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Article Summary: Sixteen-year-old Frisby Rasp, from rural Gresham, Nebraska, arrived in Omaha in 1888 to attend the Omaha Business College. His letters of 1888 reflect not only his adjustment to "city" life but also the conditions of Omaha after a period of rapid growth but before it became a major industrial center.

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# “SO DIFFERENT FROM COUNTRY LIFE”: THE 1888 OMAHA LETTERS OF FRISBY L. RASP

*Edited by Sherrill F. Daniels*

When Frisby Rasp took the train May 5, 1888, from Gresham, Nebraska, to Omaha, he was just past sixteen. His parents, John W. and Lavina Rasp, had come to Hackberry Township of Polk County early in the spring of 1871. Frisby Rasp was born on the family farm February 2, 1872, the eldest of six children. He had grown up in an atmosphere of thrift, hard work, and close family ties. His parents, in addition to working their farm and four-acre apple orchard, had helped to found the Wayland, Nebraska, Christian Church, a congregation in which washing of feet was a ceremony. The Rasps' hard work over nearly twenty years had paid off for them and for their children. When Frisby boarded the train, he was going to Omaha to attend the Omaha Business College.<sup>1</sup>

In Omaha Frisby Rasp would be exposed to a wide range of new experiences. Higher education for rural youth of the day was by no means common enough that word-of-mouth could have prepared him for it, or that others from “back home” would be going to college too. The University of Nebraska for the school year 1888-89, for example, would have only 345 students enrolled.<sup>2</sup> Living independently from

his family, Frisby would be responsible for his own finances and room and board, and would experience the homesickness felt by most young people when they first leave home. The move from a rural setting to an urban one brought its own changes: noise, crowds, and contact with a wide variety of people. The experience would not be all negative. There would be the thrill of Omaha's Memorial Day parade and concerts of music that was such an important part of his life.

The Omaha to which Frisby Rasp was going was nearing the end of a decade of rapid change. In 1880 the federal census listed the population as 30,518. The Omaha city directory for 1888 estimated the population at 125,000.<sup>3</sup> And by 1890 the federal census counted 140,452 for the city. Even allowing for alleged inflated figures for the latter census, Omaha's growth had been dramatic. Services, such as paving, sewers, and water, had not kept pace as the city grew in less than forty years from a few houses on the rolling hills along the Missouri River to become Nebraska's most populous community.

Others had complained about Omaha's living conditions before Frisby Rasp. According to historian Alfred Sorenson, “In 1871 . . . the streets were unpaved and alternately muddy or dusty, and the sidewalks were nearly all constructed of planks.”<sup>4</sup>

A reminiscence of Omaha written in 1903 recalled similar conditions:

Those who see Omaha's Avenues of the present day can appreciate them the more by the comparison with the muddy unpaved streets of [1881]. It was said, in the early days, that two or three of the business streets were paved, but if so, it was known only to the oldest inhabitant, for so much mud was tracked in from the side streets as to make the paving utterly invisible.<sup>5</sup>

Omaha's reservoir and water system dated from the late 1870s. The City Waterworks Company, a private firm, by 1888 still was unable to provide adequate service. The city of Omaha did not take over the system until 1912.<sup>6</sup>

Sanitation had improved somewhat from the dismal conditions of earlier years, when the carcass of a 300-pound hog could lie on a downtown street corner for three days before the board of health ordered the city marshal to remove it.<sup>7</sup> The problems of garbage disposal, sewage, and wandering livestock were lessening but still not solved when Frisby Rasp came to town in 1888. The Omaha city directory for 1888 was a little defensive about such matters claiming, “The system of water works is lacking in nothing . . . and the sanitation precautions for the health of the city leave nothing undesired.”<sup>8</sup>

Although not yet a major industrial center, Omaha had the stockyards, the Union Pacific's machine and car shops, the Omaha and Grant Smelting and Refining Works, and the Carter White Lead Company. A wholesale market district had sprung up near the Mis-

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souri River, and the red light district flourished near Ninth and Douglas streets, an area of Omaha with several hotels.<sup>9</sup> It is hard to imagine a greater contrast to the rural background of a naive farm boy than Omaha offered in 1888.

Despite the doubts and homesickness expressed in his letters, Frisby Rasp graduated from Omaha Business College and worked as a bookkeeper in Omaha for two years. His daughter, Naomi Rasp Fredrickson, remembers his story of buying a bicycle in Omaha and riding it to Gresham, a distance of about ninety miles. After the death of his wife, Rose Kingsolver Rasp, Frisby entered Bryant Normal and Business University in Stromsburg, Nebraska, in the fall of 1894 as both student and instructor. In 1897 he enrolled in York College. The following spring he was ordained at Wayland, Nebraska, as a minister of the Christian Church; later he served a pastorate at Rockport, Missouri. Rasp married Mattie Jones in 1900, and the couple moved to a farm

near Gresham where their seven children were born. Frisby Rasp died there March 18, 1948.

The letters Frisby Rasp wrote to his family between his arrival in Omaha and his first return home June 20, 1888, express feelings no less poignant for being a century old. In the letters many will see reflections of their own experiences living away from home for the first time. The letters appear here with repetitious or purely family-related material deleted. Rasp had a habit of beginning a letter and adding to it until the pages were full; some letters span several days. In a few letters he included "pieces" directed to specific family members. While punctuation has been changed to current usage, the original spelling is retained.

#### THE LETTERS

Omaha, Neb. May 6, 1888 [Sunday]  
Dear Father and Mother and all the rest of you

This morning finds me well and in

good spirits. I got in town at 3:55 and went direct to the College<sup>10</sup> and settled my business there, and one of the teachers went with me and got my boarding place.<sup>11</sup> I have to pay \$3.00 a week . . . .

I got my first meal this morning — plenty of good coffee and sugar, oatmeal, bread and butter, and a fried egg, and a piece of cake so — 1"x2" — without sugar . . . .

If you didn't loose more sleep last night than I did you didn't loose much. The people where I stayed last night didn't get up until about two hours after I did, and the sun was an hour high when I got up.

If I hadn't got a place to sleep the manager of the College was a going to take me home with him. I had to pay \$40 dollars for my tuition . . . .

