



*Nebraska History* posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

## Article Title: A Burlington Railroad Telegrapher, Joseph Harmon Ballengee

Full Citation: Ruth Ballengee Wortman, ed., "A Burlington Railroad Telegrapher, Joseph Harmon Ballengee," *Nebraska History* 65 (1984): 221-244

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1984Ballengee.pdf>

Date: 1/03/2014

Article Summary: For more than forty years beginning in the late 1880s Ballengee worked as a railroad station agent and telegrapher in several Nebraska and South Dakota towns. His duties included keeping track of rail cars in the yard, selling tickets, and dealing with freight.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Joseph Harmon Ballengee, Mary Rosa (Doll) McFarland Ballengee, John McAllister Schofield, "Doc" Middleton, John Morrison Hamilton, Mike Brady

Names of Towns Where Ballengee Worked: Tilford, Buffalo Gap, Ardmore, and Rochford, South Dakota; Crawford, Fort Robinson, Mason City, Howells, Nickerson, Seneca, Antioch, Dunning, Berwyn, and Ainsworth, Nebraska; Glen Rock, Wyoming

Keywords: Joseph Harmon Ballengee; Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad (CB & Q); Chicago and North Western Railroad (originally the Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad); Railway Express Company; Morse code; Sioux Indians, Pine Ridge Indian Agency; Red Cloud Indian Agency, Ku Klux Klan

Photographs / Images: train at the Fort Robinson depot about 1905; Rosa McFarland Ballengee and Joseph Harmon Ballengee at Fort Robinson depot; Ballengee with the Gordon, Nebraska, band about 1855; Ballengee in band uniform; Mary Rosa Ballengee (holding daughter Ruth) with Helen Ballengee at Howells, Nebraska, 1908

# A Burlington Railroad Telegrapher, Joseph Harmon Ballengee

*Edited by Ruth Ballengee Wortman*

## INTRODUCTION

The railroad telegraphy career of Joseph Harmon Ballengee in northwest Nebraska and southwest South Dakota spanned more than four decades, from the latter 1880s to 1932. His service was with two companies, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy and the Chicago and North Western Railroad (Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley). The telegraph companies had arrangements with railroad companies for the common use of wire.

Ballengee was at various times a farmer, schoolteacher, homesteader, and railroad section hand before beginning his telegraphy work. In the small towns in which he worked, the job of telegrapher was most often combined with that of station agent. He operated in Morse Code not only to facilitate railroad operations but as a middle man between the townspeople and their correspondents elsewhere through use of the telegram. The telephone had not yet become a household necessity, and inter-city phone communication, where available, was not reliable. The agent-telegrapher also was a middleman for Railway Express Company shipments. His rail company employer assessed 10 percent of all express revenue and 10 percent of "paid here" telegrams. Ballengee was a keen observer of railroad operation and small town life in general during his years of service in South Dakota (Tilford, Buffalo Gap, Ardmore, Rochford) and in Nebraska (Nickserson, Howells, Ainsworth, Crawford, Berwyn, Seneca, Dunning, Antioch, Mason City).

Duties of the agent-telegrapher were numerous. In addition to "keeping score" on cars in the yard for benefit of the dispatcher, he sold tickets and recorded sales, "expensed" all in-

coming freight bills and figured revenue on them, prepared monthly reports, and "hustled" freight. The latter chore meant pushing or pulling either two or four-wheel carts in storing freight not immediately retrieved.

Train orders from the Chadron dispatcher were in code and any error could be disastrous. Those orders either were handed to trainmen on the platform, or if the train did not stop, were delivered from the end of a curved bamboo pole handed to the engineer or conductor as the train rolled past.

Perhaps Ballengee's most interesting years were at Crawford and nearby Fort Robinson during the 1890s and early 1900s. Here he was responsible for the usual telegraphy ("jerking lightning"),<sup>1</sup> ticket selling for passenger trains, and numerous other duties as well. He processed all incoming freight bills, prepared monthly reports, and stored freight. At Fort Robinson there were at times during the Spanish-American War, as many as 21 trains a day arriving and departing, and Ballengee had to meet all of them. His arduous duties left little time for his wife, the former Mary Rosa McFarland (Doll), his family (eventually to include five children), and his favorite sport of trout fishing in the White River near Crawford. On one occasion, when his family was visiting in Iowa, he headed for the trout stream a few hundred yards from the depot. During his absence lightning struck the depot and burned it to the ground. Had he been at his usual position at the telegraph key, he might have been electrocuted.

In 1911 Ballengee bid-in (the seniority job-claiming system) the agency at Ardmore. With more leisure time he found expression for other talents—leading the town band and singing in a church choir.

His last station was Mason City, Nebraska. After his wife died in 1931 when he was 68, he planned to continue working. But the Great Depression brought retirement at age 70, and Ballengee's railroad career ended with a pension of \$30.50 a month. Had it come just six months later the greater benefits of the Railroad Retirement Act would have been his. Life with a daughter, Helen, brought too much idleness, and he moved to the farm of another daughter, Ruth, near West Point, where he gardened, cared for farm animals, and wrote his memoirs. A long-hand copy of it is filed at the Nebraska State Historical Society. He died in November, 1945.

Ballengee was born August 16, 1862, on the Twelvepole River near Wayne, Virginia (now West Virginia). His father Evi Jackson (Jack) Ballengee in 1870 moved his family, including young Joseph Harmon (called Harmon), to the fledgling town of Dow City, Iowa. The Ballengees in 1875 moved on to northwest Arkansas and eventually returned to West Virginia. When 19 years of age, Harmon persuaded his father to try farming again near Dow City.

Mrs. Ballengee was born in 1874 at Fort Bridger, Utah Territory, the daughter of Peter McFarland and Ann Collins McFarland, Irish immigrants. Sgt. McFarland, a Civil War veteran, came west to guard construction crews on the Union Pacific Railroad. The McFarlands lived at several Army posts before being ordered to Fort Robinson. He died there in 1883. His widow afterward ran the Gate City Hotel in Crawford. Their daughter Doll married Joseph Ballengee, a telegrapher, in 1893.

