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Article Summary: Wooster homesteaded in Nebraska while his wife waited in Michigan for him to build a house on his land. The letters they sent each other reveal how very difficult it was for him to find the money to establish himself.

Scroll down for complete article.

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THE LETTERS OF CHARLES AND HELEN WOOSTER: THE PROBLEMS OF SETTLEMENT

EDITED BY WILLIAM F. SCHMIDT

CHARLES Wooster, who became known as the "Sage of Silver Creek," was born in Hillsdale County, Michigan, the third child in a family of six. In 1861, Wooster, at the age of 18, enlisted in the Second Michigan Cavalry, Company G, which participated in several Civil War battles including Chicamauga, Dandridge and Nashville. Upon being discharged in 1865, he enrolled in Hillsdale College. Although he did not graduate, he taught school for a time. In 1868 he married Helen M. Hitchcock in Adams Township, Hillsdale County, Michigan. A few years later he came to Nebraska and filed a homestead. Unfortunately, his first wife died in 1877, leaving him with two children. In 1881 he married Miss Lillie M. Todd at Plainwell, Mich-

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igan. There were five children from this union. Wooster died in 1923.¹

If political participation offers any validity to Turner's thesis on the frontier and democracy, Wooster's life needs to be studied. Soon after he came to Nebraska, he held the post of Justice of the Peace and took part in political rallies. Active in politics throughout most of his life, he was editor of the *Silver Creek Times* from 1891 to 1897, was considered as a candidate for Congress, and was a participant in the Congressional convention in 1896 which nominated Judge Samuel Maxwell. He obtained a seat in the lower house of the state legislature as a free silver Republican on the fusion ticket in 1896. The *Legislative Year Book for 1897* portrayed him as a journalist who "has fearlessly attacked and exposed frauds, shams, and questionable schemes, whether connected with or emanating from the pulpit, church boards, or political rings or cliques."²

These letters deal with Wooster's experience during the year 1872 when he settled in Nebraska. With the exception of the few words that were added for clarity, the letters appear as written. The originals are a part of the Charles Wooster Collection in the possession of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Chicago, March 12, 1872
9 p.m.

My Little Wife

I have been here about 24 hours, as you see by the date of this. I found that I could gain no time by starting towards Minnesota before 5 this afternoon. I have been running about town most of the (day) and have learned noth-

¹ Jonathan Robertson, comp., *Michigan in the War* (Lansing, 1880), p. 459 ff.; Grand Army of the Republic Collection (MSS in the Nebraska State Historical Society Archives), Roster of Soldiers, Department of Nebraska, Volume 3, p. 142; A. G. Wolfenbarger, ed., *Nebraska Legislative Year Book for 1897* (Lincoln, Nebraska), pp. 182-183; U. S. General Land Office Records (MSS in the Nebraska State Historical Society Archives) Volume 114, p. 140. The legal description of the land was the SE $\frac{1}{4}$, Section 6, Township 15N, Range 3W, 160 acres; *Central City Republican*, January 4, 1923.

² A. G. Wolfenbarger, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 182-183.

ing worth mentioning. I went to the Office of the Prairie Farmer this forenoon. Saw a man there from Minnesota who had been there twenty years and after talking with him and some others and thinking the matter all over again concluded that I would not go to Minnesota at all. This evening I accidentally met a young man who has just returned from southwestern Kansas. He says everything is awful high there and gives a discouraging account generally. Having concluded not to go to Minnesota I have made up my mind to go to Nebraska and shall look for a place with a house and some improvements. I have half a mind to say I will not write again until I find a permanent stopping place, but still I may. I shall leave here within an hour and shall reach Omaha about 10 tomorrow p.m. . .

Bye Bye

I think of you all the time and hope to see you soon

Charley

Council Bluffs
March 14, 1872

My little wife

I arrived at this place last night at about 10, and shall cross the river this morning at about 9. I slept most of the night on the train from Chicago . . .

I have begun this letter so that I may add a little from time to time . . .

Silver Creek, Nebraska
14 6 p.m.

This is a station city or village consisting of the depot, a grocery hotel, and one dwelling house . . .

