

Song slides of the 1890's—

THE LETTER EDGED IN BLACK



I was standing by my window  
yesterday morning,  
Without a thought of sorrow  
or of care,



When I saw the postman coming  
down the pathway  
With such a happy smile  
and jaunty air.



Oh, he rang the bell and  
whistled while he waited,  
And then he said, "Good morning  
to you, Jack."



But little he knew the sorrow  
he had brought me  
When he handed me that  
letter edged in black.



Then with trembling hand  
I took the letter from him;  
I broke the seal  
and this is what it said:



"Come home, my boy, your poor  
father wants you:  
Come home, my boy, your  
mother dear is dead."



It said "Forgive the angry  
words I've spoken;  
You know I never meant them,  
don't you, Jack?"



"Oh, the angels bear me  
witness, I am asking  
Your forgiveness in this  
letter edged in black."

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## A Tear-Jerking Illustrated Song of 1897, "The Letter Edged in Black"

JOHN W. RIPLEY

WHEN Robert B. Hansford was recounting his activities as a professional photographer to a reporter representing one of those spasmodic but ever-optimistic booster publications, *Kansas City, Kansas—Past and Present Progress & Prosperity* (about 1908), he failed to mention his brief but notable career as a producer of song slides. Perhaps Hansford was unaware of the fact that a series of hand-colored slides he made in 1897 as illustrations for a prime tear-jerker, "The Letter Edged in Black," represented the first photographic song slides ever produced in the state of Kansas. Possibly they were the first produced west of the Mississippi river. Moreover, this remarkable set of song illustrations may be credited with contributing largely to the national popularity of the first of many ballads composed by Hattie Nevada, then an unknown amateur song writer of Kansas City, Mo.

The booster brochure did have this much to say about Hansford and his elegant studio:

The studio of R. B. Hansford at 542 Minnesota Avenue suggests the true artistic spirit in its equipment and fittings and with spacious reception rooms, tapestried and hung with beautiful examples of photographic art, presents a picture of elegance and invitation to repose. This studio was established in 1872 and is decidedly in the lead among similar enterprises in this section. Five skilled artists are employed and 2,400 square feet of floor space is occupied by the operating-room, parlors, etc., which are complete in every detail of modern equipment. A specialty is made of high grade carbon and platinum work in all its branches. Mr. R. B. Hansford was born and educated in Carthage, Ill. He is a graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts at Philadelphia, and is a painter of note, having followed portrait painting previous to locating here.<sup>1</sup>

JOHN W. RIPLEY is the newly installed president of the Kansas State Historical Society. Long a business executive and civic leader in Topeka, Ripley is a former editor of *Business Week* and has contributed articles and illustrations to *American Heritage* and other publications.

1. Transcript courteously furnished by Harry M. Trowbridge, curator, Wyandotte County Historical Society, Kansas City, Kan.

Hansford's reputation as an artistic photographer was what undoubtedly brought to his studio Frank H. Woodbury, proprietor of the Kansas City (Mo.) Talking Machine Co., with an order for some very special lantern slides. Having just published "The Letter Edged in Black," composed by his wife, Hattie Nevada,

**The Letter Edged in Black**

Words and Music By  
**HATTIE NEVADA.**

PUBLISHED BY THE  
**KANSAS CITY TALKING MACHINE CO.**  
KANSAS CITY MO.

OLIVER DITSON CO., Boston, Mass.  
 LYON & HEALY, Chicago, Ill.  
 J. B. FLEMING, Milwaukee, Wis.  
 WILSON & SONS MUSIC CO., Minneapolis, Minn.  
 WILEY & ALLEN CO., Portland, Ore.  
 NATIONAL MUSIC CO., Chicago, Ill.  
 CHAS. B. JOHNSON & CO., New York.  
 T. H. & J. JOHNSON & SONS, Baltimore, Md.  
 L. SCHWENK & CO., New Orleans, La.  
 THEO. FRISCH, Philadelphia, Pa.  
 A. B. ROBERTS, Springfield, Mass.  
 BOSTONIAN TRAY & CO., San Francisco, Cal.  
 METROPOLITAN MUSIC CO., New York.  
 W. J. GENDRON MUSIC CO., Kansas City.  
 CARL HOFFMAN, Kansas City.

Title page of the original sheet music.

Woodbury, taking a tip from the major music publishers, decided to promote the composition as a song-play or illustrated song. He commissioned Hansford to engage and photograph models as they enacted the sad tale of "The Letter Edged in Black."

Invented only two years before, in 1895, photographic song slides were revolutionizing the merchandizing of sheet music. In cabarets, rathskellers, and theaters where new songs were introduced, the song-play was the very latest thing. A vocalist, at the conclusion of his solo accompanied by projected slides, would invite the audience to join him in singing the chorus as the words appeared on the screen. What followed—the degree of co-operation—often determined the fate of a song. A rousing songfest, with the chorus repeated several times, was enough to send a goodly number of the patrons to their nearest friendly music dealers for copies of the sheet music.

Without the assistance of Hansford's lantern slides the chances are that "The Letter Edged in Black" would have slipped quietly into that particular corner of oblivion reserved for the works of unknown composers and publishers. Instead, the song-play was performed in countless night spots and theaters across the nation. Its popularity is indicated by phonograph recordings on three major labels. Recently the ballad has been enjoying a revival by the ever growing cult of folk singers but however sorrowful their renditions, the emotional impact can never approach the song-play version of the good old days, with Robert Hansford's lantern slides.<sup>2</sup>

2. Robert B. Hansford, aged 75, died in Kansas City, Kan., on June 10, 1929. Two daughters survived: Mrs. Marguerite Diemer and Mrs. Mary Bell Longshore. His studios were located at various times at 945, 542, and 644 Minnesota Ave.—*Kansas City Kansan*, June 10, 1929.