### BALLENGEE'S TELEGRAPHY YEARS

I worked on the farm near Dow City, Iowa for some years, managing to get in three months of school each winter, then went to teaching. I followed this for two or three years, deciding that I was not liable to make any great success of it. Finally, in the Spring of 1886, I went to Western Nebraska and filed on a homestead about eight miles southeast of Gordon. Father filed two miles west of me. We built sod houses and a sod barn for the stock, and were quite comfortably fixed. All our neighbors were similarly circumstanced.

Of course, people had come from many locations, and all were strangers but were a very sociable friendly lot of people, and we soon were well acquainted. Money was almost unknown, and I can hardly imagine how they managed to live. I secured a school for the first winter, which carried us over.<sup>2</sup>

Of amusement, there was plenty. A few of us would meet in town Saturday afternoon, and to the first married couple we would meet, we would suggest a party for the following week. The suggestion was always well received and they would insist that we bring our instruments, which we did: Cornet, violins, banjo, guitar, which with an organ, made quite a variety. I

don't remember ever spending three more pleasant years.

In the spring of 1887, I had a choice between teaching and railroad section work. I chose the track and followed that for three summers. In the fall of 1888, I joined a gang building snow fences, working from Harrison, Nebraska, to Glen Rock, Wyoming. The country was little settled; the towns were the regulation "Cow Town," with its usual equipment of saloons, gambling halls, and "Dance Halls." The latter were unique in their way; mostly patronized by "cowboys." At the close of each dance, each man led his partner to the bar at the rear of the hall, and both would take straight whisky, a dollar for the two drinks.

After the work was discontinued, I returned to Gordon, and settled down to the study of telegraphy. I had been working at it at times for a couple of years, but my other work (plus amusements) had interfered.

Many things occurred during my three years at Gordon which were of great interest. It was about thirty miles from the Pine Ridge Indian Agency,<sup>3</sup> which was the Headquarters Agency for the Sioux tribe. These Indians were almost totally uncivilized, were presumably peaceful, and came to town in large numbers. I became acquainted with a number of the Chiefs—Big Crow, Little Crow, Standing Bear, John Woman's Dress, Yankton Charlie, Calico, and many others. Through my friendship with them, and a number of "Squaw men," I got an insight into many of their rites and customs, which were very interesting and which I could have secured in no other way. I saw all the different dances except the "Sun Dance," which changes the Indian boy to a warrior. This dance was supposed to be witnessed only by members of the tribe. The Omaha dance was for pastime, but the "bad medicine" dance, the scalp dance and several others were ceremonial or religious observances. All these were danced by the men only—the Squaw dance by the squaws. In the scalp dance the Chief rode into the ring of dancers with a scalp of long hair dangling from his bridle.

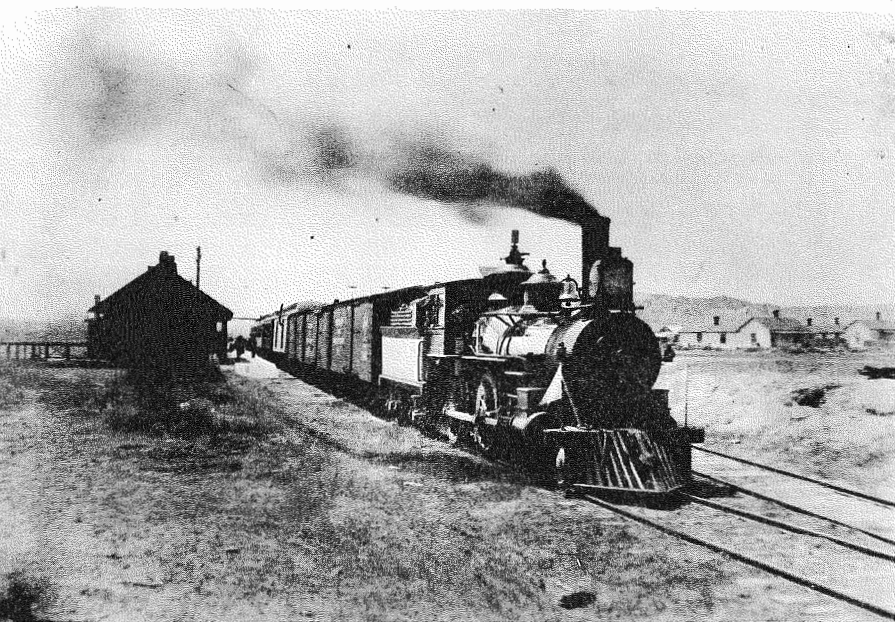
One Fourth of July celebration they arranged for a mounted charge of 400 Indians. They came down a long slope at full speed, no clothing but their warbonnets and loin cloths, full war paint, brandishing weapons of every kind, not an inch of leather, bridles or halters, guiding their ponies by the inflec-

tion of their bodies. When it seemed certain that they would ride through the crowd, they made an abrupt turn to the left and rode away without slackening speed. It was a maneuver which could not have been duplicated by any trained cavalry.

I was quite flattered when the Indians would address me by my "Indian name" which was "Chick-a-Paugh." I must have stood high in their regard, as I afterward learned that this meant "Twin Brother." Quite flattering.

The Indian character has not been improved by contact with the white race. They have learned few virtues but have absorbed many of their vices. Many of their legends and traditions are very interesting, and people who know most about them are most interested. It is unfortunate that no one sufficiently familiar with the subject saw fit, or was able to leave, a written history and account of their traditions and observances. The only man I knew who was capable of doing this, Mr. J. H. Cook, told me that he had such a work in preparation,<sup>4</sup> but on account of his advanced age, about 80 years, it is doubtful if he ever published it, his only published work, *Fifty Years on the old Frontier*, being more a personal history of his own experiences. This work is very interesting from a personal standpoint, many of the characters mentioned being people that I had personally known, but covers little of the subject mentioned.