It [the country] is as much different from anything that you ever saw in Michigan as can possibly be imagined. What I shall do here I can not possibly say. I do not intend to be in a hurry. I shall probably remain here . . . some time and then perhaps [go] to Grand Island . . . You must make up your mind not to get homesick when you come, find what you may. If we find any peace or happiness on this earth, I suppose at least 99 per cent of it will be within our own home . . .

(Unsigned)

Silver Glen,³ Merrick Co., Nebr.
March 27, 1872

My Little Wife

In my letter of last Monday I told you I would send you another Tuesday or Wednesday. Well I did not because I have been at work since then renovating my "dobe" and running about. As might be expected I have felt quite tired and not so much like writing. Last night I slept in said dobe, or rather stayed and did most of my sleeping this morning after sunrise. If I only had my house built and you were here I should be glad and we should no doubt enjoy ourselves very much. I like this country very much and I think you will too. I am told that the long drizzly rains of March are unknown here, that when it rains it rains beautifully and is usually followed by a clear sky...

I said I would tell you all about the Indians in this letter, but I am afraid it will not be a very interesting story, for I took a slight cold last night and feel very dull. Although there are Indians to be seen here, almost every day, they are very peaceable and are much more afraid of the whites than the whites are of them. In fact the white people do not fear them at all and I have yet to learn of a woman or child who stands in the slightest dread of them. Mrs. Alpaw [sic]⁴ said that she always had a great terror of them but when she came here and found that no one else cared for them she soon lost all fear herself. Both she and Mrs. Lee say that they will decamp very suddenly even for a woman if she will take a stike [sic] in her hand as if to drive them away and tell them "Wiscut" or "Wiscut to the Pawnee house," meaning go away to the Pawnee village, which is on the reservation. . . I learn that it is some 15 or 16 years since the Indians became peaceable and that they have done very little in a warlike way during that time. They have a great many ponies and wander about the country trading in a small way with the whites and begging, for they are great beggars. A few days ago there were 15 or 16 of them camped about a mile from here on the Platte. I walked down that way one day with two other

³ Silver Glen was a postoffice established in 1865 at the ranch of H. N. Lathrop. When the village of Silver Creek was established about two miles west from Silver Glen, the post office was moved to that site. A. T. Andreas, *History of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), pp.1111 and 1119.

⁴ Mrs. Alpaugh probably was the wife of John A. Alpaugh, a settler from New York state, who in 1880 was listed in the U. S. Census as a farmer in Silver Creek precinct, Merrick County with his wife Mooney and son John. U. S. Census 1880 (MSS, microfilm).

men and as we came to their tents one Indian stepped [up and] offered his hand in token of friendship and then wanted each of us to give him "ten cent." As we did not at once comply he seemed a little out of humor, which evidently increased as he saw us turning to leave without making him a present of any "Pawpeeches"—the Pawnee term for money. As we were about to go, two squaws approached, one carrying a papoose on her back and the other followed by a bright-eyed little girl of about eight years. Feeling somewhat indebted to them for what I had seen I handed the Indian a five cent piece where at the one squaw put down the little black imp from her shoulders and he instantly went like an arrow for one of the others; the little girl also came for her present and so we left them with many smiles, except the old Indian who looked very sullen because he only got five cents instead of the ten cents for which he asked.

When they wish to enter a house they will come and look in at the windows until someone notices them and then if the door is opened they will step right in without further invitation. They most always ask for something to eat, but if one doesn't wish to be troubled with them it is only necessary to refuse and send them on their way.

There is no danger here of raids from wild Indians for the country is settled many miles beyond and the wild Indians are far away... So don't give yourself any concern about Indians. You will stand in no more danger of them than in Michigan and when you have been here a little while you will not be a bit afraid of them...

Charley

Silver Glen, Merrick Co., Nebr.
March 31, 1872

Little Wife

... This suspense is rather trying, but still I think things will come out all right in the end. I don't refer to my claim in this for there I apprehend no trouble, still there is always a *chance* for trouble if one does not go upon his land and stay there. I am well pleased with my land and believe there is no better in the country. If I have average luck I know that I shall make a nicer home of it than any other one in the country. Most people you know don't have much of an idea of beautifying their homes. They only look out for the "almighty dollar." I believe that

while I am making the dollars I can just as well make a great many other things to add to our enjoyment that are usually lost sight of and that too without any additional expense, in fact I believe that in the end there would be the most money in this very course. . .

