Building the Kansas Pacific Railway:
The Letters of Charles M. Knight, 1869-1870

edited by H. Roger Grant

One momentous event in the history of the United States occurred with the building of the transcontinental railroads. Appropriately, May 10, 1869, is firmly implanted in American history textbooks as the date when the "Golden Spike" ceremony celebrated the joining of the Union Pacific Railroad and Central Pacific Railroad near the Great Salt Lake, thus making cross-country rail travel possible. Part of this story of spectacular achievement involves the Kansas Pacific Railway, a road which, like the Union Pacific and Central Pacific, traced its beginnings to the Pacific railroad acts passed by Congress during the early 1860s.

The purpose of the Kansas Pacific was to "feed" the Union Pacific-Central Pacific, which linked Council Bluffs, Iowa, with Sacramento, California, and by 1870, did just that. The Kansas Pacific built westward from Kansas City and connections with the East, to Denver, and through a subsidiary, the Denver Pacific, it reached the Union Pacific at Cheyenne, Wyoming.1

At the end of the Civil War the plains west of eastern Kansas and Nebraska, the high plains, and the Rocky Mountain region were uninhabited by whites, except for some widely scattered miners, trappers, and traders. But after railroads entered this region, these vacant lands vanished quickly. Immigrants from the eastern states and Europe swarmed into the area to make permanent settlements. These newcomers, most of whom were farmers, either filed for free homesteads from the federal government or purchased railroad lands. Thus, the construction of the Kansas Pacific (after 1880 part of the Union Pacific system) developed large sections of Kansas and Colorado.

The Kansas Pacific took shape quickly. Although the company technically began in 1855 when the territorial legislature of Kansas chartered the Leavenworth, Pawnee and Western, the firm remained merely a "paper" proposition. Reorganized in 1863 as the Union Pacific, Eastern Division, the rail-building process commenced immediately, and on December 18, 1864, the road opened between Kansas City and Lawrence, a distance of thirty-eight miles. Surveying and construction work continued. The company reached Salina on April 29, 1867, and Phil Sheridan, 405 miles west of Kansas City, on July 3, 1868. Financial problems, however, prevented the Union Pacific, Eastern Division, from pushing farther west for about a year. Renamed the Kansas Pacific on April 5, 1869, and re-energized with additional federal subsidies, the railroad moved speedily and with few problems toward Denver, 235 miles from the end-of-track. And by September 1, 1870, patrons could avail themselves of freight and passenger trains of the self-proclaimed "Smoky Hill Route" from Kansas City to Colorado's territorial capital.2

Although historians have discussed aspects of the construction of the Kansas Pacific, the human element remains mostly untold. No diaries or letters of participants in the building process through Kansas and

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2. Anderson, Kansas West, 15; Petrowski, "The Kansas Pacific," 43, 162. The town of Phil Sheridan was at first called Sheridan, then Phil Sheridan, then Sheridan. See John Rytjeld, Kansas Place-names (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 384-87.
Colorado have been published. Fortunately, however, a sizable collection of letters written by Charles M. Knight (1848-1941), a young assistant to the road's chief engineer, Col. W. H. Greenwood, have survived. Written between 1869 and 1870 by Knight to his parents in Vermont, these documents remained in the Knight family until they were given to the University of Akron's American History Research Center in 1986. They are published with the permission and assistance of Charles Knight's two granddaughters, Lovina May Knight and Lillian Knight. 

The author of these letters, Charles Mellen Knight, lived a remarkably full life. Born near Dummerston, Vermont, in the southeastern part of that state, he grew up on the farm his great-grandfather, Jonathan Knight (1731-1803), established on the eve of the American Revolution. Charles' father, Joel Knight, Jr. (1799-1874), to whom some of his letters are addressed, likewise continued a family tradition and tilled "Orchard Dale." But Charles did not choose to become a farmer. Like many Vermont lads of the nineteenth century, he sought his fortune outside the state. Fortunately, a good education made that quest easier. Knight attended Westbrook Seminary in Deering, Maine, and between 1868 and 1873 he studied at Tufts College, affiliated with the Universalist Church, in Medford, Massachusetts. It was after his freshman year that he temporarily left Tufts to work for the Kansas Pacific in various capacities, including bookkeeping and surveying. After earning his bachelor's degree with honors, Knight did postgraduate work in science at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Tufts granted him a master's degree in 1878.

In September 1875, Knight began a thirty-eight year association with Buchtel College (after 1913 the University of Akron) where he later received an honorary doc-


4. The author wishes to thank Caroline J. Pardee of Akron, Ohio, for bringing the letters of Charles M. Knight to his attention.

5. "Orchard Dale," the Knight family farm, consisted of approximately one hundred twenty acres, located in Windham County, Vermont, several miles south of the village of Dummerston.