I finally gained sufficient skill in telegraphy to hold down a job, and my first assignment was to go to Andrews, Nebraska<sup>5</sup> to do the necessary wirework in loading out two train loads of sheep. This [was] on September 20, 1889. From that time until the close of the month, I was kept continually at that kind of work. My home was the caboose of the train that was to be loaded, and I ranged from Rapid City, South Dakota, to Casper, Wyoming. I was traveling practically day and night. At the close of the month, I was instructed to get off at Crawford, Nebraska [Chicago and North Western], and report to the Agent for duty as operator. At that time the CB & Q [Chicago, Burlington and Quincy] was building their line westward to Billings [Montana]. The town was filled with tough characters from the grading gangs, and each night there was a crowd of Negro soldiers from Fort Robinson, three miles away.<sup>6</sup> There was one church and seven saloons. Gambling went on openly, and play was high. In my work I came in con-



*Train at the Fort Robinson depot about 1905. . . . (Below) Rosa McFarland Ballengee (left) and Joseph Harmon Ballengee at Fort Robinson depot.*



tact with all these different classes of people, and having been "raised nice," it can be imagined that I got many a shock.<sup>7</sup> With the exception of a few trips on special relief work, I remained at Crawford until the following July. Once I was instrumental in running a passenger train out of town ahead of departure time, just in time to keep the mob from hanging a murderer who was being taken to Chadron to jail. The men were coming down the street with a rope and meant business.

After leaving Crawford I went out as relief agent and had charge of a number of stations. . . . In November of 1890, I was checked in as Agent at Tilford, South Dakota. This was a small town on the East side of the Black Hills, about 25 miles south of Deadwood. Generally, a beginner had to work several years before receiving an Agency, so I was considerably elated over my promotion.

Six weeks passed, not entirely uneventful. At that time the Sioux Indians were on their last war path in a final effort to exterminate the whites. They were surrounded by a thin line of troops, and much fear was expressed that they would break through the line and escape into the Black Hills. One evening I received a message stating that General Nelson A. Miles requested me to stay on duty all night and watch for Indians—directing that I do so. No Indians showed up, but the Government paid me for the service, so I am qualified as a "Veteran of the Indian Wars." Some distinction!<sup>8</sup>

This being my first station on regular assignment, I was much elated. The town was small, and the business of the station very light. Generally a new man had to serve some years as night operator before being considered for an Agency. However, I had only been stationed there about six weeks when the superintendent called me on the wire and after a few minutes talk asked me if I thought I could handle the agency at Fort Robinson and also if I would accept it, adding that it was quite a busy job and that the army officers and former agents had not been getting along well together. As it would be quite an advance, both in position and compensation, I agreed, with the provision that if we failed to agree, my standing would not be impaired.

In due time I was checked in at Fort Robinson. My first army officer acquaintance impressed me very favorably, and as I met others, I found most of them very likable, but some very snobbish and domineering.<sup>9</sup>



The Post was built in the White River Valley, just below the mouth of Soldier Creek. The ground rises to the northward for about a mile, leading up to a range of "Buttes" towering some hundreds of feet perpendicularly. They are formed of what is locally known as "butte rock" a magnesium formation, very soft, but almost weather-proof. Inscriptions cut in the face of the rock over thirty years previous were still perfectly legible. This chain of buttes extends along the north side of White River some 15 miles.

The vicinity of Fort Robinson is rich in historical interest. Near that point, the treaty which ceded the Black Hills to the Government was signed<sup>10</sup> and a monument in the City Park at Crawford commemorates the event. Also a monument to Crazy Horse, a chief who was killed while trying to escape from the Guard.<sup>11</sup> The principal monument, however, is the one erected to the memory of Red Cloud, the old Chief of the Sioux Indians.

The Red Cloud Indian Agency was located about one mile east of the post.<sup>12</sup> From this Agency, the affairs of the Government as related to the Sioux tribe were handled. Several sub-agencies were located at other points.

The garrison at the time of my arrival and for years afterward, consisted of eight troops of the Ninth Cavalry (colored) and two white companies of the Eighth Infantry. These, with commissioned officers, families, civilian employees, etc., brought the population to about eight hundred. As I was fortunate in handling matters to the satisfaction of the Railroad people and the Army, I found it very pleasant. Considerable small game made good shooting, and the White River afforded good trout fishing.<sup>13</sup>

Feeling that more than anything else I wanted a home and that I was reasonably sure of being able to maintain it, I finally decided on the only girl among my acquaintances that I considered filled my ideal of a wife—Mary Rosa McFarland—raised on a ranch. I could not have made a better choice. We lived together thirty-seven years before she was finally called to her reward. A better wife or a more devoted mother never lived, and I have always considered that, whatever mistakes I may have made in my life, in that particular instance I could not have done better. In all our years together we never had anything even approaching a quarrel.

Something that very few people can truthfully say. Our first child, Paul, was born at Fort Robinson in 1895.

Life in an Army Post is rather monotonous—drills, parades, guard mounting, and other strictly military affairs soon lose their charm. The greatest source of enjoyment was the Ninth Cavalry Band, one of the best musical organizations in the Army. In addition to their regular military playing, they played weekly a concert of high class music.<sup>14</sup> Thinking it was time for me to try for a better location, I asked for a change and was transferred to Buffalo Gap, South Dakota, at the Eastern edge of the Black Hills. More money, and an operator to handle part of the work. The work was light, but the hours were long, and there was quite a large amount of responsibility. Here our second child, Helen, was born in 1897. Nothing of any other particular interest occurred during my stay there except a disastrous rear-end collision of two trains occurring in the yards, in which one man was instantly killed and several coaches and freight cars were destroyed. This occurred late at night while I was asleep, and no censure was attached to me in any way.

Buffalo Gap was at one time the northern terminus of the C&NW, and was situated quite near the gap in the Black Hills through which immense herds of buffalo had passed in their migrations from the plains of South Dakota to the country south, where they went for the winter. Through this pass the Deadwood-Sidney stages had passed, also the bull trains hauling provisions and supplies to the newly opened gold fields of which Deadwood was the nucleus.<sup>15</sup> Just north of Buffalo Gap, was Lame Johnny Creek, the headquarters of the Lame Johnny band of outlaws. Many were the times they held up and robbed the stage bearing the bullion shipments, until finally, too closely pressed by a posse, they took refuge in a cave, without food or water. They finally had to come out, and the subsequent details can be imagined by anyone familiar with the history of those days. Only one of the gang, Charlie Fuguet, escaped. He was afterward killed while engaged in "shooting up the town." Archie Reardon, deputy sheriff, did the job neatly, and when I went to Buffalo Gap his bones were in a packing box in the freight room.

