

# 'PLENTY OF WORK AND FAIR WAGES'

## A Cowboy's Letters from the Range



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Letters that Earl J. Martin wrote to his family at the beginning of the twentieth century provide a glimpse into the life and working conditions of a cowboy on the western range. Among the tasks Martin described was branding, a chore depicted during the same time period by L. A. Huffman in *Roundup*. *Bringing a Calf to Branding Fire*, above.

edited by **MOLLY KRUCKENBERG**

**To many,** the cowboy symbolizes the best of a simpler time; he is seen as tough but thoughtful, quiet but resourceful, a man content with a simple and solitary existence. But is this really who the cowboy was? A collection of letters written by Earl J. Martin, who worked as a cowboy in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Montana in the early twentieth century, provides first-hand insight into life on the western range.<sup>1</sup>

Martin was born in 1880 in southeastern Nebraska, in Jefferson County, where his family owned a farm. He served in the Spanish-American War, and after his discharge, traveled to northwestern Nebraska to find work as a cowboy, enticed by rumors that jobs were plentiful and paid between eighteen and twenty-five dollars per month. Martin arrived in the spring of 1899 and, despite some difficulty, eventually found work with the Ashley ranch in Grant County.<sup>2</sup>

May 7, 1899 Whitman Grant Co. Nebr.

Dear Parrents

I received your letter yesterday. I have not had a chance to write a letter for nearly two weeks. We have been buisy rounding up cattle ever since I have been here, I have done nothing much but ride since I came here, in fact there is not much else to do. We will commence branding next week. His brands are Circle bar  $\bar{O}$  and bar  $\bar{X}$  Mr Ashley sold four hundred cattle last week. He will get a thousand head from Oregon in a couple of weeks, then he will have about two thousand head. Then we will take them about fifteen miles south to the summer range as quick as we get through branding Mr Ashley furnishes me with Pony, saddle and slicker, and give me twenty dollars a month. There are four of us boys we have a sod shanty by our selves. I expect I can get work here all sumber. The prarie fires have been raging here for two weeks but have all died out now. There were some lives lost, some cattle and some ranches destroyed. We live about four miles north of the rail road track the fires were all south of the railroad track. They do not farm a bit here. It is not very well settled, it is three miles to the nearest ranch. There are lots of wolves here, we hear them every night. Thirty miles west of her in the dry country it is not settled at all. They say there are a good many antelope there, and a herd of about three hundred wild mustangs.

I guess this is all I can think of to write

How are you getting along at the farm and how is Ray making it.

\*See notes beginning on page 96.

I don't know when I can write to Minnie but you can tell her what I wright in your letters to her I would have to write the same thing any way.

I guess I will have to close. Write and tell me every thing that is going on.

*Earl Martin*

Dont send my gun.



Martin stayed with the outfit until the following April when the firm of Ashley and Hampton disbanded. With the help of his previous employer, he found work with a Mr. Alt, also in Grant County, at twenty dollars per month, and almost immediately he was back on the summer range.<sup>3</sup> In this letter to his parents, he describes his daily work and routine, providing a detailed look into the somewhat monotonous life of a turn-of-the-century cowboy.

May 17, 1900.

Hyannis, Nebr.

Dear Parrents,

It has been nearly a month since I wrote my last letter to you. And I owe Edgar, Ross, and Minnie answers. Where is Ross now and where does he get his mail. I did not have much time to write much in my last letter to tell you why I left ashleys. And what I was doing at my new place.

I left Ashleys because the company he was in split pardnership. And only left him 300 head of cattle he thought he could look after that many alone. He found me this place where I am working now. I only lost one days work. Mr Alt is a goverment survayor He is surveying land down in Grant county now. near Ashleys summer range. I took him and his outfit down there a week ago Friday. He owns a ranch and five hundred head of cattle in cherry county twelve miles north of Hyannis. His brother in law, a young fellow about my age is looking after his ranch and I am looking after his cattle out on the summer range, About twelve miles west of Hyannis. We brought the cattle out here from the ranch last Friday. They are pretty hard to hold, they want to go back to the ranch, every night about mid-night they try to go back there is only one way for them to go in that direction and that is through a narrow pass through the hills. they try to go through there two or three times every night but I sleep out there and have my horse saddled and

picketed and turn them back every time they try to go through. Twelve head did get away night before last, and were half way back to the ranch before I caught them I changed horses three times yesterday But don't hafo ride hardly any to day. The cattle are all feeding quietly in front of my shanty. The cattle commence to feed about sun up until about ten oclock then they go to drink and lay neer the watter until about four, then they feed until sun down, then they lay down until about midnight, When they get up and want to travel.