This photograph of Charles M. Knight was probably taken in the spring of 1873, the time in which he graduated from Tufts College in Medford, Massachusetts.

and Indians, while feared, were more pests than threats. Knight's missives also reveal how the attitudes of an uprooted and obviously homesick New Englander changed toward the Great Plains. Initially, he seemed uncomfortable on the mostly treeless and dry landscape, but he came to appreciate the region's beauty and economic promise. Since Knight possessed a love of science, his descriptive passages of Kansas and Colorado are surely more complete than if they were made by a less interested observer. Although Charles Knight had only limited collegiate training, his sharpness of mind penetrated his prose; he was an alert and thoughtful young man who participated in a significant episode of American history.

Phil Sheridan, Kansas
May 17, 1869
Dear Ones All,

....I had a pleasant trip up from Lawrence—we were from noon till the next day night coming from Lawrence—400 miles. We saw Buffalo and Antelope and I made my first shot at a Buffalo, but did not disable him. Hal7 came in a few hours after I arrived so I was all right and since then Hal has found work enough for me to do, so I have not thought of being homesick.... This place, named after our brilliant cavalry officer,7 like all of these frontier settlements, is a low, base place. Rough men and women gather here. But the railroad employ[e]es are a set by themselves and do not trouble the town people. Now about our office. It is a car—one

7. "Hal" was Knight's brother-in-law, Col. William Henry "Hal" Greenwood (1832-1880). A native of Dublin, New Hampshire, and an 1852 graduate of Norwich University in Northfield, Vermont, he soon began work as a railroad surveyor in Illinois. When the Civil War began, Greenwood enlisted in the Fifty-first Illinois Volunteer Infantry and quickly won a commission as a first lieutenant. By war's end he was a colonel. During the latter part of the conflict, Greenwood headed the topographical service for the Army of the Cumberland. In time he joined the Kansas Pacific as its chief engineer and received national recognition for supervising construction of 150 miles of track in 100 working days and for laying 10.25 miles of line in only 10 hours. After completion of the Kansas Pacific, Greenwood worked closely with Gen. William J. Palmer in his various railroad projects, including the Denver and Rio Grande. Greenwood died in August 1880; Mexican bandits murdered him while he conducted railroad survey work for General Palmer.

8. The reference is to Gen. Philip Henry Sheridan (1831-1888), an Irish immigrant and an 1853 graduate of the United States Military Academy. "Little Phil," his popular nickname, served with distinction in the Union forces during the Civil War and held command positions with the Army of the Cumberland, the Army of the Potomac, and the Army of the Shenandoah. Following the conflict, Sheridan administered the Military District of the Gulf and later the Department of the Missouri where he conducted forays against the Arapahoe, Cheyenne, Comanche, and Kiowa. He later headed several other military units before his death.

W. H. "Hal" Greenwood, the brother-in-law of Charles Knight and Kansas Pacific official, posed for this portrait about 1875.

fourth is partitioned of[f] and is Hal's private office—as I am private sec. of course I have admittance—it contains a bed, writing desk, washstand, office chairs—and is to be carpeted and papered. The other and larger part of my office—through the centre is a long table at which I write. [O]n one side is a bench or table on which are the instruments, all writing material and everything in general. In one corner is a sink and washing apparatus. Between the centre table and bench on the side is a web of office carpeting.

I have everything convenient for writing. We mess in a car—have a man-cook—and very good fare for this country. I sleep in the car, in which we eat, just now, but am to have a part of a car furnished off for my own "sanctum sanctorum." I think I shall be quite contented here. I go up about three times a day to carry mail and telegrams—this, with bringing water, and going from car to car, will be my exercise. I am to have charge of the commissary stores and I presume of other things as Hal finds me qualified....

Good night and much love from your own Charlie, true.
days. Why, an overcoat has been comfortable most of the time. A rainstorm is a very rare thing here but the thunderstorms are perfectly awful. We have had two today. It does not seem to be heat that causes them for this is one of the coldest days we have had. The wind blows like a hurricane about five days a week. I perfectly agree with the [Quaker who said, “If there was any fault at all with Kansas there was a little too much wind.”] There are two things certain, that there is air enough, and room enough out here on the “Plains.” One man is trying to raise some produce here. It can only be done by irrigation. The soil is good—8 or 10 feet deep, but not much rain. Water is obtained from wells by means of windmills which work well. The wells are from 30 to 100 ft. in depth, and here the water is very good for Western water. The people live in small wood houses that can be taken down or put up in a day, in tents, and dug-outs. Occasionally you will see a turf house—the turf being cut into square blocks and piled up like the snow houses of boys. We have news from H. Q. that the road is sure to go to Denver this fall. Hal will be through with the preliminary line and back here the 5th of June. Then will come the location and then grading and finally laying the track…