I had a nice time coming down to Omaha. Never got out of my seat from the time I left Gresham until I arrived at Omaha. I went through 13 stations as follows: Gresham, Surprise, Millerton, David [City], Linwood, Octavia, Fre-

Frisby L. Rasp's Omaha. (NSHS-054-28)



mont, Arlington, Bennington, Washington, Irvington, Debolt-Place, and Omaha Heights. I didn't see very much of the Platte when we crossed it, but we ran along side of it for 3 or 4 miles, sometimes within a few rods of it. We went through about 300 cuts, some of them as deep as our windmill. Most of them were straight-walled cuts . . . . When we went through Surprise they washed the windows as we went past the tank. Golly, but some of the passengers jumped . . . .

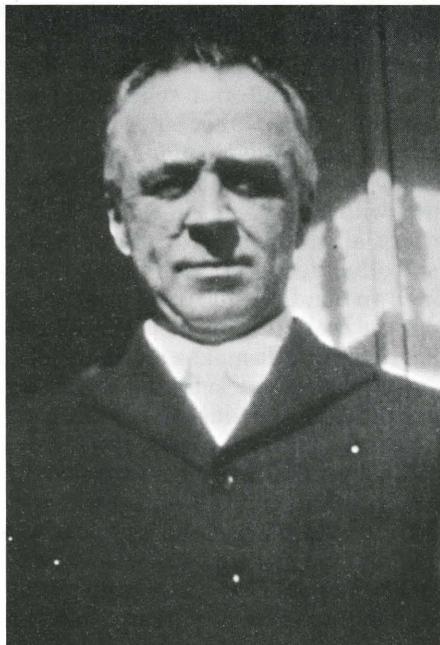
I guess there ain't any end to Omaha, at least I can't find any. You can walk till you are tired out any direction you choose, and the houses are as thick as ever . . . . The post office is a large three story stone [building].<sup>12</sup> It covers half a block. They receive over a carload of mail every day. Every thing here is coal smoke and dirt and people. When you answer this tell me all the news . . . .

Monday Evening, May 6 [7], 1888

Dear Father and Mother and all the rest of you that care to hear from me.

I am writing to you just because there is so much to write. . . . There is a business directory at the College and every person living in Omaha or vicinity has his name recorded there. . . . I am staying with Mrs. Woodbridge. I have slept on her lounge so far. They have a piano, and last night I was feeling pretty lonely, and I played about 2 hours, and it did me lots of good. Now don't snicker. Today noon was the first I felt hungry since I came, and I was hungry as a bear. Anybody would get an appetite writing all day as I did. I haven't got any letters yet — ain't looked for any, in fact — but maybe I'll get a letter when I go to mail this.

If you come to see me at any time you must be sure and come in so as to be here over, for where I board Sunday is the fancy dinner day. Oranges, all you want to eat, 3 kinds of pie, 5 of meat, lettuce, onions, beans, string, peas, peaches and cake, slaw and lots of things, but just on Sunday, recolect. . . . One good thing and that is plenty of good Coffee, Tea, water, milk.



*Frisby L. Rasp. Courtesy of Naomi Rasp Fredrickson.*

They are making a paved street right in front of the college. The[y] have a great steam roller to roll it smoothe. The Lord must be serving you well if it rain[s] out there as much as it does here. . . .

I am so busy with my studies I have to get my lesson in law in the evening. I am a going to try a week's rooming with 3 other boys. I am not acquainted with them yet. There is two beds in a room and it's the best I can do.

I may get a room by myself if Mrs. Woodbridge discharges her girl. She promised me the first chance and only 1.00 a week and [I] have to let her husband's brother sleep there once in a while when he can't get home.

I am hardly straightened out in the points of the compass yet. I know the directions, but they don't seem right. I want to call west south. I am tired of such dreary weather. Mrs. Woodbridge is just learning to play and is practicing, and Miss Davis, too, and you can't hear yourself think . . . .

I am a going to wait until I get a letter before I write again . . . .

Omaha, Neb. May 9, 1888 [Wednesday]  
Dear Father and Mother,

I seat myself this evening to write to you just to pass a way time and fill up with news to make my letters worth 2 cents to you. I could write a quire of foolscap and still have more to say than ever . . . . I can go to the N. W. depot just as good as anybody. I walked down after supper this evening just to see where it was. The trains come in from the north direct. If you think of making me a visit be sure and write to me in plenty of time and I can meet you at the depot. It is only a short walk from there to where I board. Just 3 blocks and about five from the boarding place to the College, a half mile in all. There is a steam coffee roaster on the ground floor of the college building and when it goes you can't hear yourself think. It roasts in a great iron cylinder which is revolved by steam and has fire all around it.

I am getting so I hate to hear an engine. There must be at least 50 at work beside[s] the factories, and they never stop, night or day. It is puff-puff-puff-puff-toot-toot-toot-braw-braw, puff-puff-puff-puff-puff.

I haven't heard from you yet; you must be dead. I ain't a going to mail this until I do hear. I have wrote 2 letters beside[s] this one. Let me know if you got them . . . . The time I have been here seems like a month at least and today was the first time I saw the sun . . . .

[To sister Emma] I have my Daybook and journal finished for 3 months, and am working at posting my ledger. I think I will like bookkeeping when I understand it better.

If you were in the city you would open your eyes. The street cars run along on the track with out a horse or engine. There is a chain under the ground to run them. Every other store is a saloon, but I never even looked in one . . . .

Friday evening [May 11, 1888]

I got both your letters this morning. I thought there must be an earthquake sure. I had my books home last night, and this morning I never got up till

nearly eight. I sleep terrible sound. I went and got my breakfast and took my books to the College and then ran down to the Post office and got the letters. The post office is not open until 8 o'clock. I finished my books this evening for 3 months. I wouldn't live in the City always for anything. Get an education there and a good start in life and then let me have a farm. If I had to live in the City always the very thought would kill me . . . I will send you a list of prices for washing. I will wear my socks until they are holly and then away with them. I got a lot of paper Collars for 10 cents. You mention Bitters to give me an appetite. Lord, I can hardly wait from one meal to another now. My clothes are just as good as anybody's, and my hat too . . .

I ain't homesick a bit, or at least not that I know of. I havn't been any where yet except one evening to the young man's christian association and they didn't have the debate I went for.<sup>13</sup> But they had 2 organs and a piano, so I didn't care. I played every thing I could think of. 2 young men sung. They said they didn't have any one to play for them very often.

Here are my expenses: tuition, \$40, books, \$11, Board \$3.00, room \$1, foolscap, 10c, Oranges, 5c for 3, pen holder 5c . . .