Bye bye

Charlie

Silver Glen, Merrick Co., Nebr.
Apr. 24, 1872

My Dear Little Wife

. . . Yesterday I went up to my place and took another look at it. I shall have the ground plowed this week and shall go right to planting potatoes and such other things as will answer. I have bought 3 lbs. of Osage seed⁵ which I am going to plant for hedges next spring. I shall plow hedge rows all over the farm this spring, and next I shall put out at least about two miles.

I like this country here as well as any I have seen anywhere. . .

The little trinket I inclose is a Pawnee ear ring. One will sometimes wear twenty in each ear. They slit their ears about the edge sometimes making one perhaps an inch in length. They use these things as money, one of them passing for five cents, though of course they use our money. . .

Yours,

Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.
July 21, 1872

My dear little Wife,

This morning I arose quite early, put my house in order, breakfasted upon a couple of cold pancakes. . .

I hope you will follow your own advice to me and not allow yourself to feel discouraged. . . We cannot tell what may be in store for us. Let us do the best we can and not attempt to war against fate. I have some of the best land

⁵ Osage orange hedges were used for fencing before the advent of barbed wire.

there is in Nebraska and it is admitted to [by] all who know it. *I will keep it*, and sooner or later we shall surely embrace each other in our "little home."...

I do not want to put you in a sod house. It would be too bad for such a nice little wife.

I do not fear the Indians, and if it were not for you I would not care how quick they came.

Bye bye love

Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.

July 28, 1872

My dear little Wife

I do not know what to say to you. You inform me that you are coming this fall. I certainly hope you will do so for it is very unpleasant for me to live alone and do my own house work, no less so perhaps than for you to be without any fixed place in Michigan. But these are only a part of the reasons why we wish to be together. It seems to me however that it would not be very wise for us to undertake to go to keeping house when we have no money even to pay your fare here saying nothing about freight, the cost of enough furniture to enable us to live at all which would be 50\$ at least, the incidental expense of living and things which it would be necessary to have to supply our table which the farm will not afford. Fuel would necessarily cost something. How could we live without a cow? A good one would cost 50\$—a second rate one might be had for 40\$. In the spring if I did not have a team and some farming utensils a little money would be almost a necessity. How should we get the seeds that I had intended to, for hedge plants, fruits and forest trees? True my corn crop ought to be worth 200\$, but whether I could realize anything on it would be a very doubtful question. . . . You can estimate our resources and the necessary expenses of settling up here as well as I can.

If I said I could live cheap here alone, it has been proved that I was correct for since the 26 day of April, living, fuel, cooking utensils and all probably has not cost me 10\$. I have had no butter for two months and I do not use more than a pound of pork in a week. Of course it would be expected that I should supply you in Michigan as well as myself here. Both together would be more than

keeping house here. . . . As I said, I have some good land and I intend to keep it. The more I see of some other places the more I think of my own. I can prove up on it next spring and then I could raise money on it if I wish to, though I do not wish to if possible to avoid it. As heretofore I shall *try* to get along as well as possible but, if in so doing my feet should slip from under me and I should slide into hell, I should endeavor to endure the fry with all fortitude. . . .

I know very well that your father preffers Greeley to Grant. Then why not vote for him? . . . He ought to oppose Grant, in my mind, notwithstanding all the little one horse political intriguers in Hillsdale or any where else. Greeley has the ability and the honesty properly to administer the government. Grant has neither. Greeley would consider the interests of the nation. Grant considers the interests of himself, his family and those who have rendered him personal service. . . .

Bye bye

Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.
July 31, 1872

My dear little Wife

. . . I think that I shall be able to build this fall and have you come.

. . . I do not really like the idea of your working but it will perhaps not hurt you. Do as you please. I love you more for all your ambition to help in establishing ouselves in our little home. Dollars are very hard to get here and will be. . .

. . . I hope you will soon be here —

Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.
August 28, 1872

My dear little Wife

. . . I think I shall get a yoke of oxen and a second-hand wagon. I think of going down about Columbus to look for them. I can not go till I do four or five days more in haying. I do not want to pay over 150\$ for them both.