I was at Buffalo Gap fifteen months and was rapidly growing tired of it. In the meantime the battleship *Maine* had been

torpedoed in Havana harbor in [1898], and over three hundred officers and men lost their lives. The people of the country were daily becoming more excited. One day the superintendent asked me if I would be willing to return to Fort Robinson, saying that they had tried out several Agents during my absence but none had been satisfactory, either to the customers or the Company. He added that they were expecting some "big business" at short notice, and the present Agent was totally incapable of handling it, and that I was the only man available who was sufficiently familiar with Army business to assure him that it would be satisfactorily handled, adding that the Army officers had requested that I be sent back. He added that the date of the expected "big business" was not yet determined.

This could only have one meaning. War with Spain. Needless to say, I accepted on the spot. He said he would probably make the transfer in about six weeks.

Events must have moved faster than expected, for a few days later, I received a message about ten o'clock at night, telling me to turn over the station to the Operator, and leave not later than the following evening. It was a busy day, but we carried out the program on schedule. I had only gotten fairly settled at Fort Robinson when messages began pouring in regarding getting the command ready for field service. Finally the instructions came stating the details of the move—that cars would be set in immediately and were to be loaded as rapidly as possible.<sup>16</sup>

The cars were set in. Every one was a selected car, and were put in as near perfect condition as possible--journals [part of an axle or shaft that turns in a bearing] were freshly packed and swimming in oil. The spirits of the men were high, as it seemed little more than a frolic. But I surely needed all my reserve. Most of the time I had to have my meals carried to the office, and my hours for sleep were few. At last came the night before the final movement. The superintendent had come up during the afternoon and left details entirely in my hands, giving me full authority to take any action and issue any instructions I saw fit, using his signature without referring to him. This surely was a wide discretion and one I have never known in any other case.

I had asked to have billing instructions given me during the

day so that I could make some advance preparation. I did not get them until 9:30 p.m. and the movement was to begin at daylight, the shipments itemized, routing over seven railroads, with tissue copies for each road.

I had asked the Chief Dispatcher to send an Operator to handle the message work and he sent Mike Brady. Mike reported during the afternoon, and while I was out on business, he connected with a pint of whiskey, and was just about out when I returned. I rolled him into bed, and told him not to show up again.

The night that followed cannot be described. I had had little sleep for the preceding three nights, and I had work in sight that would have kept three men busy until morning. How I ever got through it can only be explained by the old saying that "needs must, when the devil drives."

Daylight came, and with it seven engines with cabooses and crews. I was busy at my desk when I heard the order repeated on the wire, "Wyman will run extra Fort Robinson to Chadron." I looked up and saw a man sitting at the telegraph table. He explained to me that he was Dispatcher Byington of the Chadron force, and, knowing "Mike," felt sure that some help would be appreciated. Never was a man more welcome, and he stayed with me until he was no longer needed.

I had formed many warm friendships among the officers of the Ninth Cavalry, and little thought that I would ever meet most of them again, for on their return they were sent to Arizona for station.<sup>17</sup>

Finally the last train was gone. I looked about—where a few hours before had been feverish activity, now hardly anything living was in sight. I doubt if another rail movement of this size ever equalled this. Seven trains, hauling seventy-eight cars of passengers, stock and equipment, made better than fast passenger train time to Chicago, with all trains, including passenger trains, taking sidings for them. They went directly to Chickamauga, Georgia. There were a number of similar shipments arriving from many other military posts all about the same time at a little country station with very scant trackage facilities and the confusion cannot be imagined.

Life for the next few months consisted mostly of nervous strain. Families of officers and enlisted men had been left behind. Newspapers carried plenty of sensational news, some

of it authentic. One of my unpleasant duties was to deliver a message to two daughters of Col. John Morrison Hamilton, commanding the Regiment, that their father had been shot through the head while leading his Regiment.<sup>18</sup> Also several similar cases.

At Fort Robinson, our third child Ruth was born.<sup>19</sup> After the Cuban campaign was over, the Tenth Cavalry, also colored, was sent for garrison. Previous to this several troops of the Eleventh Cavalry were stationed there for a time. Previous to the Eleventh, my experience with white troops was confined to two companies of the Eighth Infantry, generally pretty good men, and many veterans of Indian campaigns. The Eleventh Cavalry had been recruited for the Cuban campaign and were generally not a very desirable class of men. Generally, the black troops were of the better class, as a good grade of white man would not enlist, since he could do better, while generally a Negro could do as well nowhere else.<sup>20</sup>

During my service at Fort Robinson, it was my fortune to meet many people who were among the prominent figures of the time. Among them were several secretaries of War, including William Howard Taft (later President), and Daniel S. Lamont, also many Generals, including General Greeley, who gained fame as a second Lieutenant in charge of a relief expedition searching for Sir John Franklin and his party who were sent out from England to explore the Arctic regions. None of the party were found alive, only a few skeletons. Major A. R. Chaffee was perhaps the most interesting figure of them all. With no influence and with nothing but his own efforts and ability, he made his way from buck private to Major General and Chief of Staff, the highest position in the Army.<sup>21</sup>

One of my laughable experiences was when Major General John McAllister Schofield, Commanding General of the Army, came on an inspection trip.<sup>22</sup> The regiment, mounted, met him at the Depot, and it was arranged that he should ride at the head of the command. This was before the days of the "Hollywood diet," and the old General had a very protuberant stomach. He put his foot in the stirrup and tried to swing aboard, but the aforesaid stomach struck the horse "amidships" and he came down faster than he went up. Other efforts produced like results, so I got a chair, placed it on the platform, and he finally succeeded. It can only be imagined

the amount of effort it took for those five hundred men to keep from laughing, but the discipline triumphed and the General rode proudly(?) at the head of the command to the parade ground.