My Best Respects and love to you all. Don't let a new gray hair come on your head on my account. But I am afraid you will find it lonesome with out your son.

Omaha, Neb. May 13, 1888 [Sunday]

Dear Parents,

I must write you a few lines to let you know that I am still alive and enjoying good health and hope you are all well. I am writing just because I have the spare time and plenty to write.

I went out with one of my room mates who delivers a daily paper. We started about 4 o'clock and went to the printing office of the Republican paper and there I saw my first steam printing press.<sup>14</sup> It was a nice site. They do the fastest printing I ever saw. The paper is

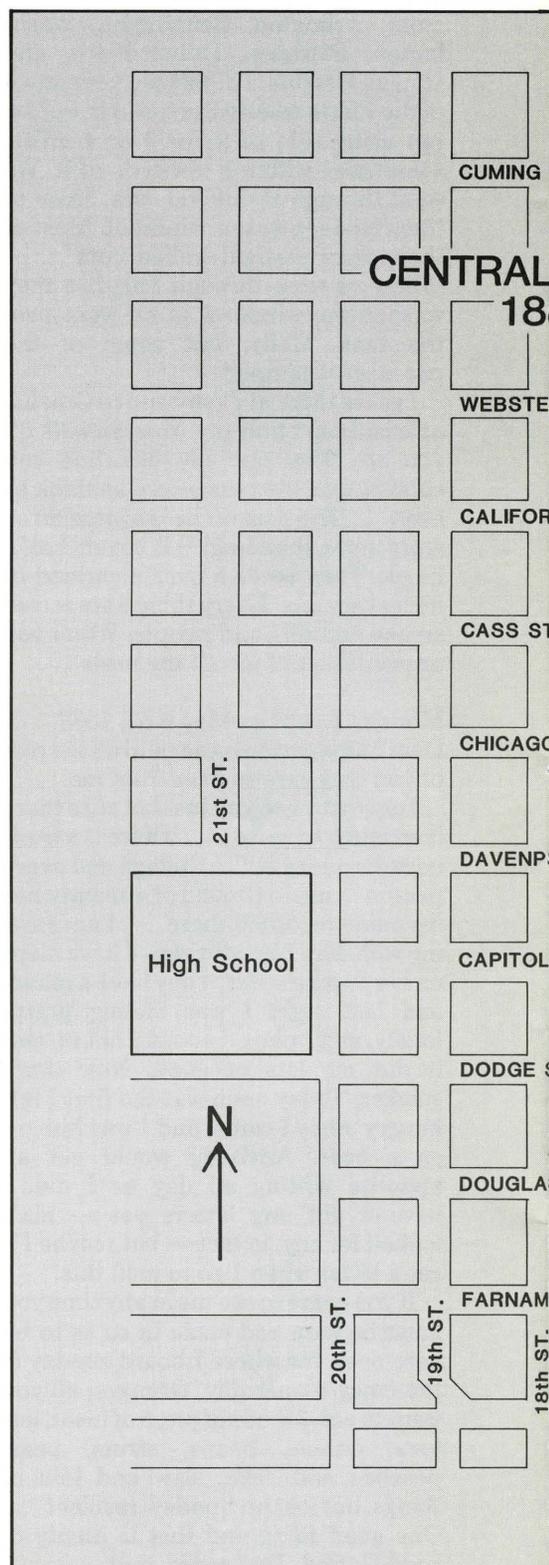
all rolled up in big rolls 3 feet long and four feet across the end with a spindle through the centre. The blank paper goes in one end in a solid sheet and comes out the other all cut up into papers printed and folded 4 times all ready to mail or deliver. The fellow I was with gets 5.00 a week and had to count all the papers to the newsboys and other deliverers, and then he takes his own bundle of 200 papers and has to deliver them. I went with him all over his route and it makes a 4 hour job. I went through the smelting works and saw a 1000 carloads of lead and the biggest engine I ever saw.<sup>15</sup> It was metal all melted and boiling and running it into pots and molds. I guess there were 200 fire places and the awfullest roar and the worst smell you ever saw — smelt, I mean. And blue vitoral [vitriol] — a million gallons — some done and some just Cooking. The smelting works run on sunday the same as the week-days. The Missouri river ain't as wide as half the platte. I was surprised to see so small a river . . .

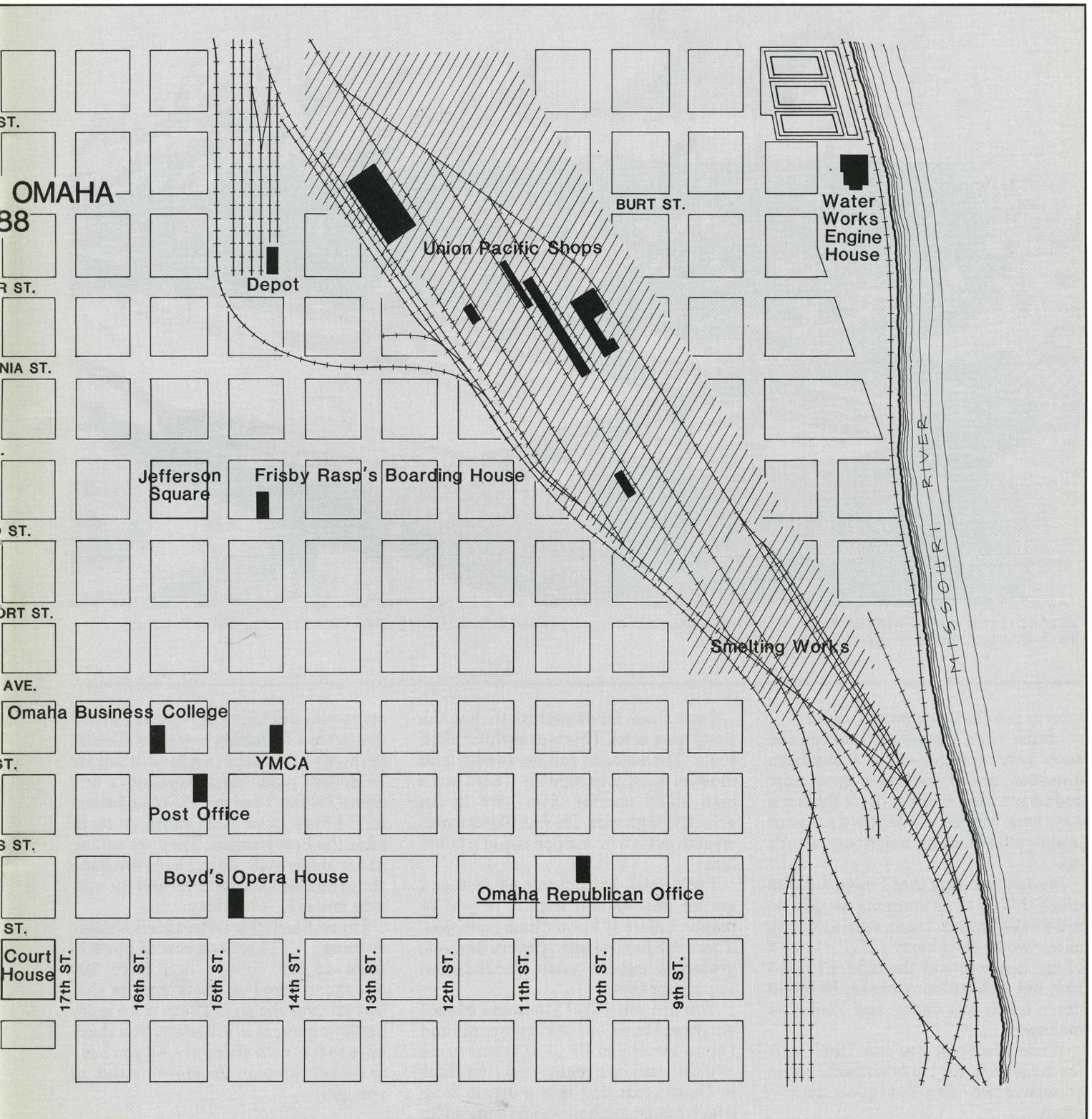
600 men work in the smelting works. I don't like the city at all. It is dusty just as soon as it quits raining, and the dust here is [the] worst dust I ever saw. It is all stone and manure. Streets that ain't paved, 2 feet deep of mud.