It will be better for me to get them at first if I get them at all as I shall need several days team work preparatory to building. The material for the house will cost altogether 150\$, and I am in hopes that I shall be able to do so much of the work myself that it will not be necessary to pay out much for work.

I have bought the heifer I spoke of in my last [letter] and shall pay for her—40\$—in a day or two... I would not have bought the heifer now, but I was afraid some one else would get her. She is the only one I have seen that pleased me and is, I think, the best one I have seen or heard of.

Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.
Sept 7, 1872

My dear little Wife

... It commenced raining this morning about 7 o'clock and has continued until now—3 or 4 p.m. I have been at home all day, if it may be called home, looking over old Tribunes, mending my whip... and eating pudding and milk. I have a sort of headache and feel rather dull. There was to be a Greeley meeting at the Station tonight and I was expected to speak. It will probably not come off on account of the rain. I decided to vote for him upon principle, because I thought him infinitely preferable to Grant with his army of lackeys, and I will vote for him though hell should gape—a thing which it will not be likely to do unless it be to swallow up some of his vile caluminators. When a boy I sometimes stood almost aghast at what I considered the rascally lies of Democrats, but if any party of men ever told blacker lies than Republicans are now doing, God pity them...

Sunday night I brought my oxen home and Monday morning I went to plowing for Mr. Grange. By doing so I shall get some pigs and other things which I shall need and might not have the money to pay for.

Charley

P. S. ... Do not ship anything by itself that weighs less than 100 lbs., as the freight will be higher.

Adams, Mich.
Sept. 29, 1872

My dear Charley,

I rec'd yours of the 22 and sent a short note to you in reply, so as to have it be sure and reach you before it was too late to have the bedroom come in front instead of the buttery. And I wouldn't have you fail to do this for a large sum of money; the flowers etc., will be in the front yard no doubt, and I want my bedroom to be in the pleasantest place possible, and for a thousand reasons, figuratively speaking. I want the bedroom in front, and you will no doubt have it built there; and then another thing *please* don't fail to have a back-door and if it is going to cost so much that you will not have money for a door I will stay in Mich. enough longer to earn money for a door; oh! I do want a back door so much! . . . You will never be sorry to have a back door and to have the bedroom in front. I shouldn't want to let hired men go into any buttery to wash in the sink (you may though, bless you!) and I don't want the washdish to be in the frontyard, and I expect to have a little standard or something of the kind fixed on purpose for the washdish to stand on while one is washing and then it can be hung on the side of it. . . .

[Nellie]

Silver Glen, Nebr.
October 2, 1872

My dear Nellie:

About packing the things you must use your own judgement, or, what would perhaps be better, ask information of those who have had experience in such matters. You need give yourself no trouble about marking the things. When they are taken to the freight office, simply tell them where they are to be sent and they will attend to the marking. . . .

If you should get a new [barrel] and pack the jugs in it, it might be well to jam in all the dried apples with them you could. It there was any more than we wanted they could be sold. . . I mention this because the jugs might get broke if *something* was not packed with them and whatever that might be should be valuable. . .

I am very sorry that I cannot follow your suggestions in regard to the house, but I cannot possibly. Don't "fly

off the handle" now but reserve judgement until you come. Things will look very different from what you expect, and I am fully persuaded that you will like my arrangement better than your own. We will have things nicer than anyone else. Now you see. Your flowers will be in front of your bedroom and it will not look out on back yards. If you were on the ground today you could not for your life tell which was the *front*. There are two sides either of which might be considered as such. I cannot possibly give you anything like a true idea of these things.

I intend to plaster if cold weather does not overtake me and it shall not if hard work will prevent it. I shall leave the pantry till you come, and then you can have it finished to suit yourself.

Bye bye

Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.

Oct. 13, 1872

Little Wife,

I suppose you think I might have written last Sunday even if I did write three days before, and so I might, but it is not very comfortable in my house lately and I stay there as little as possible. Much of the time lately it has been too cold to write without a fire, and you know I have no stove. But to be candid about the matter I worked most of the day on the cellar wall.

