up to write you about; but although the river has opened, and is alive with steamboats and sloops, still West Point appears as dull as ever; in fact, the only visitors we have had so far have been tailors, shoemakers, etc., etc., who prowl about us, knowing our inexperience and the necessity we are under of getting a full supply of clothing at their prices. The snow has entirely disappeared, and for the past three weeks the weather has been beautiful, and reminds me very much of sugar-making times at home, and I have no doubt, if your weather has been as fine as ours here, your farmers have not been idle in their camps. An evening at old Mr. Buchanan's or Wilson's sugar-camp would be great.

I presume the idea of your studying law has been decided upon by Mr. Reese and Taylor, so that it would be rather impertinent for me to object in the least; but

for my part, it would be my last choice. Everybody studies law nowadays, and to be a lawyer without being exceedingly eminent — which it is to be hoped you will be some day — is not a sufficient equivalent for their risks and immense study and labor. However, if you decide upon anything, you should immediately commence to carry it into execution. As to me, I am already provided for. As soon as I graduate I am entitled by law to a commission in the army, and from my standing in the class to a choice of corps. To be stationed in the east or west, to be in the artillery, infantry, or dragoons, depends entirely on my choice. This choice will be, unless war breaks out with England, the Fifth Regiment of Infantry, because it is stationed on the northwest frontier, a country which I have always felt a strong inclination to see; and if it meets my ideas, formed from descriptions of travellers and officers, it must be the finest spot on this continent. Also it is probable that the Indians will break out again, in which case I should have an opportunity of seeing some active service. Should war, however, be the consequence of this Maine difficulty, I should prefer the artillery, for the reason that it is stationed east of the mountains, which would be the seat of war, and it is an arm of service which I would prefer in a war against a civilized people. But as there is scarce a possibility of this, I have concluded to go to the west, and have accordingly ordered an infantry uniform. Whether I remain in the army for life or not is doubtful; but one thing is certain, — that I will never study another profession. Should I resign, it would be to turn farmer, if ever I can raise enough to buy a good farm in Iowa. . . . If I can spare money when I am at the city of New York, I intend to get one of Colt's patent rifles to shoot ten times in succession as fast as you can cock

and pull the trigger. They cost from \$40 to \$60, more than, I fear, I can spare. I have been very well indeed all winter.

Your affectionate brother,

W. T. SHERMAN.

His leave after graduation was passed in Ohio, where he seems to have reverted to his boyish days and amused himself generally. In one letter he writes as follows: —

“I'm glad to hear that you've got the coon. If it is no trouble, bring him when you come. Be sure to tie the chain to something, that he may not fool you the way he did me.”

The following letters, from his first post, Fort Pierce, are descriptive, in answer to questions from home.

FORT PIERCE, F., March 30, 1841.

My Dear Brother:

The peninsula of Florida is of the latest geological formation, one mass of sand, with few rocks of the softest consistency, and, were it not for its delightful climate, would be as barren as the deserts of Africa. It is cut up by innumerable rivers, streams, and rivulets, which, watering the soil, nourish a rank growth of weeds and grass, which, continually decomposing, gives a rich soil, and gives rise in time to a heavy growth of live oak, palmetto, and scrub of every kind. These are the dreaded hummocks, the stronghold of the Indians, where he builds his hut, and has pumpkin and corn fields. The stream furnishes him with abundance of fish and alligators, the palmetto its cabbage. The thick growth conceals his little fire and hut, secures his escape, enables him to creep within a few yards of the deer or turkey feeding on the border, and drive his copper-headed, barbed arrow through the vital part. In a word, the deep streams, bordered by the dense hummock, have enabled the Indians thus far to elude the pursuit of our army.

The remainder of the country is so very level that water will not flow off, but collects in ponds until absorbed by the sand or evaporated. These ponds are met at every few yards, sometimes miles in extent and but few inches in depth, at other places narrow and boggy. All else is pine barren, and of course monotonous.

As to the history of the war,—the same as all our Indian wars. A treaty for the removal is formed by a few who represent themselves as the whole; the time comes, and none present themselves. The Government orders force to be used; the troops in the territory commence, but are so few that they all get massacred. The cowardly inhabitants, instead of rallying, desert their homes and sound the alarm-call for assistance. An army supposed to be strong enough is sent, seeks and encounters the enemy at a place selected by the latter, gets a few hundred killed. The Indians retreat, scatter, and are safe. This may be repeated *ad infinitum*. The best officer is selected to direct the affairs of the army,—comes to Florida, exposes himself, does all he can, gets abused by all, more than likely breaks down his constitution, and is glad enough to get out of the scrape. Treaties, truces, and armistices have been and are still being tried, with what success is notorious. The present mode of conducting things is to dispose the troops at fixed points, and require them to scout and scour the country in their vicinity,—about as good a plan as could be adopted, and one which would terminate the war if small columns of a hundred or a hundred and fifty men were to make excursions into the interior. We have from this post thoroughly expelled the Indians from this section of the territory, and have had the good luck to kill some and capture others, besides destroying and capturing boats, canoes, etc. The same has been

done below and throughout that district where war prevails.