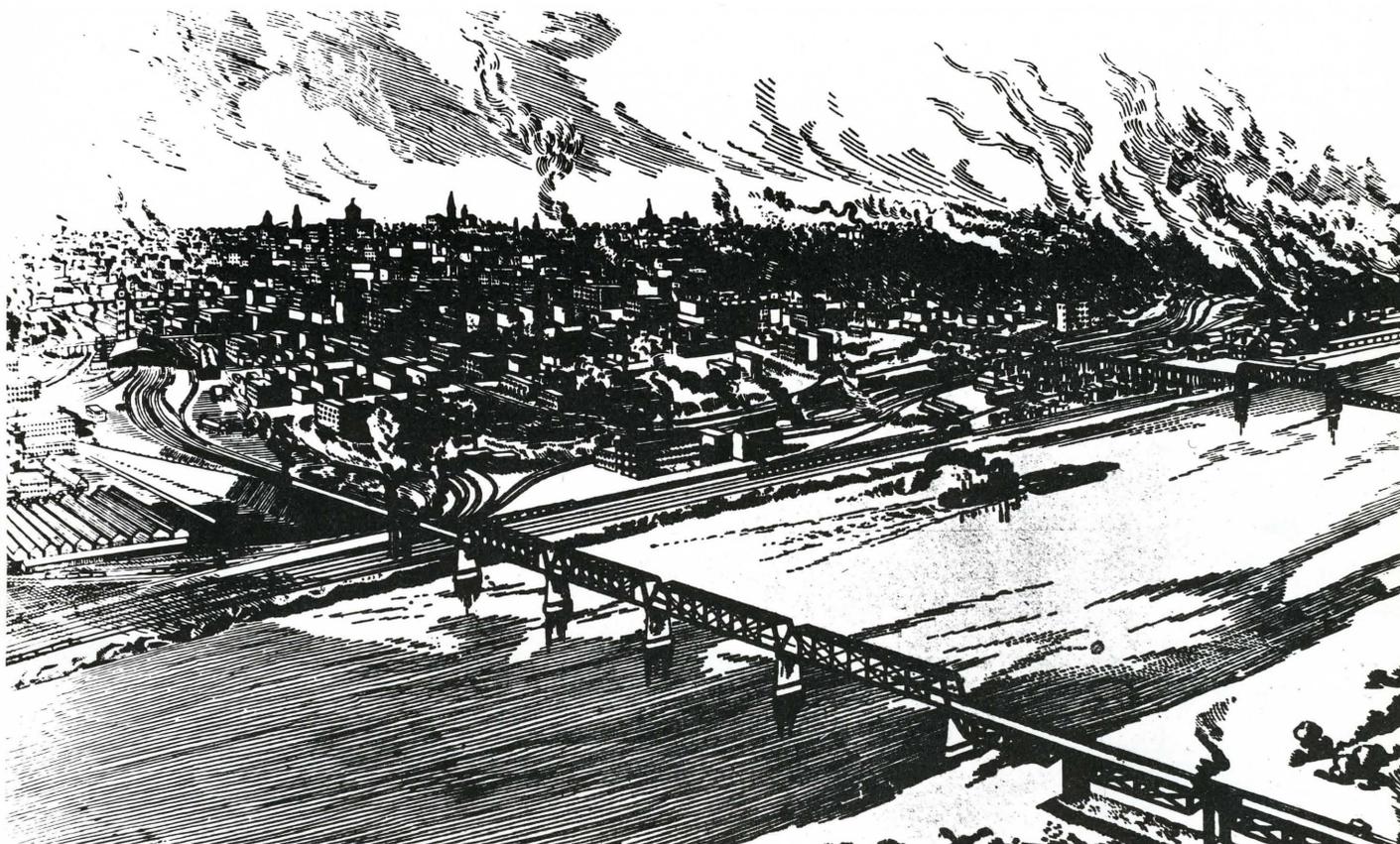
I have been here one week and it seems more like a year. I think I can stand it to come home after 3 months. I can't see anything but houses. I like to see the horison once in a while . . .

Sunday after dinner

Well, I feel more like writing now than I did before dinner. Today is the fancy meal where I board and she is [a] daisy. About 20 different kinds of stuff. Some good, too. All the Oranges you can eat (I eat three), and 3 kinds of pie, roast veal, roast beef, and roast pork, new potatoes, coffee, water clear or chalk water called milk or tea, plenty of bread and hog lard and cotton seed oil mixed with paint called Butter [oleomargarine]. I have seen more people since I came here than every person I ever saw before I came and with a few exceptions







Omaha from east side of Missouri River, 1888. From James W. Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska, and South Omaha* (New York and Chicago, 1894), 192 ff.