Much love from Charlie

Phil Sheridan, Kansas
May 30, 1869
Dearest Mother,

Although I'm thousands of miles away, I am with you in thought and spirit even more than if at college. I have wondered many times today what you were doing, thinking about, etc. The Bratt paper11 came today. Many thanks for papers, they are so rare here. I was reminded by that, that it was the day set apart for decorating the Soldier's graves with flowers… I heard from Hal last Mon. and heard of him yesterday. He is at Cheyenne Wells [Colorado Territory] tonight—about 20 miles west of here. Eva wrote Friday—was well. She gets our washing done at Lawrence. [One fellow] got two handkerchiefs washed before he went into the field. I went with him after them. He asked her how much it would be—she says: "only 50 cents—tis easier to wash in summer than winter." I pity those who live here in winter!! When once clothes get dirty the cheapest way is to throw them away.

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9. "Eva" was one of Knight's older sisters, Eveline Duncan Knight Greenwood (1884-1912). She married Hal Greenwood on May 19, 1857, in Galva, Illinois, and their only child, an adopted daughter, Gussie, died in childhood.

10. Knight’s mother, Fanny Maria Duncan Knight (1810-1907), married Joel Knight, Jr., in 1829. Their union produced eight children, six girls and two boys.

11. Knight is referring to the Brattleboro, Vermont, newspaper, the Vermont Phoenix. This weekly publication contained news of his nearby home community, Dunnsboro.
I ought to have taken my woolen shirts. White shirts cannot be washed clean in this water. It has been so cold I have not taken off my under clothes yet.... We live very well indeed—only two of us, Mr. Wallace, Road Master and myself. We have canned meats, fruit and berries, nice ham & eggs & sometimes buffalo steak—not much fresh meat. I have had but little writing to do this past week. Have been making a profile of the line—drawing building plans for Mr. Wallace and getting supplies into the field. It is all new work to me. I have to use my judgement continually. At home it was always “would father like to have it done so,” but now I am on my own responsibility. Hal is willing to show me, but he isn’t here often.... Please write often, Mother, and send a paper once in a while ‘tis such a treat.

Phil Sheridan, Kansas
June 13, 1869
Dearest Mother,

.... Have been “busy as a bee” since Hal came in. He has had so much business to attend to, and his maps to make out, and report of the survey to complete....

I have been out with Capt. [Howard] Schuyler two days, and will go two or three more. The Engineer Corps is divided into Divisions—the 1st under Capt. Schuyler—the 2nd under Mr. Reynolds. Schuyler has been nearly to Denver and returned and has commenced location. His camp is to be here for a week, and Hal wanted me to go out with him and learn the practical Engineering—the theoretical part comes to me in the office....

Phil Sheridan, Kansas
June 27, 1869
Dearest Mother

.... You ask about the country Mother.... On entering the Plains you are impressed with their vastness and loneliness. They are not perfectly level, but are composed of broad and perfectly rounded swells and are covered with a wavy herbage of light-green color, called “Buffalo Grass.” In motion they resemble a sea.... The Plains are treeless, but varied somewhat by ravines—both wide and narrow—with sides perpendicular.... Long lines of embankment appear often remarkably regular in angles. These are of chalk formation and are often covered with Indian hieroglyphics. Higher than these and more surely seen are high hills of all shapes you can fancy from half formed pyramids to cones. These are called buttes. The river bottoms are alone fitted for agriculture and are covered with a rank grass and at this season of the year with flowers of the most beautiful tints. The upper Plains or Plateaus are where the cactus flourishes. There are some beautiful blossoms on them, though they are shunned by man and beast. I mean to send you a Pine-cushion Cactus when I find a small one. They grow in dry dirt and blossom every year. If you wet it much it will die.

.... You ask if [Hal] is in danger of Indians when he is out. Yes, everyone who goes on the Plains alone, or in a small party runs a risk, but Hal less than others. He and his horses are known throughout the Plains. He shirks no danger and the Indians admire bravery.

.... I drink all I need and it does not hurt me. It will not be worthwhile to get colored shirts at present. Mine are colored enough....

To thee the love of thy faraway boy.

Charles

Phil Sheridan, Kansas
July 4, 1869
Dear Ones All,

How do you all spend this 4th of July morning at Orchard-dale, though I suppose this is not the day that you celebrate, but were were kept awake all through the morning—Sunday you know—by the reports of guns. I have not heard from home for a good while, neither have I written; the reason for both is that our communication with the eastern world is cut off by a flood. I cannot see how the world has lived and moved on without Sheridan. Poor world!!

The road is about going on and the work piles up before me. The reason for idleness here—have been out on the line for a few days, and doing general work. Hal will be out in the field and in the office—back and forth—for a few weeks and I shall be in the office probably. My pay for May amounted to $60.50, $50 of which I paid Eva for Railroad fare and Hotel bills in coming out. The remainder I shall spend for a carbine. I will try and procure a check for the amount of pay for June.... The dry hot season has commenced. I hope we may be in Denver soon.... I cannot write more this time, for the office is full of men talking and I cannot think. Ever so much love to all and each.

