

FRONTIERSMEN OF FORT McPHERSON, 1870-1875,
AND THE WRITINGS OF ENA RAYMONDE BALLANTINE.

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FOREWARD

As originally envisioned, this manuscript was to be a straightforward editing of the diaries and other writings of Ena Raymonde Ballantine, an extra-ordinary Nebraska frontierswoman. By the time the project passed into my hands, it was becoming obvious that this could not be done, for her diary keeping was spasmodic, and she seldom mentioned what had happened between diary sections.

It was not an easy task to fill in the blank spots, for Ena lived on the frontier, far from any newspaper--or at least any newspaper that has survived. Having already been collecting material on the Republican River country of Southwest Nebraska, where Ena lived, I already had related materials in my files, but not to the extent necessary to fill out her story. Several years were spent in checking newspapers, microfilm records from the National Archives, and collections in the archives at the Nebraska State Historical Society. A great deal of material on Fort McPherson and its area was found, though little of it related directly to Ena, beyond providing further background for events she mentioned.

It slowly became evident that Ena and her small circle of relatives and friends were only a part of a much larger group of interesting frontiersmen, all living in the same area, seeing the same events from different points of view, but it was a fascinating world larger than Ena's diaries illuminated. Their stories, to me,

seemed equally worthy of preservation, but, to do so, would mean redirecting the scope of the original project. Though Ena left a greater body of writing than any of the rest, her life was but one among many on this particular frontier. Instead of writing the life of one woman, I found myself writing the history of a region and its pioneers.

My research turned up dozens of contemporary, first-person accounts, usually letters, which gave added immediacy to life on the frontier in the vicinity of Fort McPherson and the nearby Medicine Creek valley. I then planned to use these documents in writing narrative chapters to appear between the portions of Ena's diaries. After rereading many of these accounts, however, I came to feel that it was important that these other frontiersmen should be allowed to speak out in their own words, that readers should know how others on that frontier reacted to life around them, not just how Ena reacted. Though a greater body of her work remains, these other voices are just as authentic and worthy of our attention.

Using these other materials in complete or nearly complete form, however, made it impossible to keep the manuscript progressing in one central direction. Though it makes for some rather rapid digressions, this method still seems the most satisfactory way, at least to me. After writing of an Indian raid, a North Platte writer describes efforts at planting crops and the building of new houses in North Platte. They are not a part of the central story, but it did not seem that an accurate history of the region would be presented if I deleted these "less interesting" paragraphs, for the

area did have an urban side, and, when Ena and her friends visited Fort McPherson, they usually made a trip into North Platte. Thus details of its growth were not outside the scope of the story.

In the end, I have allowed the numerous eye-witnesses, as well as Ena, tell their own stories in their own words, with my role being that of an editor, of writing transitional paragraphs which, hopefully, show how the many different stories are related. By muting these other voices, I might have produced a more readable narrative, but it would have had less human interest. It is hoped that readers will become less interested in my words and more interested in the many individual stories that are contained in this manuscript. That, though the reader is spoken to in many voices, he is reading the story of a small frontier area as seen and described by those who participated or witnessed its many exciting events.

These spokesmen are a varied lot, from Ena, a gentile southerner to U.S. Army officers, employes of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, sod-farmers, Indian traders, ranchers and businessmen, and the Indians themselves--as recorded by others.

Though Ena did not arrive at Fort McPherson, until March 1872, this manuscript begins in January 1870, about the time her brother came to the area, though nothing is known of his life for his first year there. Ena arrived there during a transitional period, a period which began during the winter of 1869-1870, when, though it was not known at the time, Fort McPherson had finished its years as a real frontier military post. They had ended with the Republican River Expedition of the summer and autumn of 1869, when General Carr had

had brought an end to open hostilities of five years duration, ushering in a period of uneasy truce between the two groups. It seemed necessary to me, if Ena's years were to be understood, that I begin with the beginning of this transitional period, allowing her to take her place, upon her arrival, as another character among a cast of many. By her very extraordinariness, Ena quickly became a typical frontiers-person of the area around Fort McPherson, for it appears that to be "typical" there meant to be "extra-ordinary" in most places, or by most standards.