I never see the same person twice . . . .

I think when 3 months are up you can keep your eye pealed in a southern direction, and if you see a great dust and hear a loud roaring, don't think it's a cyclone. Maybe you better warn your timid celler-running neighbors what's up.

My teacher says that I have done as much this week as students usually do in 2 weeks. I haven't seen a girl as pretty as our worst Hackberry girl . . . . I like 2 of my teachers and the others I don't like, but I haven't any cause. Rathbun don't teach any more and Dailey is manager . . . .<sup>16</sup>

Write whenever you can. Don't wait for my letters, for I may not write often enough or two often, but I guess not two often . . . .

I saw three fellows drunk to day, the first I have seen. This is an awful wicked town. The saloons run on sunday and most all work goes right on. There was a man killed not far from here by an eclectric high wire. He was fixing it and went to cut it with a nippers and it killed him . . . .

I will finish writing this as soon as I get an answer and mail it to you or maybe before if I don't hear from you. There is a funeral nearly every day, one yesterday and one today. Had the band to play for them.

You'uns must feel lonesome when I am gone. I know one that misses me and I know I miss you all . . . . It seems to me as if this cant be a reality that i am alone in Omaha but that it is a dream from which I must awaken and find myself in

my own bed at home. If you can I would like to have 10 dollars sent me so I could get a suit . . . . I can get a splendid suit for 10 dollars plain black worsted or any figure I want. I can get the blue flannel at 7. I have been in 20 stores or more after the best bargain. They are selling under shirts at 10 cents. I have the same shirts on that I started with and the outside one ain't a bit dirty . . . .

I must finish this letter this is sunday evening . . . . There is a row of posts in front of the college that have 300 telephone wires on them and its that way all over the city. There is a 6 story hotel in here, it is a beauty. You don't have to fool with stairways, all you have to do is to step on the elevator and up you go . . . .

Frisby L. Rasp

Omaha Neb, May 14, 1888 [Monday]  
Dear Father and Mother . . . .

You said you saw a man go by our house on a bicycle and that it was a funny site. I see so many that I am sick a looking at them. I see fifty every day. The biggest crowd I have seen since I came to Omaha was yesterday coming from the Base Ball game.<sup>17</sup> The side walks were as thick as they could walk, and they are twice as wide as those in small towns, and the street was lined with teams, and every street car had the top stock full of them. I saw as many nice horses since I have been here as I ever saw in my life and a great many poor ones. The big bugs have the nice horses and coaches and such things. You can have an idea what things look and go like when a team is looked at more as a curiosity if it walks than if it were running away. Some horses are good trotters, and a fellow has too look out for his own bones when he crosses a street. A team wouldn't think of slacking up for a man. I like my boarding place splendid. They have the best coffee I ever drank. I always drink 2 cups. They have had canned apricots for dinner lots of times . . . .

The post office is a fine building. I was through the jail but there was nobody in yesterday.<sup>18</sup> Today there was 45 in. I can go all over town if I want to . . . .

Omaha, Neb., May 16, 1888  
[Wednesday]

Dear Father and Mother,

I received your letter last night and was glad to hear from you all. This is Wednesday morning and I haven't been to breakfast yet. I must hurry and finish writing . . . .

You wished to know how my room looks and what kind of bed I have got. There is one wash stand, a wash bowl, and a pitcher, a pispot that's full and heaped every morning, 2 beds with wire mattresses on and fixed up pretty good, an old pine table, 4 trunks, 3 valises, 2 chairs, and a rocker, a lamp, a bureau and that's all . . . .

There ain't a drop of good water in town and never will be. I have seen

everything since I have been here from a woman with a man's coat and hat on to the finest silk. I would like to have you and paw come and stay a week if you had so much time but I am coming home on a visit in dog days and quit breathing smoke and drinking filth. I never want to live in so large a town as this, I would rather be dead at once . . . .

It seems to me as if I were taking lots of money out of your pocket, but I don't see any way to help myself. I know that you have worked hard for what you have and I wont spend a cent more than

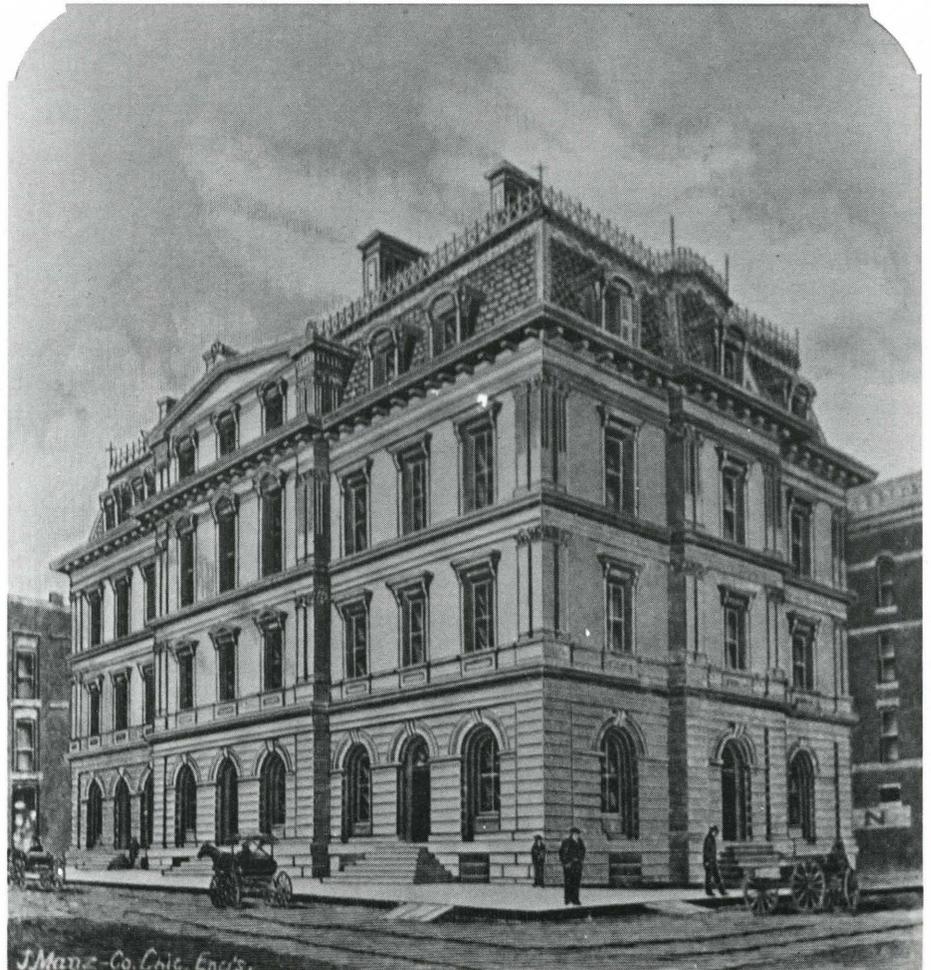
I can help . . . .