In the west, there is peace. General A— is buying them up, and, what is to be wondered at, has learned wisdom by experience. You doubtless know that he was most egregiously hoaxed last fall by them, but now he places all who come in under a strong guard, so they can't get off this time. Some flatter themselves that there is hope of the war's ending this summer, but I think there is no probability, as they have burnt their fields and hunting-grounds to the west and northwest of us, and Sam Jones and Coacoochee are still out, and have not the least notion of coming in whilst they are so strong.

We have just returned from a very pleasant scout, having been eight days out, examining several streams that empty south of us, without, however, accomplishing anything or seeing any sights except those left by a hunting party some ten or twelve days previous. We went to Jupiter, famous for the grab by General Jesup; from this place we went out to the battle-ground on the Locha Hatchee, where the Indians made a stand against General Jesup in 1838. It was a dense hummock on the stream called Locha Hatchee, where the army was to pass on the way to Jupiter. The trees were riddled with balls, and several of our men, who had been at the battle, pointed out the trees behind which Captain Such-a-one and Lieutenant Such, etc., etc., stood; the limb over which our men crossed to get at the enemy; how the general got his spectacles smashed by a ball, etc., etc.; how the volunteer militia, as usual, were seized with a panic, gathered together like sheep, presenting a sure target for the Indians, which of course was not allowed to pass unheeded. Your affectionate brother,

W. T. SHERMAN.

On January 16th, he writes from Fort Pierce: —

Upon all scouts or expeditions of danger, all the officers insist upon going, but as it is necessary that at least one should stay at the fort, this is done by rotation, and upon the expedition to the Haulover, ninety miles distant, it fell to my share to remain. On the 4th instant the boats, seven in all, with four officers and forty-three men, left the fort, intending to travel by night and lay by day; but not having a guide, and their map being incorrect, they could not find the way, so on the third day out they concluded it was best to hurry on by day, reach the point where they expected to find Indians, and lie concealed; but on the fourth morning they espied a little canoe in a cove, went ashore, found a trail, followed it, and soon came to a cluster of board and palmetto huts, which they rushed upon, but only found a negro family, — man, wife, and two children, as also an old squaw and papoose. They secured these, and learned that a party of Indians living at this place, and another which our party had previously destroyed, had gone up to the Haulover or to the big swamp for oranges and —. The negro said he and his wife had been stolen four years previous, and had been with them ever since. He seemed quite rejoiced at his recapture and offered to act as guide. He was handcuffed, and a noose fixed about his neck as a gentle hint, then told to go on. On the 5th (Saturday) they reached the Haulover, encamped at the Haulover, and had the pleasure to receive the visit of a horse at daylight the next morning. They followed his track back for about a quarter of a mile, and came upon a temporary camp of the Indians. The dogs gave the alarm; they all rushed in, when you may well suppose there was a little scattering. Nearly all took to their

canoes or the water, where, of course, they were pursued, and after half an hour's popping away and pursuing, they collected together, and found that they had killed two warriors, a woman, and a child; had captured three warriors, eight women, and fifteen children, two tolerably good boats, any quantity of canoes, pots and kettles, etc., corn, pumpkins, and dried fish, and bows and arrows, rifles, bullet-bags, leggins, moccasins, etc.; all this, too, on Sunday. Having destroyed everything that could not be carried with ease, shot the horse, and secured the prisoners, they took to their boats and crossed the lagoon to the other side, from whence the next morning two of the officers and twenty men were sent over to the St. John's, to a place where, the negro said, a couple of families lived. They found it as he had said, but the dogs gave the alarm before they could be surrounded; but in escaping one warrior was shot, and two squaws and their two children, one warrior alone effecting his escape. Here they found two elegant canoes, one of mahogany large enough to carry twenty men, but were destroyed, not being able to bring them away. The houses were burnt, with all the corn, pumpkins, and household stuff. Thus, having captured all they could find in this quarter, and their provisions becoming scanty, they commenced their return, and reached this post after having been out ten days, exposed to some terrible showers, with hard rowing and little to eat, but were in good spirits from their success. They brought with them six boats and thirty-four prisoners. They are encamped here under charge of the guard until they can be sent to Augustine. I wish you could see the group in its savage state; although many have lost their husbands and fathers and wives and children, yet they show no grief. Several are very badly wounded; one little girl,