

PREVIEW OF *Their Man in Omaha* PUBLICATION DATE: DECEMBER 2004

The Best of the Barker Letters

Featured excerpt from the Barker Letters (November 6, 1868) publication date December 2004. (Editor's Note: this excerpt and all published writings are as written by Joseph Barker)

"I was on Capitol Hill last night. It was dark no moon & rather cloudy - Prarey fires, red & lurid were in the distance up & down the River on both sides & crawling over the Bluffs - the City at my feet - was all alight - dotted thickly over with lights - Farnham & Douglas were quite brilliant - All along the river & at the Railway works were lights & on the opposite shore - and stretching up all the way to Council Bluffs - where the lights of that City stretching two miles along the foot of the Bluffs Shone out clear & bright & quite near. It looked like one vast City. I was surprised & struck by the appearance it made - The prary fire surrounding it all and the lurid shadows reflected on the Clouds made quite a picture - C.Bluffs is steadily growing down towards the river & someday it will be one great City on both sides the river with Rail Road & foot & Carriage Bridges connecting the two - and this is now the Hope & talk of the Bluffers."

December 23, 1861 - Alfred Sayre to Joseph

What a commentary on the world's progress is that a broad and stormy ocean, and two thirds of the extent of a great continent affords no practical obstacle to the interchange of thought! Not even when the one party is in the metropolis of the world, and the other in the wilds of the cor-dilleras!

December 23, 1861 - Alfred Sayre to Joseph

They now have a Telegraph there, connecting the place with New York and San Francisco, and the troubles in Missouri have increased it's population, notwithstanding that more than a thousand Nebraskians, of whom a large portion were Omahas, have gone to the war. In it's relation to this territory it is considered the most important point on the Missouri river. The progress of it's affairs is decidedly in the right direction.

January 20, 1863 Lida Patrick to Joseph

We have had a most lovely winter for the last three months. We have not had one drop of rain or snow, till last Monday it commenced snowing. I am not surprised that you do not like the English climate, after living so long in this beautiful clear atmosphere ! I like Nebraska better every year that I live here

May 14, 1866

I assure you I shall come home as soon as I can. We can never like America except on compulsion. We were not mistaken in our judgement of the Country or the People. Englishmen — (like us) and Americans are like oil and water. They will never mix. I was in hopes I was prejudiced and mistaken. But it is not so — so far. Stick to England by all means if you can. I have got on very well — and it seems nearly like a dream to find myself here and only 17 days since I left Sheffield. Just 14 days from Sheffield to John Barker's.

May 14, 1866

I do not want us to have to settle down here. It's all very well for a time and object, but the idea of permanency would be unpleasant.

May 26, 1866

I took the Gentlemen who came with me round the Town and introduced them and they are out Land hunting. They were all pleased with Omaha and had no doubt of its being a large City someday. Coln McLarran who is quite a western man, was quite surprised and satisfied that it will be one of the prominent Towns of the west.

Their Man in Omaha

May 26, 1866

If we had a little Capital to put up a few houses or stores we could do well. They would pay 20% & 25% interest. People live very stylishly. And there are a many new people. Of course it is America. But we could manage here if we had to come out and live a few years. I am more of the opinion that this is to be a place. Though the Freighting and Emigration to the mines is less than it was. Last years Indian troubles and high waters destroyed all the North Platt Bridges and injured trade here. Also they are shipping direct from St. Louis to Fort Benton which is only 100 miles from the Montana mines. 50 steamers have been freighted this year. They can only make one trip a season many wrecks occur and others are detained and never get there. So it is not a desirable way and when the rail is accross Iowa and up the Platt it will put an end to much of this.

May 26, 1866

Well, I have told you all I can at present. I will write again in a week or so. After all said and done, this is America and these are Americans. I like this place, climate and people better than any other part of America. And if we have to be here we can get along. One thing is certain I must stay here awhile. When you are away people will try and attack your property.