Goodby, write soon, from your loving son to his dear old parents.

Omaha, Neb., May 19, 1888 [Saturday]

I am lonesome today. Saturday and Sunday are hard days for me. I was down to the depot this morning and saw the train for Gresham pull out. I thought 6 weeks more and I will be on that train for Gresham. I think this is the unhealthiest place I ever saw. The air is full of dirt and filth, and the water is full of sewerage. I haven't drank a

Omaha's post office in 1888. (NSHS-054-395)



drop of water for a week. I don't drink anything but coffee. The coffee hides the filth . . .

Omaha, May 19, 1888

This is evening . . . I was down to the electric light plant and saw the largest engine I ever saw in my life.<sup>19</sup> The balance wheel was half under the floor and what stuck up was over 10 feet high. 16 motors were running. The electric lights are the nicest I ever saw. I went up in an elevator this evening, the first thing of the kind I ever saw.

I think I am in with a pretty nice set of boys, one of them is a church member.

He has been with me where ever I went. If you come down I think I can show some of the city at least. I saw my first beggars today. One was an old man and on a card it said, "Please help, I am blind and 80 years old." He had a hand organ and sat on the sidewalk and ground out music for the millions. Another was an old man and on a card it said, "Please help. I lost my sight by small pox and have 3 children to support." He had an accordean. Another was a girl about 16 and another little girl 3. They had an organette. A card said, "Please help. I am a girl whos father lost his sight by smallpox."

What does all the folks think about that *smart* Rasp being in college? . . . You wanted to know if my book[s] were worth 11 dollars. No they are not. This is what I got: one day book, one journal, one ledger.

Good by. Write soon and tell me all the news. And if you ask any questions I will try and answer.

Omaha, Neb., May the 25, 1888  
[Friday]

Dear Parents

I must write you a few lines this evening to let you know that I am well as

YMCA Building, Omaha. From Alfred Sorenson, *History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time (Omaha, 1889)*, 310.



usuall. I write to you just so you will hear from me . . . .

I haven't got anything to write. I haven't seen anything new this week. Bill Rasp wondered what electricity was made of. Tell him it is made by rubbing a hard substance against a roll of silk. The machines are about as large as a hogshead and the inside part turns and a shell around the outside stands. You can see the electricity agoing from the machine. It looks like little pieces of lightning so bright you can't look at them. The machines only run at night. They can't make it any faster than they use it. It all goes away on wires out of the roof of the building. The lights are beauties. All I would have against them would be the sputtering. They don't hold still. It makes bright white light, 40 times as good as gas.

I see lots of comic sights here, but the funniest sight was a boy that had a dog hitched to a little wagon and he was in riding. He drove up 16th Street as big [as] anything . . . . The next building from the College is a bad house, the College boys say. The one on the opposite corner from where I room is another. The papers say there are 6,000 of them, 300 saloons, and if you would stop those two and tobacco half of Omaha's business would be gone . . . .

Saturday morning, May 26

Dear Friends

I got your letter that had a stamp and a lilac and a 4 leaved clover this morning. Just 8 days since it was mailed . . . . This makes the fourth Saturday I have passed away from home and four more and home I go . . . . I hope you will all know me. I would be disappointed if I should come home and you wouldn't know me . . . . I am letting my beard stand. I guess I will get Mother to cut my hair when I get home . . . .

Sunday morning [May 27, 1888]

I was out last night and got a suit. It cost 8 dollars. It is a suit like Paw's nice one. The man wanted ten, but we hung on till he came down to eight. I must tell you what happened at the restaurant



*Douglas County Courthouse in 1888. (NSHS-054-503)*

this morning. Mr. Mahoney rooms at the same house I do. He waits on the table for his board. This morning when he went down the fire didn't burn good and one of the cooks went and got a quart can of coal oil and commenced to pour it in the fire, the fire ran in the can and the cook dropped it. Another one picked it up and threw it out past Mahoney and set him on fire. He is terribly burned. All the hide is off his face and hands. I saw him a few minutes ago. It made me sick.

[Undated letter]