I have a gun and a six shooter and have fresh meat every day. I have plenty to eat although I eat about half my meals on horse back. I put a lunch in my pocket every morning. Frank came out from the ranch yesterday and brought me a big paper sack full of cookies, he comes out every two or three days to see how I am getting along. After two or three days more when the cattle get situated it will just be a snap here.

My shanty is 10 by 12, a hard dirt flour and a big board for a window. And my bed is a tarpolin—a heavy watter proof canvis 18 ft long and 8 ft. wide long enough so I can lay it on the ground and fold it clear up over my head, with six blankets this makes a dandy bed.

My horse hase turned out to be a dandy I can get more than I paid for him if I want. I went to a branding party about a week A go We branded 120 head, I roped and drug down about 80 yearling steers in the after noon with my horse. Well I suppose you folks are planting corn now. I expect Ray is big enough to do lots of work now. I will try and write to Minnie after these cattle have made their home here and I have plenty of time. If the subcription to the news has not run out yet have it sent to Hyannis, if it has do not subscribe fore me any more.

I will send some money as soon as I can get to town. Well I guess this is all I can write this time

Yours Truly,

*Earl J. Martin*

My Bill of Fare

Coffee sorgum biscuits, Bacon, popatoes, dried fruit, oat meal, corn & tomatoes Write soon.



During the next two years, Martin moved on several times, as most cowboys did, and found work with cattle

outfits in three different states. From Nebraska, he went to Rapid City, South Dakota, and later to Black Hawk, and from there, to Ekalaka, Montana, and then, in the fall of 1902, to Wibaux. Throughout these years, Martin kept in close contact with his parents and some of his five brothers and sisters (among them Ray, Minnie, and Della).<sup>4</sup> He returned to Nebraska to visit as often as he could afford to and sent money on a regular basis. His letters are full of news of his life and indicate, perhaps, his desire for more companionship.

Through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ranching in eastern Montana slowly changed as cattle ranches gave way to sheep ranches or diversified to include sheep, horses, and hay. Herders and ranch hands slowly replaced the cowboy who worked only with cattle.

Wibaux Montana

May 9.-1903

Dear Della & Charlie

As it has been some time since I last wrote, I will get at it this evening and try and write you both a letter. I received Charlie's letter over a month ago. But am sorry to say I never got those pictures.

The postmaster says they never arrived at this office.

I should like to have had them so well as it has been so long since I have seen any of the home folks. My hasn't this past winter been a long cold one. it comenced here in dead earnest on the 12th of November and never let up untill the middle of March.

Our first snow came the 12th of October; it snowed about four inches. They claim here that the month of February avaraged 51 below zero the two coldest day's 57. I guess I froze my nose about a dozen times it has'nt got through peeling yet. is as red as a boiled lobster. Although not much snow fell what came in November crusted and staid on all winter.

It went off so gradually this Spring that it left no moisture to soak into the ground. The Spring has been cold, windy and cloudy with no rain yet. The grass is not growing very fast.

If it don't rain pretty soon I am afraid there will not be a very heavy hay crop in this Country. If this Spring had been late cold and wet lots of stock would have perished. As it was a good many of the Sheepmen had heavy losses. There was not much loss among cattle and horses; But cattle that russled all winter look awful poor. I will not work in this country another winter. I do not like this part of Montana; it is to[o] rough and over-run with sheep.

A few year's more and they will be unable to cut any hay at all except on the bottom's that are fenced. The cattlemen are slowly getting out, or going into sheep them selve's. There is no irrigation in this part of the State. And no land worth taking. I have seen no Alfalfa here. potatoes and oats do fair if taken care of. There is no chance for farming except in little patches

This man I am working for has a small bunch of cattle and a small bunch of sheep on share's; He has his sheep on a small creek about four miles south of here.<sup>5</sup> I go out about once a week and move the herd-er's camp for him. I am doing all kinds of ranch work now day's. I put in a small patch of potatoe's yesterday I do not spend all my time in the saddle like I did in the Sand Hills and South Dacota. I some times wish I did; But I get better wages than I did then—I was offered one job of steady riding; but would have to batch and cook for a batchelor And only 35 dollar's a month. So I concluded to stay with this untill after haying. Then I will either go up to Glendive; on the Yellow Stone river; or go to the harvest fields of North Dacota. Do you think Charlie it would be profitable

to go to the harvest fields after the first of September; Could A fellow find plenty of work and fair wages untill the 1st of December. what would be the best part of the State to go to. How are the wage's up in Your country; Are there any large cattle ranche's there or is it more of a farming country.

