

Letters of Lucy M. Billings

No picture could be truer to life in the first pioneer days of Union Colony than that found in the letters of Lucy Billings who lived through those days and had the rare ability of drawing pictures from the scenes of every day life.

Jesse F. and Lucy M. Billings with their two little girls, Alice and Fannie, arrived with other colonists May 10, 1870. Mrs. Billings kept up a constant correspondence with her mother back in the old home in Wisconsin and these letters have been carefully preserved to the present day. They are among the priceless possessions of Mrs. Gene Williams, the Alice of the Billings family, who has kindly allowed the writer of this history to take from them the following extracts bearing upon life in the first two years of the colony.

They tell of hardships and privations met with the strong fine spirit of the pioneer; but there is a tinge of sadness in them, too, when it is known that the brave soul of Lucy Billings was called from earth before the end of the second colony year before many of her cherished hopes could be realized. And one of the saddest parts of the story is that her death was caused by typhoid fever which was traceable to the water that the colonists were then obliged to use. Her body was laid away on the hill that is now Inspiration Point, but later was placed in the new cemetery when it was established, where it is today.

After the mother's death the little girls were sent back to their grandmother in Wisconsin, but when Alice was 16 she returned to Greeley and lived with her father. Later she married Gene Williams and her home has ever since been in Greeley.

The following are brief extracts from the letters:

THE INDIANS. THE NEW HOME IN THE COLONY.

"May 22, 1870.

"They say there is no danger from Indians here, yet I cannot help being some afraid. Jesse never goes to bed without his gun where he can put his hand on it. The colony is well armed, and I hope for the best.

"There has been a great change in the two weeks we have been here. When we came there were three houses and three or four tents; now there are as many as 25 houses and a large number of tents; there would be more if there was lumber. We moved into our own house last Friday. I will describe it to you: It is better than most of the houses in Greeley: It is 12 feet by 18, all in one room. It is not plastered; that is to be done in the future when lime can be had. Jesse is going to make me a cupboard for a pantry. We have a hole dug under the floor with a tight box fitted into it where we keep milk and butter cool. We will have three windows when we get them finished. Our house is built of matched boards so it is warm and strong and the wind does not stir it at all. Our goods came all right."

Improving. New Homemade Furniture. Real Stove. Coal Mine Discovered Near Colony.

"June 6, 1870.

"We are improving a little in our style of living; Jesse is making improvements all the time. Our table and bedstead are both home-made; we have no chairs yet but they say there will be all kinds of furniture here soon. We have a pretty stove and a good one; it cost \$37. The furniture with it is a boiler, spider, grid-iron, dripping pan, two griddles, two bread pans, a teakettle, coffee boiler and steamer.

"The worst thing here is we are obliged to burn coal, and I don't like it. Perhaps I shall get used to it. Wood is scarce and can only be used for kindling. The Colony has discovered a coal mine within 15 miles and is working it. Jesse has taken a share so we can have coal cheaply.

"Sometimes I get 'blue,' living so rough, but I look about me; others are living in the same way and worse, and making the best of it, and so I try to make the best of it, too. We are all perfectly well and that is a great blessing. The past week has been pleasant.

"You pity me because I must live in the same room with my stove; but I haven't seen a night or morning yet when a fire was uncomfortable; some days we keep it all day. The Rocky moun-

tains, only 18 miles away, are always covered with snow.

"We have one big improvement the past week; a well has been dug of beautiful soft water, very pure. The river water that is to be brought over town for irrigation is soft and pure, too.

"Lumber is high and almost impossible to get, but we think it will be cheaper by and by. Then we will build on a bed-room and finish off the house. I live in hopes of better things. I will send you one or two pressed flowers such as grow all over these prairies; one is a cactus, very handsome but covered with terrible pricklers. They say they will disappear when the ground is cultivated."

NO INDIANS

"June 11, 1870.

"I am getting all over being afraid of Indians. Most of the Indian troubles are in the southern part of the state; if they should come this way we should hear of it and the Colony would be prepared. I do not anticipate trouble.

"It is all nonsense to expect to build a town in a few weeks; it has to take time; and I came out expecting to undergo a good many privations and get along most any way for the first few years. We have five acres about five miles out of town and I shouldn't wonder if we moved out there another year; then we could keep a cow and hens and raise stock.