June 1, 1866

Of course America is never England. But of all parts of America Omaha and the West are the most desirable places to live in. And if we could do a paying Business, we could manage to live very comfortably in Town. Living in town is more expensive than the country, and provisions are all higher. But with a paying business we could live comfortably and save money. The town has now a permanant back Country trade. The valleys west are more thickly peopled. And the Inhabitants are steadily increasing. Of course the people are still the same grasping, tricky, swearing — brutal talking people we always found them. The people both high and low are unchanged. But the Prospects of business and the Trade here is changed. It has improved and the abundance of paper money has put an end to clumsy bartering and trading.

June 1, 1866

O.F. Davis and others say Idaho and Montania are very fine countries, and so are Colorado and Salt Lake. Fine countries to settle in and farm. While Idaho and Montana are full of minerals and coal. And they have the fin-

est Gulch Gold diggins. Better, Davis thinks, than California. Fort Benton and the upper Missouri goes into Montana Territory. And there are mines within 100 miles of the Fort — Consequently a great deal of Freight for Montana is now taken up by Boats to Fort Benton from Missouri. This though is a very dangerous rout, and many accidents occur. Still 50 boats have gone up this year, but they can only make one trip a year and that has to be arranged so as to meet the June rise when half way up between here and Fort Benton. You may calculate the traffic there alone when fifty

boats loaded for that point have gone up, besides half as much more by land. Since I have been here, now ten days, there has been an average three boats here every day. 3 or 4 have gone to Sioux City, the others all here.

June 1, 1866

At least 150 Freighting teams have gone out, and some 50 (fifty) emigrant wag-gons, — “Pilgrims” as they call them to distinguish them from the “Freight Trains.” 50 teams went out for Government in one day. The greater part of the Remainder went out on private acct. for the mines. Government contracts and freighting during the War made people rich here. No one in any legatimate business but what has done well here during the last six years. The mines have at the same time made Beldon, Claves, Byers and many others we knew rich or very well off. Walker is worth \$30,000. Boyd and the other young man who married Dr. Henry's sisters got beef and hay contracts at Kearney, and each made 30 or 40 thousand dollars.

June 1, 1866

Little Dr. Peck is a sober man, and well off by Freighting — “I tell you what it is Bark-

er, you must pitch into something. No sober steady man in any legitamate Business can fail to do well and make money here. I believe this is as good a place as any in the world and this is as good a time as any. And if you can only import the right goods, you will do more than well. You will make a fortune. That's my opinion.” So think the Patricks. Old Patrick thinks a Wollen mill if you could manage it as good and better than any other business. He says there are 20,000 sheep already in Nebraska, and as many more in and around Pottawatamoy Co.

June 5, 1866

Boats come up 3, 4 and 5 every day. The levee is covered with Iron rails, Tyes, immense piles of Telegraph wire, Lumber etc. The R. Rd Bridge across the Loup Fork is completed and the R.R.d for 20 miles beyond is in running order. They are laying the Track at the rate of 1 ½ miles a day. They expect to be 20 miles beyond Fort Kearney by middle of September.



“Omaha City” 1866, Map Courtesy of N.P. Dodge Company

Their Man in Omaha

June 5, 1866

People insist that we are rich or ought to be with our property. And if no Financial Crash does come, and the Rail Rd does not quarrel with the Town and try to injure it; and if the Rail Rds on the other side of the river come to C. Bluffs as they are expected; and if the country back fills up as it promises; and trade continues as good as it has been — why then this is a fine point — this will be a large Town, and we shall then be very well off if we can keep all our property. So it is. But you see there are many things to be depended upon first, and “white men are very uncertain” and America is a very white country.

June 5, 1866

Sunday, 17th. I went to Church (Episcopal) this morning. A large and very stylish, splendidly dressed congregation. Some very good looking Ladies there.

June 19, 1866

I suppose that last year at this time you could not have heard the sound of a hammer. Now there is not a spare carpenter or builder to be found. Everybody has more than he can do. The reason was that last year the railway was standing. They had not put up a solitary Railway Building and were threatening to commence them at Bellview. However they did not, but placed them here and ever since the Town has gone on improving.