Your own Charlie

12. The duties of a railroad roadmaster historically have involved supervision of the physical plant, with track maintenance being the principal task.

13. Until the twentieth century when Christmas emerged as the premier holiday for most Americans, the Fourth of July held greater significance. The discharging of firearms was a common form of celebration on Independence Day.

14. Knight received a respectable income. His pay of $60.50 (which later increased substantially) represented about twice that of a typical laborer.
Dear Father,

Enclosed I send one of the Companies' Engineer Checks for seventy-five dollars. Please present it at the Brat[leboro] Bank, who will get it cashed through a N. York firm, and as you are a stockholder will ask you only what it may cost them to collect it; which I think will be nothing... Please turn over to Helen\textsuperscript{a} $15... and the remainded you can use if you wish, if not, please deposit the same in the bank. I am always paid in these checks and can get them cashed here, but thought this is a safer way of sending my salary than in money.... Eva starts for Lawrence next Sunday. Hal & Gen. Palmer\textsuperscript{a} leave for Denver the same day. I will write to some of you next Sunday. Am very busy. Love to all.

Chas. M. Knight

Phil Sheridan, Kansas
September 8, 1869

My own dearest Mother,

... Your dear motherly letters! Many thanks for all! I have wanted to write you a full letter, but duties have deterred every week. I took a span of miles yesterday and the new carriage (Genl. Palmer has a nice covered carriage) and carried Hal out to Pond City [Kansas]\textsuperscript{b} (16 miles) and he was to walk to the Engineers Camp on Eagle Valley (8 miles) where he would take his pony and follow the line, located by Mr. Schuyler, towards Denver till the stage leaving here this morning would overtake him near Antelope Springs. Eva left this morning with Genl. Palmer, Dr. Bell (an English tourist...) and a New York merchant—friend of Genl. Palmer. Tomorrow they will all meet at Antelope where they have an ambulance and provision wagon and saddle horses. From hence to Denver they will ride daytimes and camp at night. It is the very best way to travel over this country. Distance from Antelope to Denver cannot vary much from 100 miles—about a week's trip from here. Eva intends to return after a good visit among the Mts., but it will depend on how she likes the people—what kind of a boarding place she secures. Hal returns here by the 20th inst., when he will put a new party of Engineers into the field under Mr. Holbrook—one of their old engineers—to operate at the base of the Rocky Mts. till the middle of November. I expect to leave with that party as Hal has promised me a situation. I shall fill the place of 1st Rodman, but my rank and pay as Office Engr. will continue. We shall get free from the Indians by going west, or we shall be in the hands of the Ute Indians who are friendly. You need not worry about Eva on account of Indians, for they will be beyond the Cheyennes tonight.... We have an abundance of fruit—apples, pears, peaches, grapes, watermelons, etc. Every fruit that can be purchased in the Lawrence market.... Please write often Mother.... Letters are most valuable in camp. This with the love of

Charlie M. Knight.

Phil Sheridan, Kansas
September 19, 1869

Dearest Mother,

... Received the telegram from Hal yesterday dated "Denver," so he is with Eva yet. I presume he will start east tomorrow. Life on the rolling car is quite monotonous just now. Am straightening up the books and getting ready for another "push things" when Hal returns.

If we are all well, I hope you and Father will come out here next summer. Don't laugh I'm earnest! I want you to see this part of our country. Eva & Hal I presume will be in Denver and the road will be done, so you can see the Rocky Mts and when you can come all the way by rail—it will not be too much of an undertaking will it?...

I send by United States Express\textsuperscript{b} to Father, Brattleboro, Vt. one hundred and fifteen dollars. I will pay the Express fee on it here, and if Father will call for it at the Express Off. and put it into the bank before Oct. 1st, or invest it some way so it will draw interest, I will be thankful....

Charlie

Phil Sheridan, Kansas
October 1, 1869

My dearest Mother,

Have just locked myself into the private office to answer your full motherly letter, which came to me

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15. Helen was Knight's twin sister, Susan Helen Knight (1848-1876). A frail girl, who never married, she died of consumption at the age of twenty-eight. Helen was especially close to her brother, and he later named his only daughter after her.

16. "Gen. Palmer" was William Jackson Palmer (1836-1909), Civil War officer and railroad executive, who in the late 1860s became treasurer of the Union Pacific, Eastern Division (Kansas Pacific). When the railroad reached Denver, General Palmer left the firm for the recently organized Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, a company designed to provide Denver with southern and western connections. Later he became involved with building and operating railroads in Mexico.

17. Although generally referred to as Pond City, the post office was Pond Creek Station. See Rydlind, Kansas Place-names, 388-89.

