

# Iowa girls preserve state's Holocaust connection

By Daniel P. Finney  
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The story is a tough one to tell children.

The tale involves two Iowa girls from Danville who exchanged letters with Anne Frank, the Dutch teenager whose "Diary of a Young Girl" chronicles the rise of the Nazis



and the Holocaust that led to her death in a German concentration camp during World War II. Needless to say, Anne Frank's story does not have a happy ending. But the task of

telling it to an audience of second- through fifth-graders did not intimidate Davenport authors Hallie Darnall, 15, and Haley Villont, 16.

The Davenport High School sophomores have written a children's book called "Oceans Apart," which tells the story of correspondence between Juanita and Betty Ann Wagner of

Danville and Anne Frank and her older sister, Margot, as the Nazis closed in on Frank's Amsterdam home. The authors wanted to preserve for future generations the Iowa connection to one of the Holocaust's most well-known victims. And by the publisher's require-

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**AUTHORS**

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nents, they had to do it all

n 10 pages.

"Sometimes you don't

think Iowa is a place where

big things happen," Villont

said. "But there is this local

history connection to Anne

Frank. We didn't know any-

thing about it until we start-

ed writing this book. It's

something people need to

know."

**Letters stemmed**

**from pen pal project**

The story Darnall and

Villont tell in "Oceans

apart" begins in the Dan-

ville classroom of Birdie

Mathews in the spring of

1940. Mathews had gained

local celebrity after she

took a trip to Europe in 1914

and wrote lengthy letters

some that were published

in the Danville Enterprise

newspaper, according to a

1995 biography in Palimpse-

st, a State Historical Society

of Iowa publication.

Mathews encouraged

her students to write, and

she devised a pen pal pro-

gram. Juanita Wagner, age

11, selected to write Anne

Frank, then a 10-year-old in

Amsterdam. A few weeks

later, Frank sent back two

letters — one from her and

one from her older sister,

Margot, who was 14. The

letter letter was addressed

to Wagner's older sister,

Betty Ann, who was also 14.

Juanita Wagner had

written about life on their

farm near Danville. Frank

wrote back about her hob-

by of collecting postcards

and sent one in the letter,

along with photographs of

herself and Margot.

The letters were written

in English, but historians

believe the Franks wrote

their missives first in

Dutch. Their father, Otto

Frank, translated the let-

ters, and the girls then re-

wrote them in the foreign

language. The letters are

believed to be the only sur-

viving text written by Anne

Frank in English.

The Frank girls' letters

to the Wagners were dated

April 27 (Anne's to Juanita)

and April 29 (Margot's to

Betty Ann), 1940. They

were penned just three

weeks after Germany had

invaded Denmark and Nor-

way. Eleven days after the

Danville girls got their let-

ter from the Franks, the

Dutch surrendered to the

Nazis, according to the Pal-

impsest.

It would prove the only

correspondence between

the two sets of girls living

oceans apart. The Franks

took to hiding above a store

in an attempt to avoid Nazi

atrocities. They were even-

tually arrested and sent to a

concentration camp.

Years later, Betty Ann

Wagner wrote the Franks

to see if they were all right.

Otto Frank responded with

the news that the girls and

their mother had died in a

concentration camp.

The Wagner sisters

lived in California in their

later years, and in 1988 auc-

tioned the letters for

\$165,000, according to the

Los Angeles Times. The let-

ters are now part of the col-

lection of the Simon Wies-

enthal Center, a Holocaust

history museum in Los An-

geles.

Both sisters are now

dead. Juanita Wagner Hilt-

gen, who lived in Redlands,

Calif., died first. Betty Ann

Wagner, who lived in Bur-

bank, died in August.

Darnall and Villont be-

gan their book two years

ago, when they were

eighth-grade students of

Burlington teacher Katie

Salisbury. Salisbury recog-

nized both girls as top-

flight writers and wanted

to devise a challenging pro-

ject.

Salisbury came across

the work of Deb Bowen,

who owns A Book By Me,

an organization that en-

courages children to write

stories about the Holocaust

for other children. Salis-

bury suggested that her

students write a children's

book about the little-known

correspondence between

the Franks and the Wag-

ners. "Haley (Villont) al-

ways had a goal of being

published before she was

19," Salisbury said. "I

thought this was perfect."

**Proceeds will aid**

**Danville museum**

The two friends took

their writing project seri-

ously. They never squab-

bled, but it was work, they

said. Darnall's writing

style tends toward a more

fictional approach, while

Villont prefers a straight

recounting of facts. Then,

of course, there was the

complexity of the subject.

"The Holocaust is a hard

thing to understand for

sophomores in high school,

let alone little kids," Dar-

nall said. "We really

worked on every word. We

would pick a word and

think, 'No, we learned that

in seventh grade.' We

would ask younger kids if

they understood what we

wanted to say."

The book is illustrated

with photographs set in

Danville. Villont's cousins,

visiting from Arizona,

were used as models to re-

present the Wagner sisters.

The book is available as

a gift to those who donate

\$25 or more to the Danville

Station Museum. The mu-

seum preserves regional

history, including material

on Birdie Mathews' pen pal

project.

Now published authors,

the girls don't plan to pur-

sue careers in writing.

Both are more interested in

becoming veterinarians,

though both said they

would consider minors in

creative writing or journal-

ism. Said Villont: "There

are a lot of good stories out

there."

**ABOUT 'OCEANS APART'**

**WHAT:** A children's book about two Iowa girls who wrote

letters to Anne Frank and her sister before the Holocaust. The

book was written by Burlington High School sophomores

Hallie Darnall and Haley Villont.

**TO OBTAIN A COPY:** Available as a free gift for a \$25 donation

to the Danville Station Museum, which preserves local history.

**MORE INFORMATION:** [www.indiegogo.com/annefrankpenpal](http://www.indiegogo.com/annefrankpenpal)

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