I probaly cannot get around to make you folk's a visit untill next Winter As I want to work as mutch as possible this Summer, for I do not expect to work again next winter. I will try and make a visit home next Winter.

I suppose you are buisy putting in your crop's now.

Do you try to raise any corn or wheat. Well it is getting late and I can think of nothing more so I will close for this time. hoping to hear from you both soon.

Your Brother & Brother in Law.

*Earl J. Martin*

P.S. May 10th. It is raining this morning, looks like it would keep it up all day. Dont know when I will get a chance to mail this.

excuse lead pencil.



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

**In ten years working as a cowboy, Martin found employment on many ranches at a time when they were diversifying and general hands were beginning to replace the "true" cowboy. From a Wibaux-area ranch, Martin wrote, "I do not like this part of Montana; it is to[o] rough and over-run with sheep." L. A. Huffman captured a herd of woolies in this undated picture, *Sheep on winter range Yellowstone breaks*.**



As Martin ended his cowboy career in the early 1900s, he observed the transformation of the open range as settlers staked out homesteads and flooded the job market. Land locators and merchants in small towns like Lemmon, South Dakota, above, welcomed the influx.

Despite his intentions, Martin worked for the same outfit another winter. In fact, he remained in the area for the next four years, until late in 1907. At this point, the tone of Martin's letters begins to shift, and he expresses more and more dissatisfaction with the cowboy's lifestyle. He is particularly discontent with the isolation and the long periods between visits to town.

Like many cowboys, though, he attempted to relieve the monotony and supplement his income by hunting animals for bounty. Ranchers often paid their cowboys a fee for killing predators, particularly wolves and coyotes.

Glendive, Mont.

Sept. 1-1906

Dear Father—

Your's and Minnie's letter received a week ago. I am glad you have decided to quit farming and take it

easy. Hope you will like it in town. How is Mother? is she well now? I suppose Minnie is getting ready to go back teaching again.

I expect Ray and Matie are tickled to think they are going to live in town. I wonder what they would think if they had to stay out of town as long as I have.

I haven't been to town for two years. I think I will go in and buy some clothes about the middle of October. The Boss is going to ship a thousand fat sheep to Chicago about the end of this month. He expects to be gone from the ranch for two or three weeks.<sup>6</sup> He has gone into the horse business to this summer so we have plenty of work to do. He keeps three men most of the time. I received a letter from Artie Roe a short time ago. He doesn't have steady work all the time, he works mostly at odd jobs. I should like to come home and see you folks this winter, but don't know as I can afford to. I am thinking some of trying to find work in town this winter. it gets to lonesome out on the ranch

in the Winter time and again I would kind of like a change. I killed another three dollar coyote a few days ago. Well I guess this is all I can write this time.

Write soon.

Your son. *Earl J. Martin*

P.S. Tell mother not to send for Recreation any more.<sup>7</sup>



After five years in eastern Montana, Martin finally left during the winter of 1907–1908. The previous winter had been one of the toughest he had endured, with heavy stock losses, lots of snow, and temperatures reaching 44 degrees below zero. Martin chose to go first to Minneapolis, where he lived on his savings, having earned “plenty of money” to pay for his expenses through the winter. While in Minneapolis, he considered his options; returning home to Nebraska was not one of them. Although he considered Spokane, he chose the Black Hills of South Dakota, where he had worked in 1901 and 1902.<sup>8</sup>

The early part of the twentieth century saw the homestead boom on the Great Plains. In Montana alone, homesteaders filed over 114,000 homestead claims on almost 25 million acres of land between 1909 and 1923.<sup>9</sup> When Martin arrived in Rapid City in 1908, he experienced the homestead rush firsthand. His letters give a taste of how those who had long lived in the Great Plains felt about these new settlers.

Rapid City, S. D., May 10 1908

Dear Mother:

Your letter of April 30 received. I have had steady work, but will have to look for a new job tomorrow. This country has changed an awful lot in the last month on account of that new Rail Road.<sup>10</sup> Every train has been bringing in scores of home steaders, As soon as they have filed on their land, then they try to find work in the country neer their claims And they are willing to work for all most nothing.

