

Local author finds letters from Civil War; writes book

By Judy Wakefield jwakefield@andovertownsman.com Jun 2, 2016



She's a local author with gorgeous red hair who frequently points to it when she talks fast and furiously about her new book. She says redheads are known for fast-talking, being energetic and loving to laugh. She fits that description perfectly.

"I talk fast and have lots of energy," said Ellen Alden, a married mother of three, from Andover, who was a teacher and wine consultant before becoming an author.

It's no surprise to learn that she got tired of waiting for a publisher to read her manuscript about an Irish immigrant who escapes the Ireland famine and comes to America during Civil War time. So, Alden self-published her book entitled "Yours Faithfully, Florence Burke" (\$15).

"I self-published because I grew impatient waiting for literary agents and publishers to make a decision on my manuscript. You can read the blog on my website called, 'That's it, I'm self publishing'," she said. "It's just a great story and how it came about is so interesting that I just had to get published now." The book is a historical fiction novel based on Alden's great,

great grandfather's Civil War letters that she randomly found in a box in her attic.

"My parents had moved to Hawaii and asked me to store some boxes for them. I did. One day I was just looking for a photograph and I was going through one of those boxes. I found a leather case, blew off the dust, and opened it. I couldn't believe what I found," said Alden who grew up in Tilton, N.H.

There were 19 letters written by Alden's great, great grandfather - Florence Burke - written to his wife, also named Ellen, and their children while he fought in the Civil War. The letters are dated in 1864 and some were written while he was in a tent as combat raged just steps away. He signed all of his letters, "Florence Burke."

Alden spent a full year researching the letters and found out some astounding information about Burke.

"He immigrated to New York and was searching for the love of his life - Ellen. He found her in West Springfield, Massachusetts. Ellen arrived in America six months before Florence. Ellen had moved in with her sister in West Springfield.

"They married but he was never satisfied working as a tenant farmer. They were poor. Florence knew the only way to improve was to become a landowner. So, he made a deal with a landowner. Florence agreed to be drafted instead of the landowner's son. In return, he got a farmhouse, a farm and land," Alden said.

Florence was 35-years-old and a father of three at the time. Ellen did not support her husband's plan, which he insisted would make their lives better, and he left for the War just a day after telling her and his oldest son.

Sadly, Florence died in the War in June 1864 - just six months

after he left West Springfield. Ellen and their children did indeed get the farm and lived there until she died.

“The letters compelled me to write this book. Those letters are so inspiring. As he saw it, it was his last chance,” Alden said.

Alden traveled to Florence Burke’s hometown in southern Ireland where she met the town historian to talk about the famine’s effect on people, helping her to understand Florence better. In total, the book - her first - was a three-year journey to research, write and edit.

While the letters are the basis for the book, Alden said she livens up scenes to bring the characters to life, hence, the book’s fiction classification in the historical genre. She said the story would have been a bit flat if she stuck to a letters-only approach for her book.

Alden, who lives on Highland Road with her husband, Michael Alden (who grew up in town and graduated from Andover High School) and children, Nathan, 20, Liam, 17 and Jillian, 12, said the book is a good read for book clubs and she has already booked readings for two book clubs in Andover. Her book’s official launch is Thursday, June 16.

For more about the book, go to EllenAlden.com.