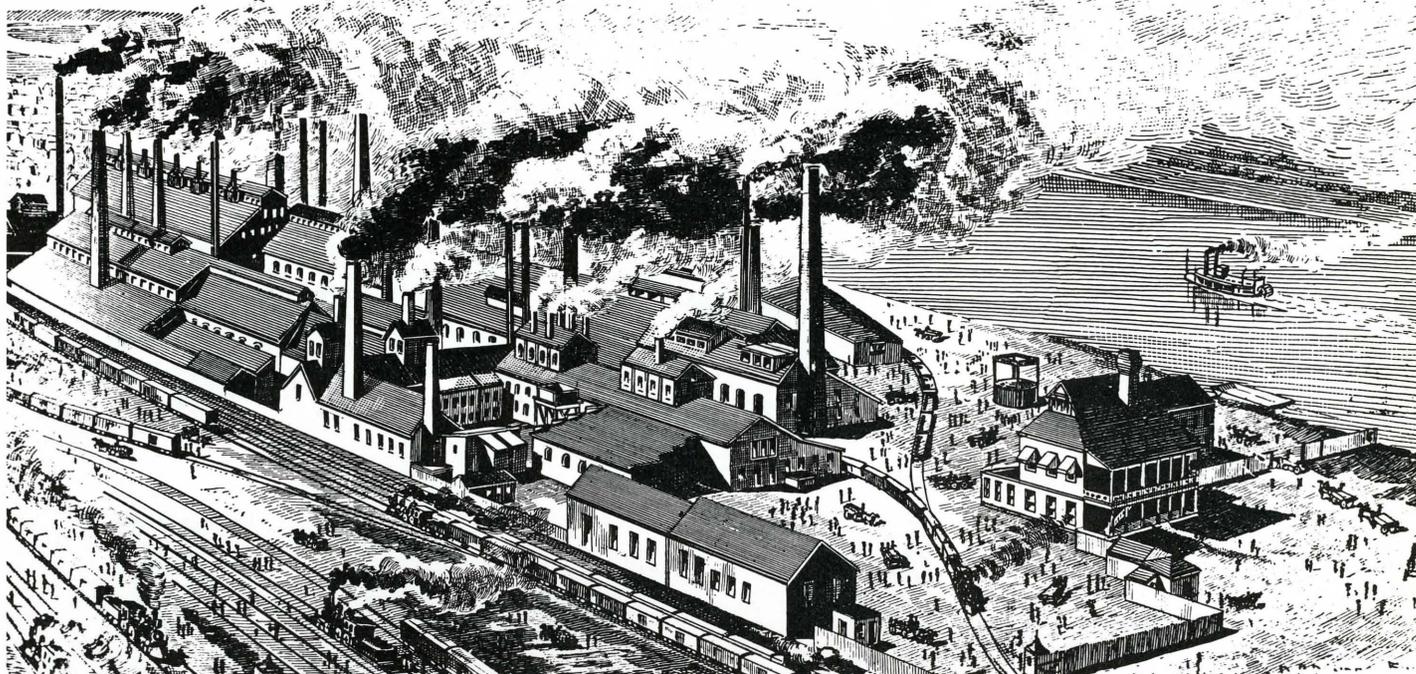
If any one comes to Omaha and has some one to show him over town and don't get the worth of his money, he is hard to please . . . . Saturday evening is a good time to take in Omaha. I saw a dozen or more bands out on the street

playing. And the most people I ever saw. If 2/3 of the country people could see Omaha they would open there eyes as if they had been thunderstruck. It has the most noise and rattle to it I ever saw . . . .

There is a girl down on the next floor and her feller comes every night and we have to shut the windows to get a little sleep and keep from getting sick.

Omaha, Neb., May 29, 1888 [Tuesday]

. . . . I don't know what to do about coming home . . . . I could stand it another month . . . . There is no school tomorrow. It is decoration day . . . . If you want me to come home on your account, all right, I will come, but if you think I am homesick I ain't so bad off [f] but what i can stand it. Of course I would like to come home pretty well,



*Omaha & Grant Smelting and Refining Works. From James W. Savage and John T. Bell, History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska, and South Omaha (New York and Chicago, 1894), 192 ff.*

but it will take that much more money. I will come home in 4 weeks anyway . . . .

I would lose my room if I didn't pay right along, and I might not get in with so nice a set of boys again. Nevertheless not my will but thine be done . . . . You don't know how I battled with myself before I left home. That was a big undertaking for me. I never expect I ever will have such a struggle again. It was all I could do to leave all alone and go where I didn't know anything or body. I have never felt homesick yet . . . . I am afraid if I came home it would be hard to leave . . . .

**An Account of Decoration Day at Omaha [May 30 or 31, 1888]**

I got my dinner at one o'clock, and directly after the procession began to form. The first I saw were 5 companies of soldiers from the fort [Fort Omaha], headed by a band. They made a grand

sight, stepping as one man, and their shoulders rose and fell as a wave on water. Their muskets with bayonets were nice. Soon they all began to gather, and when they were complete there was a procession over a mile long. I saw the whole thing twice. It was composed of soldiers, Police forces, Post office letter carriers, Knights of Pithias, bands, fire companies, Governor [John M.] Thayer and his staff, hook and ladder companies, Odd fellows, Masonic members, young men's Christian Association, and school girls, two loads of them, all dressed in white. It was the prettiest sight I ever saw . . . . Such beautiful uniforms I never saw. The crowd was something wonderful. You would not think there was so many people in Nebraska let alone Omaha. I wouldn't have missed it for any thing. The papers I send you will give a better de-

scription than I can. The crowd was as thick as it could stand on both sides of the line of march and it took 3 hours to go so you can have an idea what it was.

Friday morning, June 1  
Dear Parents

Omaha is an old thing to me now. I would have give a dollar if you could have seen the parade. It was the finest thing I ever saw. You can't imagine any thing too nice for it . . . . I am well and getting along fine with my books. I am in fact having a good time while you work and slave, and I am spending lots of your money, but not a cent that I don't put to some good use . . . .

Saturday afternoon [June 2]  
Dear Friends,

I will write down the news just as it happens. I saw a good bit this after-

noon. One store gave away 20 doz. summer hats worth at least 2 cents. They were thrown from the roof of a 4 story building. It drew quite a crowd and made lots of fun. Just as the crowd was largest in the street some one from the roof yelled, "Look out for the fire company," and in an instant along came a patrol wagon at a dead run. Close after came the hose carriage, then came a fire reporter. The hat scattering began again and soon some one yelled again and along came 4 or five companies and a hook and ladder truck, all as hard as the horses could run. This is the first time I have seen them go to a fire, but I have heard them several times. They go a flying, I tell you.

Sunday evening [June 3, 1888]

I was to sunday school this afternoon. They had three violins and a piano and 2 horns and a bass violin for music. It don't seem to me as if it were real that I am in Omaha, but must be a dream . . . .

I never want to live in the city. It is the worst place in the world to live in. I saw a comic sight this morning. An old bannanna seller. They have them on two wheeled carts, one end a little longer [here a drawing appears]. A boy came along and dumped the short [end] on the ground and spilled out his bananas. They are foreigners and can't speak English, and it was laughable to see him run after that boy and cuss him in his own language. It would make a stone man laugh.

Monday Evening [June 4]

Dear Parents,

I saw a fire Sunday noon. A paint shop burned down, and a lot of other buildings. The fire men worked like beavers and soon had the fire out. It was a nice sight to see them fight the fire. It burned 3 barns and scorched a lot of houses. One laundry was all on

*Adapted from Omaha Daily Herald,  
June 1, 1888, by Debra Brownson and  
Dell Darling.*

# HATS THROWN AWAY!

Next Saturday at 3 p. m.,

## June 2, 1888

From the top of our store,

### 320 NORTH 16th ST.,

We will throw to those in the street below

## 30 DOZEN

MEN'S AND BOYS'

### STRAW AND SUMMER HATS

PROVIDED ALWAYS

There is no interference by city police

### BE ON HAND

Not at 2:30 p.m. or at 3:30 but at

### 3:00 P. M.

## ERIE CLOTHING CO.,

DAVIS BROS., Props.

