Distant courtship unfolds for readers

By Mike Gordon
mgordon@staradvertiser.com

For young Carrie Prudence Winter, the decision to work in Hawaii as a missionary school teacher, thousands of miles from her fiancé, was both exciting and emotionally difficult.

Winter had agreed to a three-year term, which meant she would not see her beloved, Charles Kofoed, or return to Connecticut until 1893.

But she would tell him everything by using the most intimate medium of her era: the letter. Every steamship sailing from Hawaii carried her lengthy, lively descriptions of her life as a teacher, encounters with Hawaiian monarchy, the politics of annexation and even the flirtations of a local suitor.

And like most letters, they were never meant to be seen by anyone besides Winter’s fiancé.


Authors Sandra Bonura and Deborah Day believe it’s something of a miracle they could even tell this story.

For more than a century, the letters were hidden in a forgotten trunk in the attic of the Berkeley, Calif., home Winter and Kofoed shared after they were married.

Day found them in 2008 when the house was getting a new roof. As an archivist at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, which Kofoed helped found, Day suspected that his old house might yield a hidden treasure.

Her hunch was rewarded when she climbed into the attic and found, hidden behind a support wall, five dust-covered trunks. Four of them contained research conducted by Kofoed, a respected 20th-century scientist, but the fifth contained Winter’s love letters, rare photographs of her life in Hawaii and essays from her students at the Kawaiahaō Seminary for girls.

The book contains 300 letters that open a window into a 19th-century courtship.

“This was so private,” said Bonura, a San Diego professor of education. “These are letters that she knew only one pair of eyes would ever see — her fiancé. These are better than any diary or journal.”

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Bonura. Some suggested she remove any hint of prejudice because it might hurt the feelings of the descendants of the person being quoted. Another person said to edit out any mushy love references, but these were love letters so that was impossible, Bonura said.

“I kept editing based on too many people,” she said. “At the end of the day, I wanted to edit a book that I wanted to read. There is still some prejudice there but it is true to the time.”

The authors gave something to Winter she could not achieve in life. The young schoolteacher saw herself as a writer and hoped someday to write a book about her time in Hawaii.

All she managed, though, was a magazine article in 1893 that ran under the headline “An American Girl in the Hawaiian Islands” — the same title of the edited book of her letters.