July 4, 1866

I expect I write about some things twice over. But you must not mind. I give you all that I hear and think of. My letters are my Diary. I carry a Notebook and note down anything I hear or learn and then write them down at length in my letters.

July 16, 1866

Patricks have got up their Engine and Workshops ready for their new Brick machine. It is long in coming but is expected every day. If it turns out a success it will be a benefit to the town as they will lower the price of Bricks and encourage Brick buildings. I fear it is too good to be all they anticipate.

July 16, 1866

Boats, 2 and 3 average every day, every day since I came and sometimes 5 and 6. I have counted 7 at once and they all bring Passengers. The Coaches come in too filled with passengers, while the boats that come down from Fort Benton come crowded with Miners and disbanded soldiers and they all stay here fill the streets, get all drunk and buy clothes to go East in, or

fit out here to go west and so a large business and a busy appearance is always going on. The People do not stay here but they come here, keep the Hotells all crowded, spend money, and travel on.

July 16, 1866

The leading Railway officials are beginning to buy lots and to build houses, which is another good sign. Heretofore they have been living at Hotells etc which always looked suspicious. One of them has bought 2 nice lots above Mr. Kellom for \$1000 and is going to put up this season a handsom house. Since I last wrote half a dozen good new houses, frames, have been commenced, and the foundations for 3 large new Brick stores have been commenced on Farnham St. of three stories each & 100 feet deep.

August 14, 1866

America is very American.

September 20, 1866

When you write to me just direct your letters to me — to nobodys care — as I am well known & the Postmaster puts them in Mr. Kellom's Box for me.

September 20, 1866

There is a large trade here with returned miners. This is the head of Navigation. Few boats go up above this point after the Spring opening. But nearly all the miners from Montana find it Cheapest & most

agreeable to come down from above Fort Benton in Barges called “Mackinaws” Flat Boats covered over & bullet proof to make them safe from Hostile Indians arrows and bullets. They come down to Omaha, 20, 40 & 60 together but few stay thro' the winter at the mines. All the successful ones return to the States for the winter nearly. When they get here the Boats are sold for Lumber — and they sell gold dust sufficient to get a complete new rig out — Boots, Coats, vests, trowsers, Holts, overcoats & Shirts &c &c Most of these men will spend \$50 to \$100 each here, & then take the Boat or stage east. They all look on Omaha as the Commencement of Civilization. The Clothing business here both retail and wholesale is Immense.

October 12, 1866

As I look over my letter I find some wonderful spelling. I wonder how I managed to spell so extraordinarily.

October 29, 1866

Last night I attended the Fireman's Ball at the Capitol. Quite a large heterogeneous affair. Principally dutch & danish and the 2nd class of well to do Americans &c Mr. Kellom had bought two tickets (\$5 each) to help them as he is a large Insurance Agent here and as he could not go he gave me them So as it cost nothing I went. I did not take a Lady as our upper Crust would not go.



“Omaha City” 1865

Their Man in Omaha

December 11, 1866

It is as good to live here as Sheffield and quite as pleasant — You are now by the Rail Rd & the Tellegraph quite in the World & get all the Papers & news of London of the 1st Decr on the second within 24 hours of it's occurrence in London. The Rail Rd is now within 20 miles of C. Bluffs. Four hours ride by coach. It is now open to that Point.

December 11, 1866

It is wonderful how such a Town could turn out so fine a sett of People, all evidently so well off & so well bred. Certainly the best of American Society. I am on good terms with the best of them and everybody was very civil.

January 21, 1867

And now I have written down my fears I feel ever so much lighter and it strikes me this is an eminently Barker like way of easing yourself at the expence of other peoples comfort.

March 4, 1867

You are a glorious old dreamer & I do not know which I like best your day or night dreams — anyway I like to hear them. Bless you I hope some of them will some day come true. You are not the only one that dreams and leads a double life in your family. It is a sad failing I fear — but I sometimes find it difficult to decide which life I really live — the dream life or the actual — & sometimes I think they get very much mixed.

March 4, 1867

It is in adversity that a good man shines. Prosperity is the severest trial that a good man can have. Nevertheless — in my case — I confess I wd still pray for a medium state — Tho' I am satisfied of the dangers of prosperity.