Out in the country neer where I was getting 35 a month the ranchers are only paying 20 now. And they say there are two men for every job. And it is the same way here in town. Board is so high here that unless one has steady work they cant lay up any thing. If I cant find steady work I am going to get out of this. I like the people here and have several good friends here

in town And I like working in town. I may go back to Minneapolis and I may go farther west. But not to the lonesome locality where I was before. I would rather work for less wages and be in a lively neiborhood. I saw an advertisement to day that they were needing men on the fruit farms in Washington, But I hate to go any farther west than Montana. I have gotten acquainted with several fellows from the East that are boarding where I do, that are working at odd jobs, And some of them have families two and are all most broke. I cant see how lots of these poor people are going to make a living, They dont know this country like I do, some of the claims they are taking are worse than use less. And they have so many dry summers in this country. I never saw so many old maids and school-marm's and they are all after claims. While I was on that ranch, four sisters from Iowa stopped there for dinner they were going 90 miles from railroad to take claims I'll bet they are sick of their job before next spring, they were all school-teachers two. lots of the people that come here have just enough money to get here and that is all. there will be lots of suffering next winter I am afraid. This would have been a good country for work this summer but for the homesteaders. They didn't hardly know that there was a panic here. Every body had work all winter at fair wages.

Well one of my friends is trying to get me to go to church so I guess I will have to close for this time. Write as soon as you have time.

Your Aff Son

*Earl Martin*

Maybe you can read this I scribbled it in a hurry.



Martin found work near Spearfish, but he remained in South Dakota only through the winter of 1908–1909. By 1910, he had moved to Washington, where he worked as a barber in the Seattle area. At the age of thirty-seven he married Arnette Ericson. He lived the remainder of his life in California, where he worked as a livestock handler. He died in San Francisco in 1960, one day shy of his eightieth birthday.<sup>11</sup>

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*American Art* (Flagstaff, Ariz., 1996); and Leah Dilworth, *Imagining Indians in the Southwest* (Washington, D.C., 1996).

8. Brian Dippie, *The Vanishing American* (Lawrence, Kans., 1982), 102–6; Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York, 1938), 125, 118.

9. Hewett, “Address at the Opening,” 74–75; Robert Henri to Henry Lovins, September 24, 1917, box 39, Edgar L. Hewett Papers (hereafter Hewett Papers), MNM.

10. Clipping from *Santa Fe (N.M.) New Mexican*, August 7, 1925, box 54, Hewett Papers, MNM.

11. “Clubwomen of Nine States Confer on Summer Colony,” *Santa Fe (N.M.) New Mexican*, April 21, 1926, 3.

12. Charles E. Doll, “Cultural Center of the Southwest,” *El Palacio*, 20 (May 1, 1926), 181. Indian Detours were intended to provide tourists with more intimate encounters with the land and peoples of the Southwest. See T. C. McLuhan, *Dream Tracks: The Railroad and the American Indian* (New York, 1985); and Marta Wiegle, “‘Insisted on authenticity’: Harveycar Indian Detours, 1925–1931,” in Wiegle and Babcock, *The Great Southwest of the Fred Harvey Company*.

13. “Great Possibilities,” *Santa Fe (N.M.) New Mexican*, April 22, 1926, 4.

14. “Statement of Santa Fe Chamber of Commerce on Proposed Cultural Colony,” *Santa Fe (N.M.) New Mexican*, April 26, 1926, 2.

15. Andrew C. Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (New York, 2003), 123.

16. Mary Austin, “The Town That Doesn’t Want a Chautauqua,” *New Republic*, 47 (July 7, 1926), 196. Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment*, discusses the 1920s opposition on pp. 281–85.

17. Doll, “Cultural Center of the Southwest,” 173.

18. Elizabeth White to Alfred V. Kidder, April 4, 1926, in *El Delirio: The Santa Fe World of Elizabeth White*, by Gregor Stark and E. Catherine Rayne (Santa Fe, N.M., 1998), 28; “Opposition to Club Cultural Colony Holds Meeting and Petitions the City Council,” *Santa Fe (N.M.) New Mexican*, April 24, 1926, 6.

19. “Opposition to Club Cultural Colony Holds Meeting and Petitions City Council,” 6.