18. Prior to World War I when a single express company, American Railway Express, emerged, a dozen or so firms operated. One of these was the United States Express Company which, like other concerns, transported both packages and valuables.
Tuesday night. Many thanks for the cheerfully written letters, they do a power of good.... I am alone—no not quite, for there is a draughts-man in the office, but he speaks German and not much English so 'tis about the same as being alone. You would laugh to see us try to talk by signs. I am still an inhabitant of Phil Sheridan and am not much sorry that I could not go in the party, for I have had experience enough to realize the truth of the remark "Engineering ain't no joke." I got all sunburned when out before and having been indoors so much before it about used me up. I wanted to go most of all to see the country, but Hal said, no one could do my work here as well as myself, so I remained here in the office and shall not expect to go again till I am really on the road. Hal has turned the Commissary Dept. over to me entirely, and trusts to me the furnishing of supplies, which requires constant attention as we have to order all things from St. Louis. Mr. Wallace and I carry on our mess together. Mrs. Wallace furnishing dishes and cooks while I furnish provision from the Commissary. So we have everything the market affordst that will keep three days. We have all kinds of berries canned and dried. One queer thing about meals here—they have the same for breakfast, dinner and supper, always meat for supper and preserves for breakfast. They call the afternoon "evening" and greet you with the indefinite "Hon." A stranger gives a stare for an answer but the "old inhabitant" returns "warro" (good). Track is being laid, but not in earnest for the bridges are delayed for want of timber. They cannot cut timber from the roadside as in "God's country".... Indians are quiet around here. Two companies of cavalry went through here yesterday towards the west.... The Engineer parties are getting quite far—about 60 miles from Denver now. The stopping place for the train this winter will be a point on the Big Sandy called "Kit Carson" [Colorado Territory] about 80 miles west from this point. If material is furnished as needed, Hal says he will join rails with the Denver Pacific and have trains enter Denver next 4th of July. Hope you will be one [of] the honorables on that occasion....

Please accept the enclosed 5 dollars dear Mother to get you something to read—some magazine or book you would like. Love to all home friends.

Charlie

10. The Denver Pacific, opened in 1870, joined the Union Pacific ten years later. See Anderson, Kansas West, 83.
Phil Sheridan, Kansas
November 22, 1869
Dearest Mother,

Have not heard from home for quite a long time, but hope all is well with you. Have added the unpleasant and to me quite new experience of sickness. Have had an attack of bilious fever putting me on the bed for a week. Am now just getting up, but am weak yet. Have been at the General Office all the time but go to the front tomorrow where I will write you... Wallace [the roadmaster] is dead. No more now.

Love from Charlie

End of Track, Kansas
November 28, 1869
Dearest Mother,

Your good full letter of Nov. 7th came one week ago via Denver. It had seemed a long time that I had not heard from Orchard Dale and I was so glad to hear that you were all well. We are all well and enjoying ourselves finely. Eva came through from Denver by stage with a Mr. Archer—a friend—last Thursday. Hal you know takes Mr. Wallace’s place as Supt. ’till Mr. Clayton—the new Supt.—arrives. We three have Mr. Wallace’s old car which contains Office sleeping room and kitchen. Are now on the Side Track at Pond City—14 miles west of Phil Sheridan. The draught[ts]—man and telegraph operator mess with us, so we have quite a respectable family.

When the new Supt. comes I think the Engineer’s Office will be at Kit Carson. I don’t know whether Eva will go there or not. I have thought of going to Denver many times but have not “got to go” to use the Plains phraseology. I want to see Denver and the mountains very much...

Am sorry that I could not have written oftener lately but it was time for me to write when taken sick, and was intending to write a very long letter to you Thanksgiving day, but was on the bed with a burning fever all the long day. I thought of you every moment, for I was alone. I am quite well now, perhaps not quite as strong as before. I cannot speak too highly of Hal’s care and attention when he came and found me sick. He understood my case and by care and nursing alone (I did not take anything but sage tea) saved me from a severe sickness. I think if I had taken medicine I should have been quite sick. I never will employ a doctor in this Country, but if sick, live, or die a natural death. Have a great deal of work to do now—it having accumulated while sick. I was to write a long letter today, but firstly we did not rise very early—after breakfast the officers from Ft. Wallace called and now some of the Engineers are here. Fearing I would lose the whole day, have withdrawn to one of the staterooms, and here I am curled up on the bunk close to the window trying to improve the twilight.

Have not received any letters from the East for a long time. A catalogue of Tufts...came a few days ago... Did I ever write that the money sent by express was not prepaid and that the charges weren’t reasonable. The express bill over the K. P. R. W. was 90 cents and only 405 miles long. I will send hereafter by draft—I could get none at that time, and did not wish to keep the money....