Colored troops have often demonstrated that they have no superior as field soldiers. When led by white officers they will go through any hardship and seem to be absolutely fearless in battle,<sup>23</sup> but think it a disgrace to serve under a colored officer.<sup>24</sup>

The older children became of school age, and the surroundings were by no means desirable on that account,<sup>25</sup> so we concluded to move again at the first favorable opportunity. The Agency at Glen Rock, Wyoming, being open, I "bid it in" and was transferred to that point. It is situated on the North Platte River, at the foot of the Laramie Mountains. It was a coal mining town, the country around being fully stocked with cattle and sheep. It had a better class of people than in most mining towns, but still left much to be desired. I had a good business in coal and livestock. After a year, the coal vein came against a geologic "fault." The coal came against a solid wall of rock, and no one knew whether the original vein had moved up or down, or how far. The pillars of coal supporting the roof were pulled out, and the mine abandoned. Efforts to open a new mine resulted in coal of so poor a quality that production was abandoned. Express commissions, on which an Agent depends for a substantial part of his income, dwindled seventy-five percent. The outlook was not encouraging, financially.

About this time, the agent at Howells [located in northeast Nebraska, Colfax County], was advised by physicians to remove his wife to a high, dry location, and Glen Rock seemed to fill his requirements, and after considerable correspondence, the matter was arranged, and we traded stations, and I was in entirely new surroundings. Previously, I had been in the "short grass" country, and outside of merchandise my business had been mostly handling cattle and sheep. Howells was in a highly productive grain country, especially corn. Immense amounts of corn and hogs were shipped out, moving almost daily.

In the middle of a heavy corn season, train crews began to refuse to pick up my loaded cars of corn. Elevator managers

were calling for more grain cars than I could supply. After nearly a month of this I received a message directing me to have all corn ready and billed so that it could be picked up that night. The same conditions existed all over the corn belt. Never, before or since, has such an amount of corn been shipped into any market at any time.

The explanation was simple. One of the wise ones with plenty of money conceived the idea of cornering the corn crop and began buying on the Board of Trade for delivery at a given date. This was with the expectation that he would buy so much that the sellers would be "caught short" and have to settle with him at his own terms. At an agreed time the railroads were instructed to move corn as fast as possible, and every road leading to Chicago was crowded with train loads of corn moving at Express train speed. The corner was broken, and one of the most spectacular deals ever witnessed on the Board ended in the bankruptcy of the speculator who planned the deal.

Near the close of the year I was transferred to Nickerson, Nebraska, on the main line just north of Fremont. Here, our youngest daughter, Dorothy, was born. The three years, 1908-1911, were uneventful. Life in a Nebraska small town can be described in three words—"nothing ever happens." This applies to the eastern half of the state. People are born, raised and die in the same surroundings. After three and a half years, I began to feel the urge to again try the West. I took time off, and after a visit with my parents in Iowa, I set out for Portland, Oregon, planning possibly to locate in that country. After looking the situation over I decided not to do so, at least for the present.

En route home I stopped for a day at Crawford, Nebraska, where I found there was a vacancy as Operator on the CB&Q. I applied for it, and although there were numerous applicants from men already in the service, it was awarded to me.

I like the new location very much. The work was heavy and exacting. It was a heavy train order point. Almost every train going East had one, generally two, helper engines, going to Belmont,<sup>26</sup> and returning light. This greatly increased the train order business and required constant attention. Heavy ticket business, helper crews to call and lay up, and a large amount of clerical work, most of which, but for favoritism,



*Joseph Harmon Ballengee (front left) with the Gordon, Nebraska, band, about 1885.*



*J. A. Ballengee in band uniform.*



would have been assigned to other employees. Nothing particularly out of the ordinary occurred for six months except the birth of our youngest son, Walter, in October of 1911, at the end of which time I bid in the Agency at Ardmore, South Dakota, just north of the Nebraska line.<sup>27</sup>

The town was small, about 150 people, but furnished good living quarters and fuel, and working conditions were considerably better than those at Crawford.<sup>28</sup> The country had been generally settled years before, but drouth and hot winds caused most of the settlers to leave their homesteads. The country was going back to range conditions. There was a Government Experimental farm a mile north of the town, which is still maintained and has done much good in determining the best crops to be grown, the best varieties of such crops to plant, and the best methods of culture. It is still in operation and now has a Dairy Experimental Station in connection.

Ardmore at that time was known as one of the four "plague spots" on the Burlington system. Nothing portable could be left with any hope of seeing it again. One day, I was trying to get the Deputy Sheriff to cooperate with me in rounding up some coal thieves. He flatly refused, saying that I would never get anyone to testify in court as "everyone of us has got so much on everyone else that nobody dares testify." He spoke truly.

One of the best known characters of the town was "Doc" Middleton,<sup>29</sup> widely publicized in earlier days as a typical western outlaw. Newspapers showed him as a dashing, handsome man, utterly fearless, with a sort of "Robin Hood" disposition. During over 30 years that I had known him, I never found anything in his character to admire. He was an expert pistol shot, but aside from having served a penitentiary sentence for killing a soldier in a drunken brawl and being leader of a gang of horse thieves engaged in stealing Indian ponies, I never knew any cause for his notoriety. I have seen him show cowardice, but never bravery. He died of black erysipelas<sup>30</sup> in the Douglas, Wyoming jail where he was confined for violation of the liquor laws.

One night the station water tank [used for filling the tanks of the locomotive steam engines] holding 80,000 gallons of water burst its hoops around the wooden structure and fell on the track. Surely made a mess. One of the operators was nearly

under it and broke all speed records getting out of the way. On another night a large freight engine was hauling a heavy freight train going North when the boiler exploded, coming to rest 150 yards from the track. The Engineer, fireman and one brakeman were instantly killed. The cause of the explosion was never determined.

While at Ardmore, I took a vacation, making a visit to Iowa, thence going south through Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi, to Birmingham, Alabama. This, being my first trip to that region, was very interesting.

