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Article Summary: Emma Robertson was a woman who assumed other responsibilities in addition to her housekeeping and child rearing duties. She managed the room and board for the ranch hands, supervised the household employees, and occasionally participated in the day to day ranching activities on her husband's Hershey Stock Ranch located near North Bend, Dodge County, Nebraska. Her letters describe her activities and experiences in letters to relatives in Iowa.

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Photographs / Images: Headquarters of the North American Cattle Company's Neligh, Nebraska, Ranch about 1890; Sale Bill from the *North Bend Argus*, March 2, 1891

THE RANCH LETTERS OF EMMA ROBERTSON, 1891-1892

Edited by JAMES E. POTTER

INTRODUCTION

Women were a vital force in frontier society though they often were relegated to secondary roles within the male-dominated social structure. Simply being a wife and mother was a demanding occupation. Emma Robertson typified those women who assumed other responsibilities in addition to their house-keeping and child-rearing duties. Her husband, James E. Robertson, was manager of the Hershey Stock Ranch located near North Bend, Dodge County, Nebraska. While Robertson managed the general affairs of the ranch, Emma had charge of room and board for the dozen or more ranch hands, supervised the household employees, and occasionally participated in the day-to-day ranching activities.

During the 1880-90's several large cattle-feeding operations were located in eastern Nebraska. They included the Bay State Livestock Company,¹ the Standard Cattle Company,² The North American Cattle Company,³ and the Powder River Livestock Company.⁴ Most were owned by eastern investors or packing companies but were operated by a resident manager.⁵ Cattle were raised on the companies' western ranches and shipped to Nebraska for fattening.

The Hershey Stock Ranch was established about 1880 by Benjamin Hershey of Muscatine, Iowa. By 1891 the ranch included some 3,640 acres, 500 of which were under cultivation and the remainder used as pasture and meadow. Sheds were available to shelter up to 3,000 head of stock, and during the winter of 1891-1892, some 1,300 head of cattle were on feed, including 200 purebred Hereford cows. About 2,500 tons of hay were harvested annually.⁶

James Robertson was a native of Fayette County, Iowa where he married Emma Bent in 1878. The couple's daughter Caribell was born in 1880.⁷ In the spring of 1891, the Robertsons assumed management of the Hershey Stock Ranch and remained there until a new manager was appointed in September, 1892. After leaving Nebraska, Robertson enrolled in a veterinary medicine course in Toronto, Canada. When his veterinary training was completed, he established a practice in Monona, Iowa. Evidently the Robertsons remained in Monona for most of their lives.

During the Robertsons' stay in Nebraska, Emma Robertson found time to describe her activities and experiences in letters to relatives in Iowa. Four letters to her aunt, Belle Robinson Burgess, were discovered among family papers by JoAnn Burgess of Clear Lake, Iowa, and copies were donated to the Nebraska State Historical Society. The letters provide an interesting picture of life on the Hershey Stock Ranch and relate the role of the manager and his family. Original spellings have been retained but on occasion punctuation has been added for clarity. In the letters Mrs. Robertson refers to her husband as Elbert, apparently his middle name. Belle is their daughter Caribell. The Emma Robertson letters span the period from September, 1891, through September, 1892:

THE LETTERS

North Bend, Neb., Sep. 15-1891

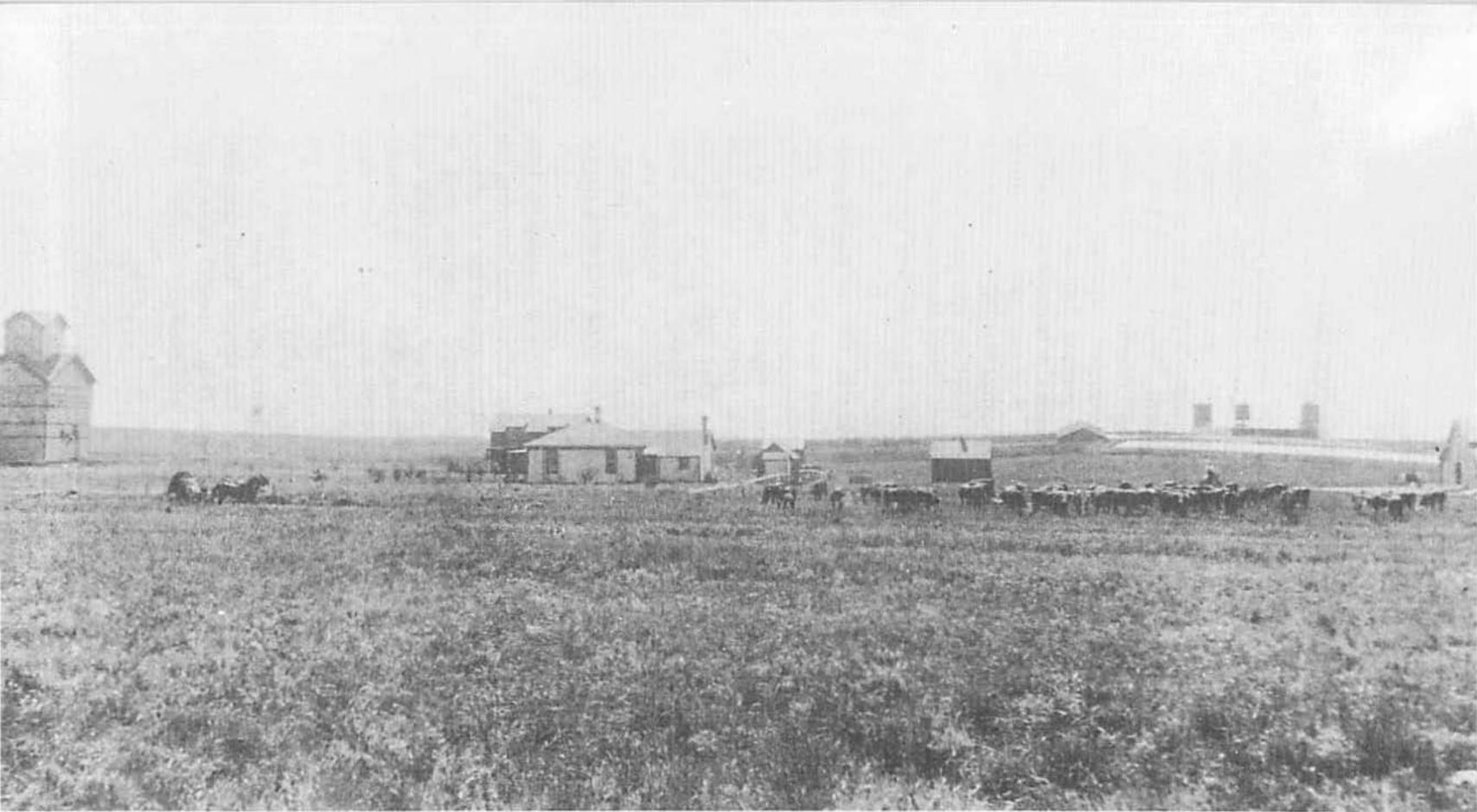
Dear Aunt Belle.

It is to hot to work so I will write a little. It has been so long since I wrote you that Elbert has reminded me of it several times. I have only seen one person since I left West Union⁸ that knew anyone that I know and that was a traveling man that called here last week. I almost felt related to him. When I came, Elbert said we would only stay four months. Have decided to stay another year if all runs smothe. In some respects, I like it here very much but when I think how far I am from friends I feel very lonely. Elbert doesn't do any hard work but is so busy he hardly has time to eat. Some man or machine wants something all the time. He hasn't done a days work in the field. Several times he saved a place in the hay field for himself but

was never able to fill it. He don't do any chores, not even to take care of his saddle pony. There has been seven mowers cutting and 31 men putting up hay for this ranch. Expect to finish this week. Elbert keeps twelve men all the time. When we had thrashers we were 26 in [the] family. Week before last, we had three carpenters, two masons, and boarded two men working on the road grader. Last week we had one carpenter and two masons. We have some extra [men] a good deal of the time. Have been putting in a cistern, raising the horse barn, putting under a foundation, and new stalls, and etc., three new gable windows in the boarding house and other repairs. Expect painters soon. There is over 30 miles of fence on this place. Elbert has had 25 of it repaired this summer. They have commenced halling manure. Have about 1500 loads to haul. They expect to feed 600 steers next winter.

I never saw so many rats. After a rain, the rat tracks are as thick as pig tracks in the hog yard. They took all the sweet corn and are working on the field corn. One evening Elbert with the dogs and two boys killed 76 and one night they caught 21 in one trap. When they raised the barn, you ought to have seen them run. They did not count what they killed but after the hogs had eaten a good many, a bushel basket would not hold them. [We] keep two dogs just to kill rats. One morning I was in the barnyard and I counted 22 dead rats without taking a step or turning around, but I don't think they will ever get rid of them.