Your own,

Charlie

Pond City, Kansas
December 12, 1869
Dearest Mother,

While I am waiting for train reports will talk with you awhile. Haven’t received a letter from home for a long time. Suppose they are wandering about somewhere in Colorado...

There is quite a large family with us now. Telegraph Operator, Two draught[ts]—men, Roadmaster—all young men—besides us three. Have given up the Engineer’s Office altogether. Have been just as busy as possible since I came here in Supts. Office. It is writing on a rush. Bills, Statements, Reports, Checks and Pay Rolls must be finished in haste, then there is a leisure time of ten days. Am on the trains much of the time. We move...ten miles to Eagle Tail [Kansas]™ (don’t laugh at the name) tomorrow—the end of the track being near that point. Eagle Tail will be Headquarters for about a month probably. Shall fix up quite comfortable there. Don’t know how busy Hal will have [with] the duties of Superintendent, perhaps all winter, but hope not for tis too hard for him. There are four hundred names on the Pay Rolls this month and it is a great responsibility to have them on one’s hands and see to the work.

We enjoy ourselves ever so much, though our offices are not so convenient for having Eva with us as our old one was. Eva helps me about my work a great deal, and is in the office with me most of the time.

It has been trying to snow this evening but melts as fast as it falls. Have not seen a flake of snow since October before today. We have had beautiful “Indian Summer” days all along—warm and hazy through the day, but chilly at night...

Charlie M. Knight

20. Present-day Sharon Springs. See Rydjer, Kansas Place-names, 63.
Eagle Tail, Kansas  
January 8, 1870  
Dearest Mother,

'Tis quite a long time since I have had the pleasure of talking with you, but this Saturday evening am thinking of you dear ones at home, and wondering (yes, wondering) for how much pleasure we derive from wondering about our memory pictures) if you three are together as we were this Saturday eve. Eva and Hal are sitting in their nicely furnished room, and the door is open into our office where there are three of us reading or writing. All together, a happy household....

"Christmas" and "New Years" passed with us very much as do other days except we had a "big dinner" each day. Had a nice Diary as a New Year's present from Hal. Eva & Hal had a big cake presented by a Hotel Keeper at Eagle Tail. This is quite a busy place now—only three weeks old—four trains come in and leave, and also, stages for Santa Fe and Denver arrive and depart daily. Yes, we get up in the world... when on Eagle Tail—exactly 3,336 feet. But in Denver they speak of the difficulty of breathing on account of the rarity of the air—This is no story but pure truth. Perhaps this thin air or gas may account for the somewhat big stories told by the inhabitants of our "new west." But there is a fine country here after all. It captivates almost every one from the East....

Charlie

Eagle Tail, Kansas  
January 15, 1870  
Dear Father,

Have deferred writing to you these many months because I was waiting to write a long letter, but now I'll write, thinking a short letter may be more acceptable than none. From Mother's letters I have learned much about your work and how you have got along. But hope to hear from your own self more particularly about the farm matters. I have thought of you much, especially during the haying season for it was the first summer that I ever spent away from the old farm, and often I wondered how the machine worked, and how you got along with so little help. In truth, I rather missed my usual summer vacation at home....

The work is going on finely here which makes it pleasant for all of us. Over a mile per day of track has been laid this week. There is no snow and warm pleasant days. The weather is much the same as November weather in N. E. some days unpleasant winds and severe cold, but the majority of days like "Indian Summer."

Our stopping place here at Eagle Tail is close down by the bed of the stream which runs N. E. and in which there are pools of very good water. The water very rarely flows above the ground in any of the streams here, but through the sand and appears in ponds much the same as the small streams about home appear in a very dry time. So much of the water leaches through the sand that one can easily leap across when their source is 400 miles from the crossing.

To the north of us the ground rises gradually to the upper and level plateau, which is 50 ft. above us and 2 miles away making the ascending grade 25 ft. pr. mile or so slight as hardly to be noticed, while on the South the ascent is made by bluffs—a meadow extending back a few hundred feet, then a perpendicular bluff twenty ft. high succeeded by another meadow and dirt bluff until the elevation of the plateau where the small swells go to make one vast plain, which extends to the Heavens blue—to eternity for all that the eye can distinguish. The "buffalo grass" reminds me of the "Putney Hill" or "Whig" grass most of all. Like that it is fine and wiry, but does not grow as thick and seed stocks if they appear at all are short and fine—say 3 inches high. It is tough and slippery and like a mule will flourish under abuse—in buffalo trails where thousands of feet pass it seems to flourish best of all. It affords abundant forage for stock which eat it at this time of year in preference to the well cured hay shipped from Eastern Kansas. Before it comes to maturity the scorching July sun dries the juice all out of it (which will explain why it so rarely goes to seed) leaving the nutritious sugar or starch in the leaves, and as there is no rain in the fall (I don't think we have had 1/2 inch since Aug.) the stock raiser has for winter nicely cured hay without the trouble of cutting and storing in barns. This fine dry soil of the Plains, I am confident may sometime produce good crops without irrigation but not for many years. It is a fine sediment—lime formation—that was laid down so solid when water was over all and becoming dried, cannot be wet any more than so much flour. The rain usually comes in torrents and just runs from the surface as though it was oiled—hence the great and disastrous [sic] freshets. But it is a curious fact that with civilization comes its grasses: without sowing seed, it springs up as though it knew instinctively that its reign was at hand and the wild grasses vanish as before fire. The effect of the course [sic] and deep rooted grasses of the east is to loosen and make porous the soil so it retains moisture and that is all this land needs to make it a rich agricultural country. But I fear I have warried you with this long story, but come and see the Plains and I will promise they will not weary you. I want to go west in February and select
a "homestead" before the favorable points are all secured....

