

F. A. Harmon Book of Correspondence – 1898-1899

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This binder of correspondence consists of letters written by F.A. Harmon, Division Supervisor of the Fremont, Elkhorn and Missouri Valley Railroad in the late 1890s which was headquartered out of Chadron, Nebraska.

The significance of Harmon's letters is they give the reader a feel for the power the railroad wielded at this time period in the region. Since the railroad was responsible for laying out many of the early towns and had a land division, some of the correspondence deals with merchants and others making application for land ownership near railroad right of way or lots owned by the railroad within a town.

Harmon's correspondence also details the day to day activities of running the railroad and dealing with employees as well as giving the reader a glimpse into the end of the Open Range era on the Plains. There are numerous correspondences that deal with stock claims for livestock hit by trains as well as livestock that died while being transported on trains and even fires started by trains that burned pastures and hay. Owners of stock who shipped on the F.E. M.V. were more likely to receive compensation than those who did not use the line for shipping or were infrequent customers. Even in cases where the railroad was found not to be at fault for an animal being killed by a train, if the owner was a good customer, Harmon would offer to split the cost of the loss. A letter dated Dec. 30, 1898 discusses allowing T.B. Irwin, a large rancher in the Gordon area, to place telegraph wire on railroad fence posts so he could extend the telegraph from Gordon to his ranch. Location was key. Another letter written by Harmon was in reference to a Mr. J.H. White from Chadron who ranched at Oelrichs, South Dakota asking for travel favors. Harmon leaned toward denying the request due to the fact that the F.E.M.V. was the only railroad this rancher could ship on so there was no point in giving free transportation between Chadron and Oelrichs as he could not take his shipping business elsewhere (p. 496). If a rancher was located near the Burlington or another railroad, Harmon seemed to be more interested in obtaining or keeping their shipping business and would be more apt to allow travel favors.

There is also extensive correspondence dealing with the sheep industry and the railroad's involvement. For instance a letter dated December 22, 1898 to a Mr. Wm Hines – Casper, Wyoming discussed advertising for a particular sheep shearer who was going to set up in the railroad shipping yards at Wolton, WY with steam driven sheep shearing tools. The letter also mentions the fact that the railroad had dipping vats within their yards for use by livestock owners.

Harmon appears to have been a very meticulous supervisor what some today would call a micro-manager. He had the ability to plan ahead and try to avoid problems and that can be seen in much of his correspondence to his employees. For instance on Dec. 22, 1898 he sent a letter to Mr. G.C. Newman, Agent – Hot Springs, SD and told him that the last time he was at that station he noticed a 'sheep board' (used for loading sheep on the top deck of cars) between the Schlitz Brewing Company's

Beer Vault and the stock yards. He told the agent to find it and take care of it as it will be needed soon to load out sheep from that station.

Mr. Harmon was responsible for all freight and there are numerous instances of him trying to account for missing freight or items that were damaged. He even wanted a report on a broken wash basin from one specific passenger car and in doing so ascertained it was broken by the cleaning crew either by dropping ice into it or allowing a bucket of water to ride in it.

It is interesting the extent of business the railroad conducted such as locating Chinese laborers from Deadwood, South Dakota for a Mrs. Turner who owned a hotel in Douglas, Wyoming. Her letter of inquiry was at first ignored. This was followed by a letter from De Forest Richards –Governor of Wyoming and banking partner and brother of Bartlett Richards founder of First National Bank in Chadron. After receiving the letter from De Forest Richards the railroad agent at Deadwood was assigned the task of finding Mrs. Turner a cook and helper as requested. A later letter from Harmon to the Agent in Deadwood asks the agent to find references for the laborers and mentions checking with Wing Tsue, a prominent Deadwood Chinese businessman. The Richards family was treated very well by the railroad as a letter from Harmon to the Conductor of Number 5 – G.W. Brooks (Dec. 30, 1898) details. (etal. p. 495)

Dear Sir:

Bartlett Richards and family will occupy car 020 in your train tomorrow from Chadron to Orin Junction. Please give the care of the car during the day your personal attention see that the fires and everything necessary tending to the comfort of the occupants of the car is looked after carefully... (pg. 386)

It is also revealed in Harmon's correspondence the numerous buildings the railroad owned and then leased out in order to guarantee freight shipped on their line. For instance a letter dated Dec. 28, 1898 to Mr. J.H. Ballingee – Fort Robinson, Nebraska discusses the transfer of 450 cavalry to Ft. Rielly and the Post Exchange ordering a car of beer. The unwritten understanding between the railroad and the Post Exchange Officer was that the railroad held title to the cold storage building were such items were kept and as such the beer would be shipped over F.E.M V. lines. Harmon instructs Ballingee to be sure that he "makes the acquaintance without delay "of the new officer and explain to him the status of the railroad's relations with the Post Exchange and the Cold Storage Vault owned by the railroad.

Many letters also discuss lease agreements for mills and grain storage facilities near the tracks. When grain prices were low, the railroad reduced the rental of the storage facilities and raised them when the market improved. The F.E.M.V. even owned the 'eating house' in Cody, Nebraska. In December of 1898 the leaser, Mr. Underwood committed suicide. Mr. Harmon in January of 1899 sent a letter to the agent at Cody asking if Mrs. Underwood intended to continue the eating house business and if so what her given name was so they could put it on the lease (p. 479).

Harmon had an uncanny way of keeping tabs on who was doing what within his division. Whether it was someone selling coal out of Wyoming or some type of ore out of Deadwood, he knew how and when they were transporting it and if it was not on a F.E.M V. line, he sent a letter to an Agent or person

in charge of that particular area, to find out why. He also was responsible for maintenance of all the railroad property from engines to right of way and he was not beyond sending a scolding letter to a conductor who he believed did not maintain an engine properly or an agent who failed to follow procedure in sealing cars. On one occasion some freight arrived in Crawford damaged and after an investigation Harmon discovered it received 'rough handling' by a baggage man in Chadron and the damages were deducted from his wages.

There is even evidence shown in a letter that the railroad leased school land for 'cattle trail' purposes so customers could trail their cattle to rail road stock yards (pg. 411). The railroad also investigated other potential freight hauling business ventures such as a rock crushing quarries or coal businesses selling various grades of coal. In the winter of 1898 they went into the ice business, leasing lakes in the Sand Hills and putting railroad employees to work cutting and packing ice onto freight cars. The collection contains several letters to a Mr. C.C. Hughes, General Superintendent in Omaha with a summation of what was shipped over the rails and how it compared to the previous year thus detailing the economy of the region.

This book also contains some personal correspondence that shows favors flowed both ways. A letter dated January 3, 1899 is a thank you to a Mr. H.D. Clark of Hot Springs, South Dakota for tickets to baths at the Hot Springs (pg. 457). Other favors include Harmon's request for a large Christmas tree for his Sunday school at the Episcopal Church in Chadron be shipped out of the Black Hills.

This valuable collection of letters contains primary source information of life at the turn of the last century on the High Plains and has something of interest for anyone studying history of the development of the area after 1890.