April 1, 1867

Mr. Kellom was much pleased with Father's Sermon — I heard an excellent one from Bishop Ames yesterday the Wesleyan Bishop of this North West. "The gospel came to you with Power & by much assurance & by the Holy Gost" — A real substantial Methodist sermon — I was delighted, tho it was just an hour long.



1868: Republican Headquarters at gaslight, far left.



The Central Block on Farnam Street

April 1, 1867

Just as I write at 4 past 11 at night of this 30th March I hear the first flock of Geese high up in the Heavens going north. It is a good sign of a Breakup — we have looked for them for weeks in hopes they wd bring Spring.

May 8, 1867

Business is very good, great numbers are going to settle in the Platte Valley & the Towns on the Rail Rd are growing - The Company have decided to put their land into the market & the road has been accepted by the Company [Government] for 300 miles from the Contractors so that Freights & fares will be more regular & lower prices charged. Soldiers come into town every week by Hundreds and are encamped in regular camps on the side Hills. They stay one or two weeks to recruit & outfitt & then start out for the Plains & others take their place. 40 millions of pounds of Government Freight will be landed this year on our wharf and be transported over the Road. We are doing the Chief part of the Government outfitting. Nebraska City & Leavenworth are both very dead.

May 8, 1867

People come out here in hopes of recruiting their affairs - but it takes both money & knowledge to start out here So they go back or down the River & those who have no means are obliged to go to the Farmers the Rail Rd or into the army who are recruiting men here - which is a benefit to us as it absorbs the dangerous elements of our Community.

May 8, 1867

I should not think of Bringing money home with me — it is not safe — What I send — if I send — will be sent as the last — through a bank. The reason I send money to you is I think it safer I fear this country will see troublesom times — a crash — every body foretells it & every-body fears it — fortunately most are trying to prepare for it.

May 25, 1867

I am quite busy writing or running round Town collecting Income Tax returns & applications for licences for every sort of Businesses, a wonderful Country the best taxed going.

Their Man in Omaha



1873: Southeast view from 20th and Dodge.

November 16, 1867 Kellom to Joseph

The North Western cars now bring passengers 'smack' up to the river nearly opposite Chicago St & the Ferry boat takes them about 30 rods across to a new sand bar, connected with our bank, to which point the U.P.R.R. have laid a track for freight purposes. The Road is doing a large business, and by 1870 will connect the Mo. River & Pacific — then the World's commerce will pass through here.

April 3, 1868 Mrs. J H Kellom to Mrs Joseph Barker

It will be twelve years next month since we first landed in Omaha. These years have wrought great changes in the place and people. They have planted some furrows on my face, & have given Mr. Kellom whitened locks, still we have been well and happy.

April 9, 1868 George to Joseph

If Omaha gets a good start again it will eventually occupy the whole Bench up to Florence.

April 10, 1868

And I confess I fear, when I think by how slender a thread our present high prices are sustained. I mean the caprice of the Railway men. For I cannot divest myself of an uneasy feeling that they may change. And till I see the piers rising out of the water, I shall not feel sure of the Bridge

April 11, 1868

There is a growing tendency in the country and in Congress to check the great power of the R. Rd companies and their exorbitant charges. The U.P.Rd. charges ten cents a pound on freight to the end of the Road (from Omaha) & Passengers \$51 to Cheyenne. Rail Roads as at present mis-man-aged here are not near the blessing they ought to be. They are despotic, exorbitant and rob right & left.

April 24, 1868

The C. B. people say they were always against the Bridge at Child's Mill — but that it was Dodge & Baldwin & Co. who insisted in trying to get

it their. They now talk of the necessity of Peace & unity between the two Cities & their Identity of Interests &c I hope they will continue in that frame of mind.

April 24, 1868 I suppose the Government will want Two or Three hundred thousand bushels of corn next July for the Soldiers in the Mountains besides Flour, Oates, Hay, Cattle, pork &c This will enliven things. The Indians are yet troublesome & the army will have to be kept there for some years longer till they are subdued or settled on Reservations.