One week ago yesterday morning, Elbert was going to take Belle to school. Belle was in the buggy, Elbert was untying the horses when they started to run. Belle stayed in for a half mile when the tongue came down and she climed out at the back. It is a two-seated buggy. She was in the front seat. The back was full of things going to town for repairs. She was not sirously hurt. [She] fell on her face. It was badly scratched and swollen. She seemed to feel the shock a good deal, [and] did not sit up much for three days. I was standing by the buggy when the horses started. The road is so straight and level I could see her all the time. I was so thankful when I saw her out and that she could get up. Just after she got out, the buggy tipped over and went the rest of the way bottom up. They [horses] ran a week before. [They] were in the barnyard and partly unhitched. El-



Headquarters of the North American Cattle Company's Neligh, Nebraska, Ranch, about 1890. Thomas B. Adams, company president during the 1880's, was also secretary of the Wyoming Stock Growers' Association, 1887-1891, and served in the 1888 Wyoming Legislature.

bert was standing by the buggy. The buggy tipped over and turned over Elbert but he got up without a scratch. He is talking of selling them. I hope he will before they kill somebody.

Belle commenced school this week. [She] goes to town.⁹ [She] is in the grammar room [and] likes the school very much. She goes a-horseback [and] takes dinner with a family near the schoolhouse. I think it is a good deal for her to do, but Elbert and Belle think it is all right so I try to. The way she goes, across a hay field, it is 4½ miles. It is six miles by the road.

The Standard Cattle Company have a ranch near here. They keep from 60 to 100 men. Last winter [they] fed at one time 6,500 head of cattle, [and] during the winter, fed 8,000. They have what is said to be the largest barn in the world. It will hold 3,000 head of cattle. The Bay State Ranch is 7 miles from here. [It] is owned by Swift of Chicago. I don't know much about it only it is a large feeding establishment. Elbert has been to the Standard ranch. We want to go to the Bay State soon.

I must be growing young. Most people think I am not more than 30 and one man said he thought the managers wife was very young, not more than 20. Twice Belle has been called my sister, they thinking I was too young to have such a daughter. Belle has been very homesick but now that she is in school, I think she will feel better. She found but little pleasure except with her pony. She did not want to go anywhere or see anybody, would cry if I wanted her to go with me to town. She has a nice pony and saddle and is one of the prettiest riders I ever saw. I must go to work and my paper is full so I will say goodbye.

Emma Robertson.

North Bend, Neb. Dec. 18, 1891

Dear Aunt Belle,

Yours of Nov. 24th received and was very welcome as they all are. Don't you think I am good to answer so soon. We are having lovely weather, no snow. We enjoyed having Carrie and family with us.¹⁰ They have been gone three weeks. It seems like three months. I miss the children very much. One day while she was here, there were 29 here to dinner. That is the most we have had any one meal. We have eleven month men now and

have had from two to five carpenters for two months. Have made some improvements at the house and barn. They are now building new corrells. [We] have had three painters for three weeks. They have gone now, they didn't do all we wanted done but we got so tired of the mess that we are going to leave the rest till spring.

We have 2,300 head of cattle now, are feeding 1300 for market. Are buying lots of corn. I do all the weighing. Some days I take in 2,000 bu. This week, [we] are paying 28 cents [for] shelled corn. We have an office at the scales. One of the men build a fire and sweep for me every day. I have the same girls that were here when I came, but I want to make a change. The cook is the ugliest person I ever tried to live with. Have two girls, pay \$4.00 each. I would like a good woman that could take charge of the boarding house.

Belle is going to school in this district now, the days are [too] short for her to go to town. She goes 1½ miles, goes a horseback. [She] is sick now with a hard cold. Elbert has sciatic rheumatism most of the time since last January, has been doctoring all summer. I think my health is better than in Iowa. I presume you think I am very homesick and I have lots of sympathy from you. I am much obliged to you but I am not homesick and have no desire to live at West Union. Of course, I would like to see my friends, but would rather they would come here. . .

It seems as if Elbert has as many friends here as in Iowa. One man called Thanksgiving morning and give us two cans of oysters for our dinner. I have made but few acquaintances but they seem very kind. It is bed time and my paper is full so I will say good night.

Yours with everlasting love

Emma Robertson

North Bend, Nebr. Feb. 18, 1892

Dear Aunt Belle,

I have finished my morning work earlier than usual today so I am going to take time to answer your letter received some time ago. We are having lovely weather. Have had but little snow, no

HORSE SALE!

60 HEAD OF HORSES

—CONSISTING OF—

Brood Mares-Draught Horses-Fillies

DRIVING HORSES, PONIES AND

ONE PERCHERON-NORMAN STALLION.