After three and one half years service at Ardmore [1915] I took advantage of a vacancy and bid in on my former position at Crawford, bought a nice home, and planned to stay there during the remainder of my service. The principal reason for this was that school facilities at Ardmore were poor, making it necessary to keep the two oldest, Paul and Helen, in school at Crawford, which was an unsatisfactory arrangement and quite expensive. I have never found a more congenial crowd to work with than the force at Crawford. Under a different agent the work was more equitably divided, but as business had greatly increased, there was plenty for every one to do, at times too much. The European war [World War I] had greatly increased business and we thought we were going about our limit. The line from Billings to Denver via Casper was carrying an equal or larger amount. A disastrous flood in Wyoming took out the track through Wind River Canyon; it took all summer to rebuild it. This threw all the traffic over to one line making necessary more trains, more engines and crews, and greatly increased the work. The engines sent us were oil burners, which had given much trouble on the Casper Division, and it took several weeks for our Mechanical Department to get them properly drafted, after which they were a great success.

Only one who has tried it can imagine the mental strain of work under such conditions. Work must be hundred percent accurate. Failure to deliver an order may result in immense damage to life and property. This in connection with all the business with the public filled every minute, and many times I would not have time to eat my lunch, or even take a drink of coffee. After several months of this, the new track was placed in service and normal conditions returned, to our great relief.

Finally the war was over. The Government had [during the war] taken over the operation of the roads, and left the railroads in bad condition. It had been necessary to take on many new employees, wages were unreasonably high, and discipline had been very lax during the war. Not content with that, the Shopmen's Union demanded a large increase of pay. The roads refused this and the men were called out on a strike. It surely seemed strange to have an armed guard stationed at the Depot to see that no one interfered with me. It was wholly unnecessary as there was never the slightest effort to molest me. It was known to the officials that I had tried to persuade some of the men to remain on duty, which may have been the reason for this. Meantime, I had asked for thirty days vacation, and in the middle of the strike I was told I could go. Next day, I left for California.

On my return to duty, nothing of unusual interest occurred. I was kept busy. It was the kind of work that I enjoyed and there was surely plenty of that kind of enjoyment. Many times, the work accumulated until I did not see how I would ever get through it, but I always did, without delay to trains. After I had been at Crawford nearly ten years, we received notice that it had been decided to take the operators from the station to the signal tower C&NW-[Burlington] crossing and have them perform the duties of levermen in addition to their other duties.<sup>31</sup> This was a most unwelcome move, as only one of the three operators was physically able to handle the levers. It was necessary for me to look for another location. I bid in third trick at Seneca, Nebraska, which was at that time a freight terminal, and a hot job.<sup>32</sup> In addition to a heavy wire [telegraphy] job, I had ticket sales, clerical work, acted as night yardmaster, and called crews. Hours were from midnight until 8 a.m. After about two months of this, the Agency at Antioch [Nebraska] came open, and I bid that in. I had left my family at Crawford, as the three youngest children were in school there.

Antioch was unique in its way. During the European war it was found that the country for miles around was underlaid with great quantities of potash, which was urgently needed in the manufacture of explosives. Seven immense plants, costing about one million dollars each, had been erected and produced large quantities of potash. One of these had just been

completed when the Armistice was signed. It never produced a pound, and while I was there, the plants were being dismantled and buildings torn down. The Residences were hauled overland to surrounding towns. From a population of 3,000, Antioch was reduced to less than 200.<sup>33</sup> Thirteen men had composed [the] station force. This had dwindled to an Agent and night operator with practically nothing to do. I had taken it over largely to get daylight hours—also it [was] somewhat better financially—but it was in the Sand Hills. Nothing but sand as far as the eye could see.

After two months of this, the Agency at Rochford, S.D. was advertised, and I bid it in [1924].<sup>34</sup> I knew I would like the mountains [Black Hills], and I wanted to get in a summer's trout fishing. The situation was ideal. The Depot was a mile from town in Rapid Canyon, with Rapid Creek, a swift mountain stream within fifty yards of the Depot. I had no trouble in getting all the trout I could eat. There were several old smelters near—relics of the early gold fever, but while there was gold almost everywhere, the percentage was too low for profitable operation. There are large deposits of "blue ore," refractory, which are fairly rich, but no method has ever been discovered of extracting it on a paying basis. All over the country are numerous prospect holes, and I would sometimes find an old "location notice," where someone thought he had discovered a paying deposit.

I got plenty of target practice. Chipmunks were there in hundreds and were destructive as rats, and I surely slaughtered them. They were the worst pest I have ever encountered.

Beside frequent week-end visits, the family spent the summer vacations with me. I had taken enough bedding, kitchen utensils, table ware, and furniture so that we were comfortably fixed. The trout fishing interested all of us and [the fish] were greatly enjoyed at mealtime. Climbing the mountains and roaming through the forests of pine and spruce occupied our leisure time, and the summer vacations were all too short. A large family of woodchucks had their den on the mountain side in front of the Depot, and were tame enough that we could approach quite near. During the month of November, open season on deer, the neighbors usually kept me well supplied with venison, and I got an occasional grouse and "fool hen" [spruce grouse]—fine eating.



*Mary Rosa Ballengee holds daughter Ruth (marked) with Helen Ballengee seated in right foreground at Howells, Nebraska, 1908.*

Much of the scenery was beautiful—the mountains, covered with pine and spruce, while along the creek were abundant growths of white birch and quaking aspen. These, with willow thickets, were almost the only trees native to that vicinity. At night the wind would be roaring in the pines on the mountain tops, while in the canyon there would not be so much as a breeze, and a little waterfall in Rapid Creek, just above the Depot, would sing anyone to sleep. Deer, bobcats, porcupines might be expected, with a few mountain lions, but were seldom to be seen.

I had now been two summers and two winters in Rochford, and thoroughly enjoyed it, were it not that school facilities obliged me to keep the family elsewhere. But the Agency at Dunning, Neb.,<sup>35</sup> came open with better schools, and more compensation, so I bid it in. Dorothy finished High School that summer [1926] leaving only Walter for school, so the family joined me at Dunning after school closed.

Dunning is about the center of the Sandhills on the Loup River, a swift, narrow, shallow stream. The Dismal River empties into the Loup, just East of the town. It was quite a heavy job, especially for merchandise shipments for the town of Brewster [the inland county seat], all of which had to be stored [awaiting transport to Brewster].