April 24, 1868

And dear Mary Jane & George — I shall be glad to hear he is married — If a man is to be married — he ought to be married young — Don't delay it.

May 6, 1868

Will George write me a letter to the Insurance Company at Liverpool & sign my name to it. To Mr. McLaren, Royal Ins. Co., Liverpool, the Manager, giving an account of Omaha & Co. Bluffs — how they are growing & the railways centering there to join the U.P.R.Rd., and it's probable importance. You can put down C.B. as 10,000 to 15,000 people & Omaha as 15,000 to 20,000. The M. & M. Road from Des Moines is expected to be here in 12 months. The Sioux City is completed & the St. Jos. & St. Louis will be completed this fall. Then there is the Burlington which is rapidly coming along and the new Atlantic & Gt. Western & other roads all tending this way. Refer to James Collinson's introduction & that I can give references to the leading men of the state & city here. If they should decide to push their business out here & should favour me with their recommendation to their American Agents in New York as their agent here. And that I have already had some experience of insurance & am in connexion with Mr. Kellom the chief agent of the leading eastern fire insurance companies here. If I could get this agency it would be a good thing & very likely paying expenses. I ask Geo. to do this because I think he can do it better & more correctly than I.



1870: 15th and Farnam, future site of the Barker Building

Their Man in Omaha

June 6, 1868

We are having a week of very cool & damp cloudy weather, unusual for this season & country — very English. I do not think it agrees very well with the grasshoppers. They say they are migrating East — I hope so — we can spare them.

July 14, 1868

I assure you it is becoming difficult to fill even four pages like these, to say nothing of eight — And then George says I can fill another two pages if necessary without going over the weight of a sixpenny letter!

July 24, 1868

Our Wharf is really the most lively & striking feature of our Town - Mr. Kellom & I had to go down last Monday to see about a lot of Gas Piping etc. which had just been delivered - The Landing now is opposite Train's Town & the upper part of South Omaha Landing. Five Steam Boats were unloading and the Two large Ferry Boats were going Backwards & forwards Crouded with Teams & passengers as fast as they could load and unload. The Wharf on the Iowa side was covered with some hundreds of Carrs surrounded by numbers of Waggons unloading the Coal - Freight - grain - Iron etc. out of them & transferring them to this side. On our Wharf the Rail Road has several lines of rails on which were scores of Carrs & Engins & Cars passing & repassing all the time - on the Wharf were great piles - hills - of Corn & oats - Iron & railway & Government Goods & material.

July 27, 1868

Write every week, there is four of you — if you have nothing to say so you can more easily say it.



1872: Looking north from the Herman Kountze residence.

August 3, 1868

The Government Railway Commissioners & the Heads of the Millitary department are all full of the beauties of the Mountains, Their mineral & hot water springs — Grand falls — & snow capped mountain scenery &c — The Coolness & brilliancy of the weather as compared with our hot weather. They say the mountains must and will become great places of summer resort — all-ready several large Hotells at certain points are being planned & will be built — Several at beautiful points on the Road are now being built, and parties are already arranging to come out next year. They say

we may expect to see the tide of American summer pleasure seekers set this way & Omaha will always be a point at which strangers will stop and rest both before & after their 750 miles of Travil too & from the mountains.

All our strangers, writing to their newspapers, fill half their letters with an account of Omaha & generally they are very flattering — They all admire the scenery from Capitol Hill, & to me, on pleasant evenings, as the sun prepares to sett — it is a beautiful sight. We are likened to all sorts of places — from the Rhine & the Danube to Roman & Italian sunsets & views. There never was a Town so much talked of as Omaha except Chicago. This year especially have wee been written about. This spring the world has been informed that we were a gigantic mushroom & swindle — a bladder or bubble, that had at last burst for good, and was now a dessolation & grass growing in our streets, & our large Brick Blocks empty & forlorn, & none but broken spirited & Bankrupt merchants left, &c This has been reprinted in substance but in various forms in nearly every newspaper in the Union. The New York & Chicago merchants Interested have had their special agents out here, to see if this was true, & to satisfy themselves how our people stood. Fortunately they have found it all a tissue of lies framed & sent forth by our envious neighbours at C.Bluffs. After this we are pleased to see that our Editorial & other Excursionists are generally writing special letters to all the leading papers contradicting these slanders and presenting us in our true light both in the present & for the future.