320 North 16th St.

fire, and they put it out. It was burned black all over. The oil in the paint factory made an awful fire. There was an awful big crowd out to see it, and some of them got a shower bath from the fire engines . . . .

[To sister Minnie] How is the baby progressing?<sup>20</sup> Does he walk yet? Children here in town are of two classes. One class puts me in mind of pups or a pet pig. They set in the middle of the street and play in the dust. And if there is a water puddle near, they are sure to be in it. They will step up to a man when they are just learning to talk and say, "Gimmie a chaw of tobacco." The other class put me in mind of spiders. They are rich and go to Sunday school. When they are 10 years old they weigh 20 lbs. and look as white and puny as pukes. I am having a good time in Omaha at your expense. This beats farming all hollow . . . .

Omaha, Neb. June 7, 1888 [Thursday]  
Dear Father and Mother,

I must answer your kind and I need hardly say welcome letters. Welcome they always are and more if possible . . . .

I haven't got a bit of work yet, but if I live till fall I will try and get along with 1 dollar per week. I[t] costs me 4 now. I have my board and room rent paid till Sunday and will have to pay out 12 dollars more if I stay as long as I said. I have 6.80 in my purse. I haven't lost a penny yet. I balanced up my books today. I have spent 83.20 Cash on hand, 6.80 Total 90. 75 first capital, 10 additional, and 5 dollars. Total 90 . . . . I will be home June 30 if nothing happens. Good bye. Write me soon. Write me often.

Omaha, Neb., June 13, 1888  
[Wednesday]  
Dear Parents,

I received your letter last night. Got the money all right. Was glad to hear from you . . . .

News is scarce. I keep a saying over to myself, "Only two weeks more. Only two weeks more." . . . . The school is

small at present. Only 25 agoing. I am getting so I understand bookkeeping well. If my penmanship were that good I could keep books now. And my arithmetic is too slow and too many mistakes. Today was an awful hot day. It rained all night last night and night before, but it don't look like it in the street. When it don't rain for a week it gets so dusty that the dust drifts like snow. The directions don't seem right to me yet. And I guess they won't till I get back home . . . . I will try hard and make what I have got in the line of money do me till I get home. I want to give orders about my first dinner. I don't want any pie or cake. I am sick of them. I don't want any coffee. I have drunk nothing else since I came here. I want cold water, sweet milk, and cow butter and bread. Lettuce won't hurt, but have it dressed. They bring it out raw at the res[taurant] . . . . O, yes, I have something to tell you. The woman where I room says she is a going to make her boys all give up bad habits. One of my roommates smokes and chews and she gave him a good lecturing. She said I used big words and when I want to say "confound" I should say "con—" and then "sideration" and stop and consider.

My appetite is gone. I can't eat like I did, but if I cultivate corn a while that will fix me. I have learned lots of the world and its ways since I came to Omaha . . . . The post misses know my name and deliver without yelling the name. I am sick of pianoes. There is one in every house and all just learning to play . . . .

Omaha, Neb., June 18, 1888 [Monday]  
Dear Parents,

I am a coming home 20[th] as it is so very warm and I can't study much and besides I am getting a little homesick . . . . Old Fris will come back Old Fris still, but a different one after all, for if I never came back to Omaha, I would still have her crowds and bustle and sin and poverty in my mind. Oh, you can't imagine anything so different from country life. When I get home I guess I

will never get awake it will be so quiet. Hurrah. It makes me feel good to think about it . . . . My mustache is quite nice. Have my last clean shirt on. You will have a wash, I tell you, and a job of haircutting . . . .

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The letters are in the Frisby L. Rasp Collection, MS 635, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society. Biographical information is taken from several sources, including histories of the John W. and Lavina Rasp, Rasp-Day, and Frisby L. and Mattie A. Rasp families in *Gresham, Nebraska, 1887-1987*; the 1885 Nebraska State Census for Hackberry Township of Polk County; the obituary of Frisby L. Rasp in *The Shelby Sun*, March 25, 1948; and correspondence with Naomi Rasp Fredrickson. The editor thanks Mrs. Fredrickson for granting permission to publish her father's letters.

<sup>2</sup>Robert N. Manley, *Centennial History of the University of Nebraska, I. Frontier University, 1869-1919* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 92.

<sup>3</sup>*1888 Omaha City Directory* (Omaha: J. M. Wolfe and Co., 1888), 5. (Hereafter cited as 1888 directory).

<sup>4</sup>Alfred Sorenson, *The Story of Omaha* (Omaha: National Printing Co., 1903), 461.

<sup>5</sup>M. P. Dowling, *Creighton University* (Omaha: Press of Burkley Printing Co., 1903), 104-5.

<sup>6</sup>Lawrence Larsen and Barbara Cottrell, *The Gate City* (Boulder, CO: The Pruett Publishing Co., 1982), 104-5.

<sup>7</sup>Michael J. Harkins, "Public Health Nuisances in Omaha, 1870-1900," *Nebraska History* 56 (Winter 1975), 471-92.

<sup>8</sup>1888 directory, 7.

<sup>9</sup>Sorenson, *Story of Omaha*, 461.

<sup>10</sup>The Omaha Business College was located at 199 North Sixteenth Street.

<sup>11</sup>Probably the Friend H. Woodbridge family at 1416 Chicago Street. Woodbridge, in partnership with his brother, ran a musical instrument store.

<sup>12</sup>The post office was on the corner of Dodge and South Fifteenth streets.

<sup>13</sup>The YMCA was located at 1422 Dodge Street.

<sup>14</sup>The *Omaha Republican* office was at 1001 Douglas Street.

<sup>15</sup>According to the 1888 city directory, the Omaha and Grant Smelting Works was located on the riverfront at the foot of Capitol Avenue.

<sup>16</sup>George R. Rathbun and John T. Dailey founded the Omaha Business College.

<sup>17</sup>The *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 14, 1888, reported that Des Moines defeated Omaha 1-0. Both teams were in the Western Association.

<sup>18</sup>Both the jail and the court house were in the 1700 block between Farnam and Harney streets.

<sup>19</sup>The Omaha city directory lists several electric plants in 1888.

<sup>20</sup>John Cleveland Rasp was born January 13, 1888.