The local situation was most unfortunate. The Ku Klux Klan was at their peak of influence. Locally they were in control of the school and church. At both places the propagation of Klan doctrine was the principal occupation. The big event would be the burning of a fiery cross, which was a frequent occurrence. About half the population of the town were anti-Klan, and feeling ran high. After a bitterly contested election, the "Antis" regained a majority of the school board, and the Klan moved their paraphernalia to other quarters during the night after election. The feeling increased in bitterness daily.<sup>36</sup> I had refused to align myself actively with either faction, but the situation was not pleasant, and I welcomed a chance to get out of it, going to Berwyn, Neb., a good little town east of the Sandhills, a productive country in good years, but quite subject to drouth.

Berwyn was a nice little job, work not too heavy, good hours, congenial people, and fairly remunerative. The greatest drawback was the school. Since that was an important consideration, I bid in the agency at Mason City, Nebraska, in 1927. It had a good high school and over twice the population of Berwyn. The town did a good business. A large amount of livestock was shipped from there, and there were heavy grain shipments in good years. When drouth occurred, many cars of corn were shipped in. The people were congenial, and I became greatly attached to them.

Shortly after my move to Mason City my daughter Ruth resigned her office with the Western Union at Valentine, came home, and was married to Henry M. Wortman, a railroad telegrapher. Paul and his wife Effie came from Los Angeles and Helen, her husband, Ed Harvey and the boys came from Auburn, Nebraska. Dorothy came from Chadron and Walter was still living at home. On this occasion our entire family was together for the first time in several years [at Mason City, Nebraska] and, as is now certain, for the last time until the final gathering hereafter.

Although I was still willing and able to work, I retired from the railroad in 1932, at the age of 70.

## NOTES

1. "Jerking lightning" was a contemporary phrase for operating a telegraph. The phrase is used in the December 15, 1893, *Crawford* (Nebraska) *Gazette*.

2. The author recalls being told that while at Gordon, Joseph Ballengee taught his younger brothers and sisters and neighbors' children in the kitchen of his mother's home. One of his pupils while at Gordon was Arthur Bowring, who later became a rancher in the Merriman area and a state legislator (Nebraska House of Representatives, 1927, 1929; Nebraska Senate, 1930, 1931).

3. Pine Ridge Indian Agency was established in 1879 for the Oglala Sioux about 50 miles northeast of Fort Robinson in South Dakota. Roger T. Grange Jr., "Outpost on the Plains," *Nebraska History*, 39 (September, 1958), 226 ff.

4. James H. Cook (1857-1942), cattleman, cowboy, big game hunter, Indian agent, guide, and author, was a notable figure in Nebraska history. As a friend and confidant of Red Cloud and other Indian leaders, Cook played an important role in making the transition to reservation life easier for northwestern Nebraska Indians and whites. Those who knew him in his later years were best acquainted with the great fossil beds discovered and developed on his Agate Springs Ranch in Sioux County. Cook wrote one of the basic reminiscences of the opening of the West, *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier*, first published in 1923.

5. Andrews, Sioux County, reached its peak population of 45 in 1910. The railroad station, according to one source, may have been named for Jew Andrews, a locating engineer for the Chicago and North Western Railroad. Elton A. Perkey, *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1982), 183.

6. During the summer of 1885, the first elements of the 9th Cavalry had arrived at Fort Robinson. The 9th and 10th, the Army's only two all-Negro cavalry regiments, both served at the fort, the 9th during the 1880s and 1890s and the 10th in the early 1900s. Roger T. Grange Jr., "Fort Robinson, Outpost on the Plains," 226-227.

7. For a description of life in the Crawford area during the 1890s, see Betty Loudon, ed., "Pioneer Pharmacist J. Walter Moyer's Notes on Crawford and Fort Robinson in the 1890s," *Nebraska History*, 58 (Spring, 1977), 89-117.

8. Civilian authorities became alarmed in the fall of 1890 over the "ghost dance," a ritualistic worship by the Plains Indians of Wovoka, prophet of the Great Spirit, who they believed had come to restore the game and drive out the white men. General Nelson A. Miles was sent out from Chicago to take charge of the situation. The whole ghost dance disturbance culminated in the killing of a band of Sioux at Wounded Knee, northeast of Fort Robinson on December 29, 1890. Grange, "Fort Robinson, Outpost on the Plains," 227-228.

9. Army units at Fort Robinson in 1890-1891 were elements of the 9th Cavalry and 8th Infantry Regiments. From 1902-1907 the 10th Cavalry Regiment was at Fort Robinson. U.S. Army, Monthly Post Returns, microfilm, at Fort Robinson Museum.

10. A council held with the Sioux in the fall of 1876 in the White River Valley resulted in a treaty ceding the Black Hills to the whites. The Manypenny Commission, named for chairman George W. Manypenny, also former commissioner of Indian Affairs, began to meet with the Indians at Red Cloud Agency on September 7 and secured the last necessary signatures on October 27, 1876. Grant K. Anderson, "Samuel D. Hinman and the Opening of the Black Hills," *Nebraska History*, 60 (Winter, 1979), 536-537; James C. Olson, *Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 224-230.

11. Sioux Chief Crazy Horse, a participant in the 1876 annihilation of General George A. Custer's command at the little Big Horn, was himself killed at Fort Robinson on September 7, 1877, when soldiers suspected him of resisting arrest. Grange, "Outpost on the Plains," 215-216.

12. The original Red Cloud Agency (No. 1) was located on the Platte River in

Wyoming just west of the Nebraska line near present Henry, Nebraska. During the summer of 1873 the agency was moved to a new site on the White River. "Fort Robinson Outpost on the Plains," 192-193.

13. The diary of Captain Augustus W. Corliss at Fort Robinson contains this entry on February 15, 1889: "A cold stormy day....A car with the U.S. Fish Commissioners here to put fish in the White River, Soldier Creek." This would have been a special railroad car traveling on the Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Valley tracks. The incident may have started the popular sport of fishing at the fort. Captain Corliss' diary is in the Western History Room, Denver Public Library.