What is the trouble? You must not "go back on me" because I wrote you such a naughty letter about the house. . .

When I get rich I will build you a palace and you may have all the nice things. Don't feel bad because you couldn't sell your silk dress for the doors and windows. You can sell it now if you want to. There are a great many nice things we shall need and shall not have money to get.

I seem to get along very slowly, but I mean to have the house done and plastered before you come if possible. Mr. Alpaugh's folks lived in theirs last winter without plastering and many others have done the same thing. [We] can do so if you like. I would probably save about two weeks time. I wished to plaster it if possible because it would be so much more pleasant and would save tearing things up next spring. I intend to put thick oiled paper under the siding and shingles, all over, so you see it would

be quite close. If you wish me to get ready for you to come without plastering, I will do so. In that case, with good luck, I think you might come the first week in November.

... I am inclined to think you had better come and let the plastering go. It may be pleasant weather till mid winter and it may come very cold soon. It is very uncomfortable for me when it is cold and I know you wish to come as soon as possible. I had intended every since I thought of building a house to have it all done plastered and whitewashed, carpet down, bed made... but it is getting so late perhaps you had better come. I shall have wood to burn. I think some of going after a load tomorrow as I can not do much about the house till some more lumber comes. We shall no doubt be quite comfortable and after our eyes get accustomed to the lath we shall feel very well. I should of course expect to plaster early in the spring. Tell me what you think.

I have no more time but make up your mind to start, say two weeks from next Wednesday.

Little lover

Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.
Oct. 23, '72

Little wife:

I will write a few words today noon so that Mr. Alpaugh can mail the letter tonight. He is at work down at the house now. We shall about get the frame up today. Weather continues fine and I am in hopes he will be able to stay till the house is enclosed. I am getting very much "demoralized" and shall probably go to the devil if you don't come pretty soon. My clothes are all in pieces and many of them are so dirty that I should be ashamed to take them away to be washed.

It will probably not be best for you to start untill the things come, but be ready so that you can start any day. I think I will write a letter telling you to come and leave it with the Agent to be mailed immediately on the arrival of the things. If you get such a letter you will *know what it means*.

It may be of interest to you to know that the people here have seen fit to elect me Justice of Peace. I qualified last night.

Bye bye Little Baby
Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.
Nov. 4, 1872

Little Wife

We did not do a thing on the house last week but commenced again today. I hope to get it enclosed this week and then we *can* live in it. I would do most anything to have you here.

I could not have a stove in my sod house, because it is covered with hay. I can make my self tolerably comfortable nights and daytimes. I hope to work hard enough to keep warm....

Bye bye
Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.
Nov. 14, 1872

Little Wife,

Winter has come. I worked for Mr. Alpaugh Monday and Tuesday to help him build a sod wall about his stable which was necessary to be done before it froze. Tuesday evening on my way home it rained slightly and the wind blew quite strong directly from the south. While stopping at Mr. Lee's for a moment the wind changed and blew from the north. During the night it became cold and the ground froze about 2 in. deep, and continued freezing all day yesterday. Last night I came down to Mr. Alpaugh's to bring some eggs to put in their cellar. The wind blew fiercely all day yesterday and continues this morning with a little snow. As soon as it moderates so Mr. Alpaugh can work he will finish enclosing the house, and then if we had money you might come.

...Your railroad fare will be about 30\$ so you can judge what you will need....

Bye bye
Charley

At the Station
[No date]

I am just up from Mr. Alpaugh's. The wind blows worse than ever and enough snow is flying to make things look rough.

I shall go up presently [to] fix the dobe so that I can put the oxen and heifer inside and give them a good feed and then go back to Mr. Alpaugh's and stay till the storm is over. Of course I should see to feeding the things.

So now don't worry. I shall be all right.

When you are on the cars be careful and not sit near the window in a draft of air, so as to take more cold. Wrap up your feet very warm.

I forgot to tell you in my last [letter], that I married a couple last Sunday. I think I could "marry Charley and Nellie" I could try it at least.

Blow! Blow! Blow! This must be a Nebraska day.