Love to everybody and much to yourself from Charlie

Arapahoe, Colorado Territory
January 30, 1870
Dearest Mother,
....Capt. D. B. Clayton who laid the Union Pacific track and this last fall the Denver Pacific track—which is a branch of this road running from Denver to the Union Pacific at Cheyenne—is the new Supt. of Construction. He takes charge of track laying but Hal has not yet given up operating the road, although, I presume he will when he finds how competent Mr. Clayton is. End of track is just fifty miles from Sheridan now and Arapahoe forty seven. We came here Wednesday—the next day after the place was made and christened. It is situated in the valley of Rose Creek—though there isn't any water in the creek or any roses about here,...

It does not make much difference which way you go, Mother, north, south, and east are so empty and limitless as a westward course. The Yankee's rather brief and dry description "Mighty open country" is appropriate to any and all parts—it looks alike all around....

Cheyenne Wells, Colorado Territory
February 13, 1870
Dearest Mother,
....My birthday was not a remarkable one in my life—except that I shot a buffalo in sight of the office in my slippers, and in midwinter too....

Charlie

Cheyenne Wells, Colorado Territory
February 20, 1870
My own dear Mother,

This beautiful Sabbath day has been spent in idleness as far as writing is concerned. My writing materials and books went forward to Kit Carson yesterday so I was left free to spend the day without work—quite an unusual thing for me. I took a ramble out on the plains away from the R. R. looking for flowers, watching the herds of buffalo and trying to take in the full flavor of a Sunday on the "plains," but really every day is Sunday away from the noise and bustle of the R. R. or a Sabbath stillness is over all, as though God was still resting from his work of creation. The same feelings are awakened as when on the ocean—all worldly things seem insignificant in comparison to the one absorbing thought—
the power and mighty of Him who made and governs all. And the beautiful prairie flowers, ... so delicate in tint and shade that artists may well despair to copy, speak of His impartial love more eloquently than can human lips.

Your own Charlie

Cheyenne Wells, Colorado Territory
February 26, 1870
Dearest Mother,

As I shall be in the saddle all day tomorrow—my usual time of writing—will just let you know how the world uses me....I saw Hal in Carson only a few moments. He is out with his Locating Engineers. Came east from Carson to this place yesterday on my pony and went to Sheridan last night to get provisions, etc. Will leave here for Carson when the evening comes if the wind goes down.

Love to all,
C. M. Knight

Kit Carson, Colorado Territory
March 7, 1870
Dear Mother,

.....Hal has received orders... to go on with the road as fast as possible—to build and equip 150 miles of road by July 31, [1870] which means work.

The road has been built so far by a single force advancing from the east end, but now everything is to be done that will hasten the completion of the job. A large force will work from Denver east, in addition to the force going west from Carson.

The remaining country is more interesting—Carson being the connecting link between the dull plains of Kansas and the plateau and foothills of Colorado. We are in a cozy little office here at Carson. Very convenient for we can reach anything on the floor, ceiling or either side without moving.... We shall occupy our car when the track nears here.

Your own boy,
C. M. Knight

This early 1870s photograph from Hays identified the pictured Kansas Pacific train, pulled by an “American” 4-4-0 type locomotive, as the “first” to make a scheduled stop in the town.
Denver, Colorado Territory  
March 12, 1870  
Dearest Mother,  
'Tis a bright morning but a little winter as it snowed here yesterday. We have made a longer stay than we expected, but there has been so much to do that have not been out in the city much. Hal and I go out on the line 25 miles east where we shall spend perhaps ten days, so I just let you know we are well on starting….  
Charlie  

Kit Carson, Colorado Territory  
March 31, 1870  
Dearest Mother,  
Found your dear letter of 17th inst. on my return from Engineers Camp at Kiowa [Colorado Territory]—and was glad to know you were all well. Am settled at Carson for some time to come. Hal goes east to St. Louis tonight. Track was laid into Carson today….  
Charles M. Knight  