14. The 9th Cavalry Band was directed by Carl Gung'l, referred to by the February 5, 1897, *Crawford Tribune* as "a gentleman whose abilities as a composer and arranger of marches have earned for him a national reputation second only to [John Phillip] Sousa." Loudon, "J. Walter Moyer," 102.

15. Buffalo Gap was at the juncture of two trails to the Black Hills mining communities, one leading to Custer in the Hills, and the other staying outside the mountains to Rapid City. William E. Lass, *An Account of Overland Freighting* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1972), 198.

16. On April 20, 1898, 472 officers and enlisted men of the 9th and the 6th Cavalry left Fort Robinson for Chickamauga Park, Georgia. Accompanying them were 440 horses, 111 mules, 24 wagons, and two ambulances. Fort Robinson Post Returns, 1895-1906: April, 1898 (NARS RG94) Records of the Office of the Adjutant General, Nebraska State Historical Society, as cited in Loudon, "J. Walter Moyer," 111.

17. The 9th was later sent to Cuba and the Philippine Islands before returning to the U.S. Further newspaper accounts and personal reminiscences of the departure from Fort Robinson are found in Loudon, "J. Walter Moyer," 111-113.

18. Hamilton was killed at the Battle of San Juan, Santiago, Cuba, July 1, 1898. Francis Heitman, *Historical Register...of the United States Army* (Washington: GPO, 1903), I, 493.

19. Jeanette Gilsdorf, daughter of Ruth Ballengee Wortmann, recalled family stories of Mrs. Wortman's birth in a March 24, 1974, *Omaha World-Herald Magazine* of the *Midlands* account. Joseph Ballengee was unable to return with the Fort Robinson post doctor through a January blizzard before the baby arrived. The delivery was performed by a Mrs. Hill, a Red Cross nurse who had served with the 9th Cavalry in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War.

20. After the Spanish-American War, the 10th (all-Negro), 8th and 12th Cavalry regiments, in that order, followed, the 9th at the Fort Robinson Garrison. Grange, "Fort Robinson, Outpost on the Plains," 229.

21. Adna R. Chaffee, a Union veteran of the Civil War, later served in the Indian wars in Texas and the Southwest before coming to Fort Robinson. He became a brigadier general in 1898. Heitman, I, 292.

22. Civil War Union General John McAllister Schofield, a West Point graduate, 1853, served as Army commander in chief from 1888-1895. Heitman, I, 865.

23. During the height of the Ghost Dance troubles in November and December of 1890, the 9th Cavalry was under the command of Major Guy V. Henry, who was prominent in the history of Camp Robinson during the Indian War days. "Under Major Henry's leadership the 9th Cavalry made several forced marches at the height of the troubles and although they did not see action in the battle of Wounded Knee they did fight a skirmish a few days later when, in classic movie style, they arrived on the scene in time to save elements of another regiment which were surrounded and under attack." Grange, "Fort Robinson, Outpost on the Plains," 288.

24. The oft-repeated statement that Negro enlisted men did not like to serve under Negro officers has little validity. For one thing, there were practically no Negro officers with whom the theory might have been tried.

25. Children from the fort were sent to Crawford to school in a canvas-covered wagon driven by a soldier.



26. Belmont, located about 10 miles south of Crawford on the Burlington route, is noted for having the only railroad tunnel in Nebraska. The Belmont Tunnel was finished August 28, 1889. Passenger service was discontinued on the line on August 24, 1969, but many freight trains continue to use the line. "Out of Old Nebraska," February 7, 1973, Nebraska State Historical Society. Communication from Curator Vance Nelson, Fort Robinson Museum, Crawford, Nebraska.

27. Ballengee's shift at Ardmore was 8 a.m.—4 p.m. Another operator handled the 12 a.m.—8 a.m. shift and was available to relieve Ballengee, who now had leisure time in the evenings for several activities. Ballengee led the town band (he could play cornet) and sang in the choir.

28. One drawback of living at Ardmore was the poor quality of the drinking water. Potable water had to be brought by tank car from Marsland.

29. David C. (Doc) Middleton and his horse thieves operated during the 1870s. He was in the state penitentiary from September 29, 1879, until June 18, 1883, for horse stealing. He was jailed for bootlegging in Douglas, Wyoming, where he died in 1913. Loudon, "J. Walter Moyer," 109, 111, 117.

30. Erysipelas is an acute infectious disease of the skin characterized by local inflammation and fever.

31. A leverman operated manually the large levers which switched the position of rails.

32. Seneca, located in the Sandhills in Thomas County, reached its peak population of 476 in 1920. The railroad station, according to one source, may have been named by a railroad contractor from Seneca, Kansas. Established by the Lincoln Land Company, Seneca was defeated by Thedford in the 1920 county seat contest. Perkey, *Place Names*, 189.

33. By the 1920 census, the population was 764, Elton Perkey, *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1982). Ballengee's estimate of 3,000 during World War II is probably high. No people lived in Antioch in 1983.

34. Ballengee served only two months each at Seneca and Antioch, and moved to Rochford in September or October of 1924, according to Ruth Ballengee Wortman.

35. Dunning, a town of 450 in 1910, was the principal settlement in Blaine County, though Brewster (population about 200), an inland town, was the county seat. *Perkey*, 10.

36. Philip K. Gardner, secretary of the Custer County Historical Society at Broken Bow, has discovered some mention of the Ku Klux Klan in Custer County during the 1920s. The 1925 Custer County July 4th celebration was "staged by the Ku Klux Klan" (*Custer County Chief*, July 2, 1925). A Klan parade marked Independence Day the same year in nearby Merna (*Merna Messenger*, July 10, 1925), where a cross burning and a Klan-conducted funeral were reported the following year (*Merna Messenger*, March 19, 1926; June 18, 1926). Ballengee's statement that "propagation of Klan doctrine was the principal occupation" is doubtless exaggeration.

Robert A. Wirz, resident of Dunning, who lived in the town in 1925, says that the Klan numbered about 40 members. Its existence in the area was strongly opposed, and the Klan mania, which consisted of burning several crosses, soon disappeared. Interview, Wirz by Ruth Van Ackeren, Omaha, May, 1984.