—WILL BE SOLD—

At the BAY STATE FARM 2 miles west of North Bend
on the Union Pacific railroad, on

SATURDAY, March 14, 1890,

COMMENCING AT 10 O'CLOCK.

SOME FARM MACHINERY will also be sold, consisting of Plows, Cultivators, Wagons, Two Road Scrapers, and other articles too numerous to mention.

FREE LUNCH WILL BE SERVED.

J. W. MADDOX,
Auctioneer.

G. J. CAMPBELL,
MANAGER.

Sale bill from the North Bend Argus, March 21, 1891.

sleighing. Elbert went to Omaha the first of the week with hogs. We have been buying lots of corn. One week [we] took in 20,000 bu., one day 85 loads. I have done much of the weighing so you see I have been pretty busy, but I am [al]most through with that kind of work as we have nearly enough in store to feed through. [We] feed 3,000 bu. per week.

We have made a change in the kitchen. I dismissed the girls and hired a woman, past fifty years of age, and her son, a young man about twenty. I like the boy better than I expected to. The

cook was sick nearly two weeks with grippe and the boy, John, done the cooking. We got an extra girl to wash dishes. I oversee all the work since the girls went away.

Several of the boys have been sick with the prevailing disease, La Grippe. All are able to work now. Elbert took his turn with the rest but so far, Belle and I have not. Perhaps our time is yet to come but I hope not . . . Belle is growing tall very fast this winter. Her school closes next week for four weeks vacation. I had thought of spending that time in W.[est] U.[nion] but have given it up for this spring.

You are mistaken. Everything don't quite reach to [a] thousand, we have only ten dogs . . . Tell Tommie when he wants to shoot wild geese to come here. I never saw so many. They feed in these pastures. There are lots of hunters here, [you] can buy geese for .25. Jack Rabbits and coyotes are plenty. Last spring they hired a hunter here, paid him the same wages as the other men to shoot geese at seeding time.

Every letter and paper from home tells of sickness and death. I have felt very uneasy about Ma, but her last letter received this week Monday said all were in usual health. Belle is preparing to take part in a school exhibition at the close of this term. If you could see the people in this part of the country you would know it would be a grand affair. I think the star of the evening will be an Iowa girl.

It is time I was at other work so I will say goodbye.

Always love and good wishes

Emma Robertson

North Bend, Neb. Sept. 17, 1892

Dear Aunt Belle,

I have just a few minutes before dinner time and will spend them writing to you. We are having just lovely weather. Have had a little frost but not enough to do much damage. Elbert went to Leigh, about 50 miles from here, the first of the week [and] came home last evening. [He] Went a horseback. Says he saw as fine a country as can be found. I have had letters from home this week saying all are doing nicely. . . .

Perhaps you will be surprised to hear that a new manager

came for this place last week but it is not unexpected to us. In some respects, we are sorry to leave, but for some reasons are glad the time has come. Where we will go or what we will do we have not yet decided. [We] Will be here a few weeks only. Our boys are all sorry to have us go. I never saw such long faces as when Elbert introduced Mr. Browning, the new boss. He is a young, single man, is awful homesick and sick of his job, just whines, "I can't." He is a regular putty man. Some of the boys will leave when we go, they say it can never be home without us. Last evening the boys gave Elbert a *very nice* gold chain and charm

Last sunday I presented our minister with a cash donation which I done the beging for, and I was given the work of selecting and buying an organ for our sunday school which I have done and taken to the school house.

Belle is out helping drive cattle so you know she is happy. I have lots of sewing to do so I must stop writing and go to work. I was pleased to hear that you had an organ but wonder who will be the organist.

Yours with Love
Emma Robertson

NOTES

1. See C. H. Schoville, comp., *History of the Elkhorn Valley in Nebraska* (Chicago: National Publishing Co., 1892), 154; and Buss and Osterman, *History of Dodge and Washington Counties, Nebraska* (Chicago: American Publishing Co., 1921), I, 288.

2. Schoville, *Elkhorn Valley*, 144; and Buss and Osterman, *Dodge and Washington Counties*, 309.

3. J. M. Wolfe & Co., compiler, *Nebraska State Gazetteer, 1890-91* (Omaha: J. M. Wolfe & Sons, 1890), 307.

4. Schoville, *Elkhorn Valley*, 259.

5. Gene M. Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966) provides the best treatment of the role of eastern investment in the Plains cattle industry.

6. Schoville, *Elkhorn Valley*, 670.

7. *Ibid.*

8. West Union, Iowa, the county seat of Fayette County.

9. Probably North Bend, Nebraska.

10. Apparently Iowa relatives who had come to visit.