August 7, 1868

You see these two new railroads, the St. Joe's & C.&N.W Roads employ large numbers of men - in the transport business & they have their Store Houses on the wharf - besides these & three ferry Boats going backwards & forwards laden to their fullest capacity - there were Six Steam Boats buisy unloading mountains of goods & material, at the same time the Passenger Transport Companies Coaches & Omnibusses were on the wharf on their way [to] the C.&N.W.R.Rd. depots on the Iowa shore - They consisted of two 4 Horse Luggage waggons filled with trunks & five four Horse Coaches & Omnibusses crouded with passengers from the west going east - these coaches cross & recross three times a day - crouded each time & sometimes & often, they require five & six vehicals.



The Herndon House, later Union Pacific Headquarters Building

Their Man in Omaha

August 7, 1868

The Grasshoppers are Passing over us & have been for four days — We are greatly alarmed — Looking up towards the Sun — you see them passing south in immense — or one continuous Cloud. Their white transparent wings with the sun shining on them is all you see — & they are at an immense height — but it is like a continuous snow storm driving before the sun. As evening closes they begin to fall & you see the air full of them — The ground in the morning swarms & they fly before you in Clouds — They attack the young Corn saw off the top & then eat out the cornell — So far they have started as soon as the morning sun had warmed the air & the N.W. wind was strong enough to carry them along — they seem to rise up till they reach one of the higher currents of air & then sail steadily South — or wherever the current goes. In some localities they have done great mischief & consumed much corn — should the wind cease they might stay in such quantities as to consume every green thing on the ground. As it is, the feeble ones, that do not seem able to go on with the bulk — are every where & doing much damage. These grasshoppers or locusts — seem likely to prejudice settlers against this Country — for the facts in the paper go over the whole country — but Iowa & Missouri and Kansas suffer just as much as we do

August 16, 1868

While talking, he [John McCormick] took out of his pocket one of Georges 2 Blade Knives — said it was a very fine one & had been highly recommended & he had bought it because it was our make & importation — as he always liked to patronise native talent. Soon after lacy showed me another he had bought & praised it.

October 20, 1868

I am very well - but I would like something good to turn up so that we could all be together in England. Some more definite life to live. Bless you all. If we could sell & Invest in England I would prefer it.

November 15, 1868

We have had a very fine & pleasant week — Today opened as last Sunday — cloudy & drizzly — This afternoon & evening we had heavy rain & now 8 P.M. It has ceased but is blowing a hurricane from the North. After supper I walked down with a lantern to the post thro' the mud & driving rain to see if your always welcome & expected letter had arrived. I was repaid by the reception of it & have been reading it and the package of newspapers in my room — when I have your letters to read I always feel cosy & comfortable — I have my stove — and a large rocking chair — a round Table with my books & paper & my lamp & feel quite near to you while I am reading your pleasant letters & thinking about you all. Some-



1868: Northwest corner of 12th and Farnam, McCormick's Grocery

times — when I have no letters from you I sometimes feel rather dull up here all alone, but not very often.

November 17, 1868

There will be a general effort to carry out our Railway Schemes — and our congressional representatives have given us to understand they favour plans but that we shall have to secure them their proper share of the gains etc.

November 20, 1868 a letter from Frances Barker

On Tuesday last our dear George was married at Crooks Church. Your dear Father and Mary Jane were present

— It was quite a nice affair, and I suppose they all looked very well. They had two Carriages and a Cab the Cab with George alone went a short time before the Carriages then they went the first with, M Jane, and Mary, and George Osborne, and your Father, then Mr. Osborne and Annie in the last.