20. Crichton, “Philistine and Artist Clash in Battle of Santa Fe.” Anthony F. C. Wallace first explored the concept of the revitalization movement in *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York, 1969), but historians have used the theory to explain cultural movements in other historical periods, including the 1920s. See, for example, Lawrence Levine, “Marcus Garvey and the Politics of Revitalization,” in *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History*, ed. Lawrence Levine (New York, 1993).

21. See, for example, editorials in the April 28, 29, 30, May 1, 18, 1926, issues of the *Santa Fe (N.M.) New Mexican*.

22. Anonymous letter, December 5, 1926, folder 2, box 11, 1926 correspondence, Hewett Papers, MNM; Edgar L. Hewett to Percy Jackson, May 22, 1926, folder 1, *ibid*.

23. “Cultural Colony Would Make City ‘Flimsy Fair Ground,’” *Santa Fe (N.M.) New Mexican*, June 12, 1926, 2.

24. Rollin H. Tanner to Edgar L. Hewett, May 18, 1926, folder 1, box 11, 1926 correspondence, Hewett Papers, MNM.

25. Old Santa Fe Association, “An Open Letter to the Federated Club Women of Texas,” folder 2, *ibid*.

26. *Ibid*. On El Pasatiempo, see Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe*, 212–24.

27. Edgar Hewett to Mary Bulkley, June 7, 1926, folder 1, box 11, 1926 correspondence, Hewett Papers, MNM.

28. Chauvenet, *Hewett and Friends*, 156–57; Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe*, 205–13. After 1926, the Santa Fe Chamber of Commerce supervised the Fiesta, thus formally ending its earlier educational mission. As for the Hysterical Parade, Chauvenet states that it became so bawdy that the archbishop of Santa Fe issued a formal complaint that it was unworthy of the city and its people. After that, informal censorship of entries was instituted. Chauvenet, *Hewett and Friends*, 156.

29. Fowler, *A Laboratory for Anthropology*, 366–71; Chauvenet, *Hewett and Friends*, 192–94, 223–28. The School of American Research remains an independent institution to this day, housed on land donated by Elizabeth White in the 1970s and dedicated to scholarly research in archaeology and anthropology and the preservation of American Indian arts.

30. Wilson, *The Myth of Santa Fe*, 260–61.

31. Marshall Ingwerson, “The Pilgrims Are Killing Their Own Promised Land,” *Christian Science Monitor*, reprinted in *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1982.

32. Shonda Novack, “Public Turns Out to Talk Tourism,” *Santa Fe (N.M.) New Mexican*, April 30, 1999.

### ‘Plenty of work and fair wages’

1. The letters are in the Earl J. Martin Papers, Small Collection 1648 (hereafter SC 1648), Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena (hereafter MHS). Ellen M. Boyer, Earl J. Martin’s daughter, donated this collection in 1999. The letters are arranged chronologically.

2. Martin’s employer was probably Hiram J. Ashley or Byrne R. Ashley. U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census, Grant County, Nebraska, 1900.

3. Martin is probably referring to Peter Alt. *Ibid*.

4. U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census, Jefferson County, Nebraska, 1870, 1880, 1900.

5. Martin was working for “Mr. Ball” at this time. No additional information about Ball could be located. Earl Martin to parents, October 24, 1901, SC 1648, MHS.

6. At this time, Martin was working for August Ritz of the Glendive-Richey area. Ritz trailed sheep to Dawson County around 1900 and homesteaded on land southwest of Richey. Earl worked for Ritz from 1904 until he left the area in 1907. *Glendive (Mont.) Daily Ranger*, January 11, 1955, 1; Earl Martin to folks, May 20, 1905, SC 1648, MHS.

7. “Recreation” was most likely an outdoors magazine. Earl subscribed to his hometown newspapers and other magazines through his parents, who forwarded the publications to him.

8. Earl Martin to mother, March 15, 1907, SC 1648, MHS; Earl Martin to Della, June 7, 1907, *ibid*.; Earl Martin to mother, January 23, 1908, *ibid*.

9. Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (Seattle, 1991), 232.

10. The Chicago and North Western and the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul both arrived in Rapid City in 1907. Rick W. Mills, *Railroading in the Land of Infinite Variety: A History of South Dakota’s Railroads* (Hermosa, S. Dak., 1990), 55–57.

11. U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census, King County, Washington, 1910; Ellen M. Boyer to MHS Archives, 1999, Archives accession file, MHS.