TOWN IMPROVING, BUT IT TAKES TIME. TREES, A PARK AND A RESERVOIR.

"June 19, 1870.

"Our town is improving slowly. Some are very sure we are going to have a large place. If we do it will be a beautiful one because it is handsomely laid out and the colony is setting out trees on every street, both sides. There is a square or park in the middle with a large reservoir in the center; water is conducted into it from the river and into our gardens. Ours is planted and irrigated; we have put in a good many potatoes and such things.

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"Mr. Meeker and his family are here and living in no better style than the rest of us.

"All the village lots are taken and persons joining the colony now have to pay \$50 more than we did. We expect to have the deeds to our property soon. We may go out to our five acres in the spring.

"We hope to get a bedstead and some chairs this week. It would have paid us to have brought ours. Jesse likes it here and thinks we can make something if we can be content to rough it for a while till we get a start. I have an easy time! don't have work enough to keep me busy."

HOW THEY CELEBRATED THE FOURTH. THE FIRST BABY AND HIS IMPOSING NAME.

"July 5, 1870.

"I told you I would write again after the Fourth. It is over now so I can tell you about it. There were several hundred people here from Cheyenne and Denver and the mountains. They went through the regular exercises and raised a Liberty pole in the Park. There were fireworks in the evening and on the whole we had quite a celebration on this Great American Desert.

"It is wonderful how this place has grown; there are over 200 buildings, though of course, they are shanties; just something for shelter. Ours is one of the best dwelling houses, but there are some good stores. There is no church organized yet, but there is one minister who preaches for all. I think he is a Baptist.

"The first baby born in Greeley came a few days ago. A Committee named him Horace Greeley Meeker Cameron Dixon, and presented him with a share in the Colony."

ALICE STARTS TO SCHOOL.

"July 10, 1870.

"Jesse works every day at carpentering and in the garden mornings and evenings; he works nearly an hour before breakfast and we have breakfast at six; last night he was in the garden till ten; it was moonlight. If we do not have early frost we

will have things to live on this winter. Alice began school last Wednesday. There are 35 pupils and no two have books alike."

PLENTY OF WORK. THE MEEKER HOUSE BUILDING.

July 17, 1870.

"Jesse has more work than he can do. A good many are building houses now of adobe brick; they are made of soil and sun-dried. Mr. Meeker is having one built for himself. Jesse says if they are a success he will build us one. Some of my shrubbery is dying, but my rose bushes and grapes look splendid. It has been warm the past week but the nights are cool."

MANY HOUSES GOING UP. FIRST DUST STORMS RECORDED.

"July 23, 1870.

Every day we see new houses going up; lumber is cheaper now and they are building better houses. We have had some very warm weather lately; but instead of showers of rain we have showers of wind. I generally see them coming and rush to shut the doors and windows for the air is filled with dust. It is one of the draw-backs of this country. Alice goes to Sabbath school regularly; we have a good day school taught by the widow of a Lutheran minister."

SO LIFE GOES ON.

"July 30, 1870.

"We jog along from week to week with little change; it is warm but the nights are cool and it is not so prostrating as with you. As I look from my window I see two new houses I had not seen before. They spring up in every direction and new families are arriving every day. I am glad we came when we did. I can see it all."

BLANKET SHAWLS IN CHURCH. THE GREELEY TRIBUNE ABOUT TO START. THE FIRST DEATHS.

"August 10, 1870.

"Tuesday night we had a terrible thunder storm; it rained

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all night and is so cold today we need a fire to sit by. Most everybody wore blanket shawls to church today. We had a Methodist minister this time.

"The colony appears prosperous now. Mr. Meeker will start a paper soon; it will be called the Tribune of the West. I hear of no sickness here. There have been two deaths, but one was a boy run over by the cars and the other a woman who was very sick whe she came. I wish you would send me some flower seeds this fall for Alice."

HOPING FOR A COMFORTABLE HOME IN THE NEAR FUTURE.

"Sept. 11, 1870.

"We must get our house fixed soon. Jesse thinks he will build a cellar and another rough room. I live in hopes for we are so cluttered up as we are that sometimes it seems I can't stand it another minute. We are better off than a good many, but if I ever do get a comfortable home I shall stick to it, I know I shall."