There was another wedding at the Church, at the same time, and Annie was quite afraid of it getting mixed up, it would have been such a thing you know if she had got married to the wrong person, but all was right and they returned home, where there was provided a very nice and bountiful breakfast, consisting of boiled fowls with very good white sauce, and a (tea and coffee) I forgot, Large piece of roast beef, tongue, and a chow, potted rabbit, and beef, all very nice Chees cakes and tarts and a very nice bride— cake in the center on a glass stand. There was champagne, and other wine, to drink their health, The Cake and the Wine provided by George Osborne. Annie I suppose looked very nice, and so did George, he had on black coat and trowsers, a white waistcoat and necktie of light mauve, like the Brides dress. We sent you the colour of her dress, and she had a very pretty Tulle



12th and Douglas Streets

Their Man in Omaha

Bonnet, covered with flowers orange blossoms, and Jasmine Mary Jane and Mary, looked very nice too.

So it is all over now, and they will soon feel like old married folks, a thing only to be talked of.

November 21, 1868

God bless you all I hope you are well & happy — My best Love — I hope to see you next summer — If things are well I shall be able to get to see you. I can afford to leave — I do not know wether I shall like this Insurance Business. I am not a good one at urging people to Insure especially when they propose to do it “on my assurance it is all right” — Well I suppose dear George is married by this — I hope sincearly they will both be happier for it.

November 21, 1868

On Thursday the River was open till the afternoon & at 7 o'clock the mail was carried over the thin Ice on planks laid down for men to walk upon. It has not yet been cold enough to make firm ice — as it has not yet been as low as zero within 8° or 10°

I believe — It is bad for business. It is strong enough for men to walk over on the planks but not for teams or even the heavy Paper Mails. If it does not open or Harden, they will commence cutting away the ice to allow the Ferry Boats to ply backwards & forwards — for an immense pile of Freight has allready accumulated in Two days.

November 21, 1868

The U.P. Commenced today driving down piles with its steam pile driver to Build its temporary Bridge. If the ice lasts & winter really sets in — and it looks very much like it — we shall soon have the carrs crossing the river.

November 25, 1868

I was down to the river today, they have built a track all over the great bar, where boats floated this spring & down to where the temporary bridge is being built, and which is already half built. The cars will run over it by next week. The river is yet covered with ice, but the boats, ferry, have made an opening to run backwards & forwards, but they cannot carry teams over. The consequence is, we are in great trouble to get freight over. There are 1,000 loaded cars on the side Tracks awaiting a chance to be unladen. If the river should break up, it might wash away the bridge & then we should be in a fix as the boats could never get the old & new freight passed over.

November 30, 1868

Yesterday the wharm sun had made the river unsafe & they are buisy I suppose on the other side. I have not yet been down the mud is frightful — I enjoy and appreciate my fishing Boots — they are waterproof &

warm & I can venture any depth of mudd not over two feet deep.

December 19, 1868

My dear Annie you must give my Love to all my new relations! Your sister Mary & your Father & George your Bro — not your husband — Don't that sound queer — “My Husband and my wife.” I had to look into my Dictionary before I could make out how to spell “wife.” Funney is it not?

December 31, 1868

But then Omaha people are equal to the best American society — without any doubt & the number of people of Station here give a Tone & character not found out of the Largest cities.



1867: The Union Pacific ice bridge

“Best of Barker” Excerpts

These excerpts represent the “Best of Barker,” which have been selected from letters in the first of two volumes to be published by the Douglas County Historical Society from its Barker Collection. The letters were written in the 1860s by immigrant Joseph Barker to his family that had returned to England. He remained in Omaha to manage his family's property and business interests. The editorial team is chaired by Dr. Del Weber, with Barry Combs, Bob Marks and Don Snoddy, the latter The Harry B. Otis Chair/Librarian Archivist, Douglas County Historical Society. For information about “Their Man in Omaha,” contact the Historical Society's offices at (402) 455-9990. The first of two planned volumes of the 1000-page collection of letters covers the years until 1868, when Joseph returned home to England for a short time. Publication of The Barker Collection of Letters is made possible by members of the Charles W. Martin family, who are descended from the Barker family, and the Peter Kiewit Foundation.