Kit Carson, Colorado Territory  
May 4, 1870  
Dearest Mother,  
….Everything here goes well. Get somewhat tired of writing sometimes but have a horse and ride almost every evening. Perhaps you may have seen in the papers a story about some men being scalped near Carson, but it's all a story. There are no Indians about here at all. We are getting early garden [goods] from Lawrence almost every day and live first-rate….  
Ever so much love,  
Charlie  

Kit Carson, Colorado Territory  
May 8, 1870  
Dear Mother,  
….We think no more of starting over the plains on no road to go 150 miles than we used to in going from our home to Bratt[leboro]….Our office is just out west of town, and higher so that we can overlook the village—no city!! and we have a pretty view eastward down the valley of Big Sandy….  
Charlie  

Kit Carson, Colorado Territory  
May 29, 1870  
My dear Mother,  
….Everything is very lively here. The military camps are near our office and the officers occupy cars in our train. It seems like war to hear the bugle calls and drum-beats and see the troops go out and come in every day. Almost every train from the east comes loaded with troops, which assures us that the military will give us the needed protection.  
The rails on the 150 miles between here and Denver will be put down in four months commencing June 15th if the Indians let us alone. Think perhaps I may get home after the trains get to running through to Denver….  
….Money comes easy to me, so don't think you cannot take a little percent for all the many favors you do me. Am getting $100.00 per month and found $1500 a year and buy my board—almost as much as Sullivan21 gets with all his knowledge & experience.  
Charlie  

Kit Carson, Colorado Territory  
June 5, 1870  
My dearest Mother,  
….Mr. Weed the new Supt. came last evening and after a few days of preparation will commence laying track in earnest. We will leave Carson in a few days for Wild Horse Station22….Edwin Tenney arrived here last Friday. He was in the Engrs. Course at Taufts and I obtained a position in one Engrs Corps for him. It seems somewhat like a visit east to hear him tell about the old friends and college. Hope you will send me the Universalist23 containing an account of anniversary week….  
The Indians are "letting us alone" and think they will keep quiet if the military are watchful and active….  
Wish you could see a wild horse that was captured just outside of town today. He is just a beauty. His curiosity led him into a corral and he was caught with a lariat….  
Ever so much love to you.  
C. M. Knight  

Kit Carson, Colorado Territory  
July 5, 1870  
My dear Mother,  
'Tis the day after the fourth of July and no one feels very brilliant. I did not celebrate but worked pretty hard  

21. "Sullivan" was the Rev. Sullivan McCollester (1825-1921). A graduate of Norwich University, Vermont, and the Harvard Divinity School, he had headed several academies and served as commissioner of education for his native state of New Hampshire before becoming the first president of Buechel College in Akron, Ohio. Knight was McCollester's brother-in-law, for this ordained Universalist minister had married one of Knight's older sisters, Fanny Sophia "Sophie" Knight (1827-1905) in 1852. It would be Knight's connection with the Reverend McCollester that would lead him to join the Buechel College faculty.  
22. This was possibly the site of present-day Wild Horse in Cheyenne County, Colorado.  
23. The Universalist, published in Boston, was the official organ of the Universalist Church, a liberal Protestant faith. Charles Knight remained a staunch Universalist throughout his life.
and the town-people made such a big noise and fuss over their celebration last night that I did not sleep much, and have a decided "morning after" feeling....

We are all as well as busy. Mr. Cokley and self will be moved with our car—office to Willows—\textsuperscript{49}—the end of track being just past that point. Hal leaves Denver today with his team and will meet me at Willows and we will go on to Denver. I came down to Carson a week ago to settle up accounts down at this end and will take my papers up with me and not come down again. There is a very good prospect of the road being finished some-time in August. I do hope it will, as I want to see the road finished.\textsuperscript{45}...

I think a great deal of Colorado—not that it is the best place in the world but all things considered think it a good place for a young man to start....

Charlie

Denver, Colorado Territory
July 19, 1870
My dear Mother,

...It seems like the east here at Denver. We have everything, all kinds of fruits from California via the R. R.... Already she [Denver] begins to "put on airs." In addition to the D. P. and K. P. Railways the Col. Central R. R. will enter the city from the west—the mountains.\textsuperscript{46} She supports three daily papers. It is quite a good place for investments now....

Charlie

\textsuperscript{49} This was possibly the site of present-day Willow Creek, Colorado, southeast of Denver.

\textsuperscript{45} The Kansas Pacific completed its line to Denver on August 15, 1870, although regular train service did not begin until September 1 of that year. See Anderson, Kansas West, 63.

\textsuperscript{46} The Colorado Central Railroad, organized in 1870, was a narrow-gauge line designed to haul gold and silver ore between Georgetown and Golden, west of Denver. The company became the Union Pacific, Denver and Gulf in 1890; eight years later portions of the firm joined the Union Pacific and the Colorado and Southern railroads.