NEIGHBORS AT THE END AS WELL AS THE BEGIN- NING THE FIRST AND LAST SALOON

"Oct. 22, 1870.

One of our neighbors died and the funeral was today. I have been over there and have had the two small children here. Poor little things. She was the third to be buried in the cemetery here.

They are having quite a time here today. You know this is a temperance town and we are determined it shall be so. Last night some parties came in and opened a saloon. The authorities broke it up and burned it today. The leading men say there shall be no saloons but it is outsiders who are determined to bring in liquor."

IT IS DIFFERENT HERE

"Nov. 7, 1870.

"We are having our bedroom built; it is slow work but when we get it fixed we shall be more comfortable; I have to be

patient. We have bought bedstead and chairs; the children sleep in a trundle bed. I will put my bureau in the new bedroom and carpet it. It would be awful to live like this back there, but people here who have a kitchen and bedroom are considered fortunate."

LOOKING TOWARD NEXT YEAR

"Nov. 20, 1870.

"We have our five acres plowed now and will raise something on them next year. I am not going to get discouraged the first year."

A HAPPY CHRISTMAS

"Christmas Day, 1870.

"We have had a house full of company; they were neighbors; the wife came before her husband expected her. Now they are all fixed and they invited us over today. There was a Christmas tree at Sabbath school for the children. Alice could not go because she was not well enough but her teacher, Mr. Meeker's daughter, brought her presents to her: a little china cup and saucer and a big bag of candy. Alice was delighted. Both children hung up their stockings and got numerous small presents and were very happy."

BEAUTIFUL WEATHER IN JANUARY

Jan. 8, 1871.

"We are having the most beautiful weather I ever saw; I cannot realize it is mid-winter."

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And so these history-marking letters run on through the months down to September 18, 1871, three weeks before her death, every letter worthy a full quotation. January 22 she tells of the Baptists, Congregationalists and the Methodists preparing to build. February 10 she describes the most beautiful weather she ever saw in February; and speaks of the delicious dried peaches they had from Salt Lake. The March 10 letter tells of gardening operations beginning, and of her chickens.

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April 12 tells of the summer kitchen finished and of putting two beds in her new bedroom so as to be able to give others shelter. April 30, more of their gardening and their intention of trying to raise melons. June 1 tells of a spell of sickness but declares herself all right again; of her white curtains with red tassles; of their nice looking garden; of six evergreen trees and cottonwoods all around; of a small tornado that had struck Greeley demolishing some unfinished houses. June 15, not feeling so well; town getting ready for a big Fourth of July celebration. July 2, feeling better; had been to hear Elizabeth Cady Stanton lecture; was delighted; garden fine; promise of many tomatoes: July 9 of a hail storm that had seemed to destroy it all; greatly discouraged. July 23 garden recovering wonderfully; not much loss. Evidently a letter had been published in the Toledo Blade declaring the Colony a failure, for Mrs. Billings comes to its defense vigorously. She says in part:

"Union Colony has succeeded beyond the expectations of the most hopeful. When a Colony has built up a town, set out trees and gardens and grown potatoes and other vegetables enough to last a year and wheat for bread, it cannot be called a failure. When saloons are opened and drunkards are seen here then I will be ready to say we are a miserable failure."

Then she tells of a lot of editors visiting the Colony, of going to hear Grace Greenough lecture and how she enjoyed it. August 10 she tells of her fine citrons and of the tubfull of pickles she had just finished putting down. Then comes the last letter, September 18, when she tells of attending the dedication of the new Baptist church, the first church building to be finished in Greeley. The sermon was by a minister from Chicago and the house was crowded; it was a pretty church and cost \$6,000. The Methodists were building one of brick to be completed soon. The Presbyterians to commence a church soon but the Congregationalists not at present.

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Here the record breaks off, but "Alice", Mrs. Gene Williams, adds: "My mother was stricken and died after a short and violent illness, on October 21, 1871. She was buried on the

hill that is now Inspiration Point. I still have a bouquet of wild flowers picked from that grave. In 1873 when the present cemetery was located her body was placed there and there rests today. My father lived to see Greeley grow and thrive. He died in January 1893 and was laid beside my mother."