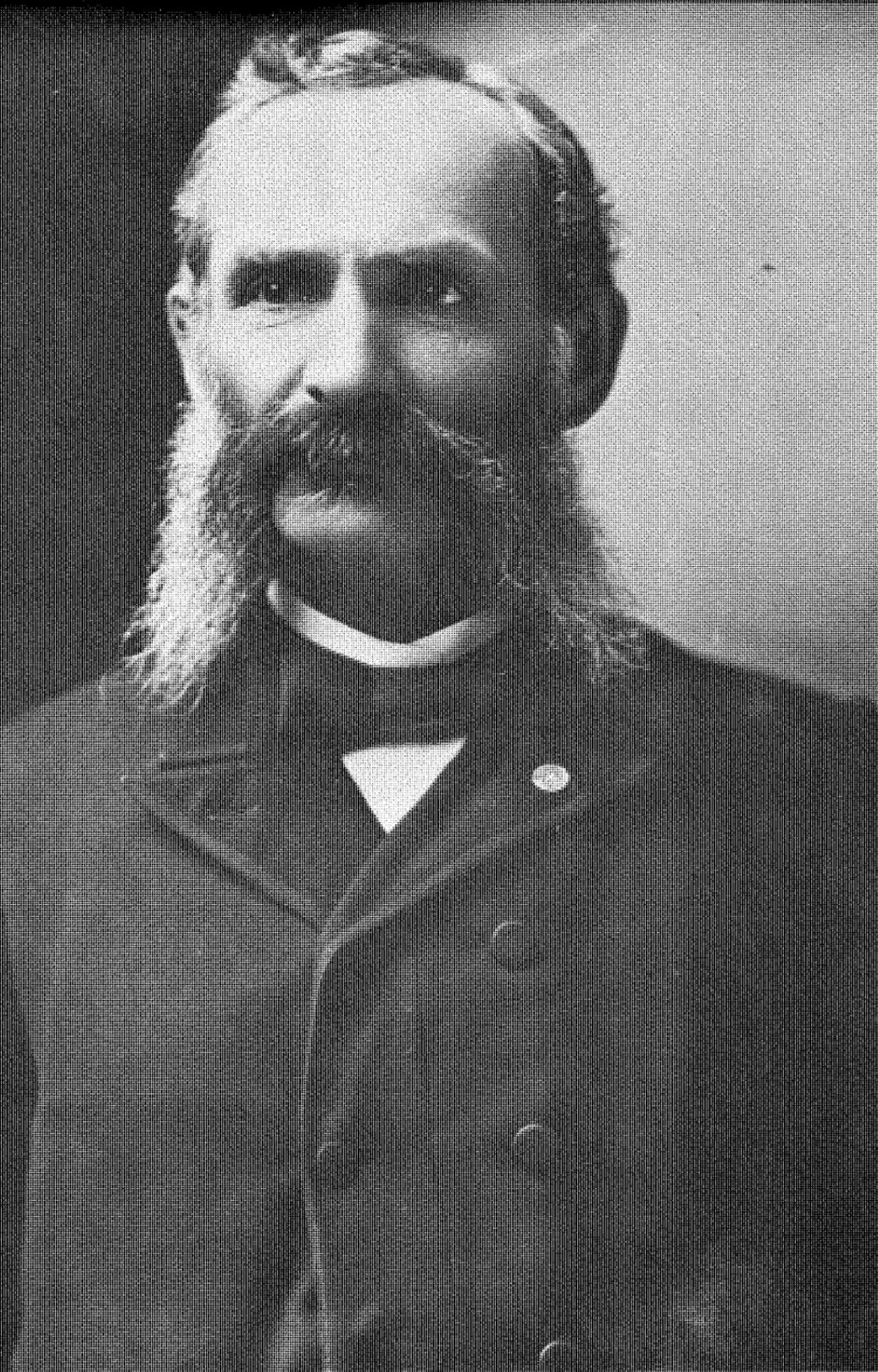
Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.
Nov. 24, 1872

Little Wife,

Thursday I went to the station partly in hopes of meeting you. I did not know but you would come notwithstanding my letter. Friday night I went again and instead of yourself I found a letter from you. I am sorry you were feeling out of gear. I am sure I have tried to do the best I could. I wanted you here, but what could I do? My means were insufficient, and whenever I did get money it was not enough to meet demands. My expenses have been greater than I anticipated and now I find myself with a house but not a dollar to furnish it. A few days ago I had 60\$ with which I intended to get furniture, but unexpectedly I was obliged to get about 20\$ worth of stuff for the house when I supposed I had enough. The charges on the goods were upwards of 18\$ and yesterday I went to Columbus... and spent 27\$ or thereabouts for a pump, inside doors, door hangings, etc.

... You see then that we have no money and no prospect of getting any for an indefinite length of time unless it can be borrowed. It seems as though some of your brothers or all of them might have money the[y] should be glad to lend... and wait till we could pay. If not we



Charles Wooster as a representative in the state legislature, 1897



Silver Creek, Merrick County, Nebraska

must work in some other direction. As I told you . . . I can prove up on my place and give that as security if it's considered necessary, and that would be worth many times all we shall need to borrow.

. . . It is perhaps useless for me to say more. I am sorry for you, sorry for myself and sorry for the devil. . .

. . . Come now if you can. Let us enjoy again each other's love. The future must provide for itself.

Charley

Silver Glen, Neb.
Dec. 3, 1872

Little Wife

. . . The floor is nearly laid now and two or three days work ought to be sufficient, especially if the pantry is not finished before you come, and it probably will not be as I wish you to have it done after your own heart. If I had money, I could be ready for you in three days and so I can in two or three days at any time after getting money. . . .

I have not opened the melodeon, barrel, chest or box of clothes. In the large box I found one of the large jars of quinces was broken probably from the hilt of the sabre pressing upon the top of it. . . .

Your little chickens are no more for this world, some skunks dug in while I was away and eat them all, their mother, two or three other hens and two or three other chickens. I caught one of the skunks in a trap and am trying to catch another. . . .

What fine times we shall have when you come.

Bye bye

Charley

Hillsdale, Mich.
Dec. 9, 1872

My dear Boy

I'm now soon coming to you and am not going to be fooled out of it much longer, for although I have had a pretty hard time to find money, I have succeeded *at last* just as I gave up all hope and had gone to bed with a nervous sick headache. You must be pleased and not frown

at me for taking the money in the way I have for it is all the way I can get any at present.

[My father] signed a note with me to get the money from Lawt Thompson. I should not have known that Lawt had any but Cousin Mart unbeknown to me asked him if he had some and would let you have it with pa for a signer and he said he would. So this morning pa came up to Lawts with me, and Lawt drew the note and I signed Chas. Wooster to it and pa signed H. P. Hitchcock... He had only 70\$ to let so I took that for six months at 10 per ct. and now you will be pleased than other wise won't you? and don't for Gods sake send it back....

I am going to start a week from tomorrow (Tuesday) so prepare for my coming and don't you write and say that the floor is not quite laid yet, for if it isn't I can soon hammer it down...

Write to me as soon as you get this for I want one more letter from you before I go so I can carry it in the cars for company...

Bye bye, for now I'm surely coming even if you write me the house is burned to ashes. Bye.

Nellie

Silver Glen, Nebraska
Dec. 13, 1872

My Little Wife,

Yours of the 9[th] was rec'd today.

I am very glad that you are coming at last, and am not at all displeased with your manner of raising the money. Your father was very kind....

It will probably take Mr. Alpaugh most of next week to finish the house; I shall probably go to Columbus Monday and get things as to make ready for you. Things will not be in very good condition to receive you, but we will try and make ourselves comfortable.

On the road, whatever information you may need you can get of the conductors. Ask them any questions. At Chicago go get your ticket for Omaha. You perhaps might get one to Columbus, but do not do so, as your baggage would stop there and occasion some trouble. At Omaha there is an old grayheaded man who acts as policeman about the station. It would be best for you to let him have your check and he would claim your baggage for you. There is usually a great crowd of men and you could not well

attend to it. Have him show you the car and take a seat as soon as convenient as they are often crowded. If you let him take your check, take the number of it with your pencil before doing so. It is his business to attend to the wants of passengers. I spoke to him about you and he said that if you would speak to him he would see that every thing was all right. I will of course meet you at Silver Creek.

... Charley's little love is coming to stay with him and then all her troubles will be at an end.

Charley