

# Buffalo Tales

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## JOSEPH C. MAHONEY: COWBOY TURNED STATION AGENT

BY VALERIE LEE VIERK

This article examines the life of Joseph C. Mahoney, who came to Gibbon from New York with his family when he was four, and lived in Buffalo County the rest of his life. By the time Joseph was twenty-four, he had lost his mother, his father, and two brothers. His only living relative in Nebraska was his younger brother, Dorr. Thus, Joseph found himself nearly alone to make his way in the world. Most likely he was lonely, although he left no diaries to attest to this. However, he overcame his early heartbreaks and adversity to become a man of character, a friend to the unfortunate, and a loving husband, father and grandfather.

Joseph Carroll Mahoney was born on June 28, 1869, in Syracuse, New York, to Thomas J. Mahoney and Laura B. (Longstreet) Mahoney. Joseph was their first born. Thomas was born in County Cork, Ireland, in 1837 and came to America with his parents at age seven. The family settled in central New York. On August 30, 1862, Thomas enlisted in Company E, 44th Regiment, New York Volunteers. He had been in the service for nine months when he was wounded at the battle of Chancellorsville. His left arm was so badly wounded that it had to be amputated. He was certified as three-fourth disabled, and was discharged in September 1863.

Shortly after the war Thomas met Laura B. Longstreet, born 1845, who was the daughter of a well-to-do central New York family. They were married in 1866. In 1873 Thomas and Laura moved to the

Gibbon, Nebraska, area where Thomas entered a homestead four miles west of Gibbon. Earlier settlers to this area were part of the Soldier's Free Homestead Colony and acquiring land was a benefit to veterans of the Civil War.

On this homestead three more sons were born to the couple: Clarence in 1873, Roy in 1875, and Dorr in 1881. Roy died at eight months. In January 1883, tragedy struck the family again when ten-year-old Clarence was dragged to death by a horse when his foot became caught in the stir-

rup. He was buried at Gibbon's Riverside cemetery. Joe was thirteen at the time and certainly this was a trauma for him. (He would never give any details of the incident the rest of his life other than to say it happened.) The family stayed on the homestead for twelve years, until 1885, and then moved into Gibbon. In April 1888 Laura died at age 43 of causes not known

to her descendants. She was buried in Riverside cemetery beside her son, Clarence.

Joe graduated from District #2, Buffalo County in April 1888. Shortly after, he journeyed to the area in the Sandhills along the forks of the Dismal River where he was employed in herding cattle. Sometime later his father joined him and the men lived in a dugout. This was during the "free range" period. Apparently the youngest son, Dorr, stayed in Gibbon with friends.

In August 1890 Thomas remarried and while the couple maintained their home in Gibbon, Thomas still periodically



Joe Mahoney circa 1892, age 23

journeyed to the Sandhills to herd cattle with his son. Joe stayed in the Sandhills as he did not like his step-mother. As the family story states, Joe and his father got in a fight up on the Dismal River in late 1893. As a consequence, Joe rode his horse to Whitman, sold it, and bought a ticket to Lincoln. His six years of being a cowboy were over. In Lincoln he hired out with the Chicago and Northern Railroad and worked in this capacity for two and a half years. He then entered telegrapher's school, and after completing the course, secured a job with the Burlington Railroad. His descendants do not know for certain where he worked in this time period.

In April 1894 Joe's father died of a brain tumor and was buried beside his first wife at Riverside cemetery. His death left thirteen-year-old Dorr alone with his step-mother. The family history states that she evicted him, and left for Washington state. Dorr then joined the circus for a few years.

On October 6, 1897, Joe then began employment as the station agent with the Union Pacific Railroad at the village of Nantasket, one mile east of Ravenna. This was a little branch line, formally called the Omaha and Republican Valley Railroad, that commenced at Boelus passed through Nantasket, South Ravenna, Poole, then on to Pleasanton, which was the end of the line. The total length was 22.42 miles one way. The train would turn around and head back the same day.

Joe was apparently in Nantasket in the early summer of 1897, as the family history holds that he went into the general store and came face to face with a mere slip of a girl, sixteen-year-old Eudora Dolly Gramly, called Dolly, who stocked shelves. (Dolly always told her family she met Joe when she was sixteen, and she would turn 17 on July 2.) Joe was smitten, but Dolly was cautious of this consid-

erably older, dark-eyed stranger in town. Just the same--he was tall, slim, and handsome. Dolly was the youngest child of Maria C. and Henry W. Gramly, who had come to Nantasket in a covered wagon from Schaller, Iowa, in 1887 when Dolly was seven. She had four older siblings, but she was much younger than them; she was born when her parents were 43. She held the special place of "baby of the family," was a bit spoiled, and quite a bit of a free spirit. She hadn't wanted to attend school, so she didn't start until she was nine. She much preferred racing over the prairie on her pony. The Gramly family lived in a sod house about a mile southwest of Nantasket.

Dolly's parents knew nothing about Joe Mahoney, and although they were

kind people, they were understandably protective of their daughter. However, the fact that the 28-year-old had secured the job as station agent showed that he was apparently a responsible man. The young people were allowed to "court" a little,

under the watchful eyes of the parents, and not surprisingly, Joe attended a box social and bought Dolly's entry.

After a couple of years at Nantasket, Joe transferred to South Ravenna (one mile south of the town) to act as the station agent there. The "depot" that had been at Nantasket was moved to South Ravenna. It was a mere crude shed. There was a grain elevator and stock yards at South Ravenna, and this precipitated some business for the railroad. A passenger coach was attached to the little train on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Other days the passengers rode in the caboose.

South Ravenna was only about 2.5 miles from Nantasket, and the courtship between Joe and Dolly was able to continue. On November 29, 1899, Joe's dream came true when they were married at the Ravenna Methodist Episcopal



*Maria Catherine and Henry Gramly holding Laura, Joe Mahoney holding Myrl, and Dolly circa summer 1903.*



church with Reverend Foutch officiating and Mrs. Foutch serving as witness. Dolly was 19 and Joe was 30. (Dolly would always call him Jody in the ensuing years.)

The couple lived in a little house a few yards away from the depot at South Ravenna. In August 1900, their first child, Laura Kathryn was born in the sod house of Dolly's parents. The baby was named after Joe's mother, Laura. Another daughter, Myrl Eileen, would follow in December 1901, and she was also born in the sod house with Dr. Hale in attendance. The December 10 edition of the Ravenna News noted the birth of Myrl, and possibly for a little humor, listed her birth at 1:01 a.m. "railroad time." In the next column was mention that Joe Mahoney had rigged up an apparatus on his bicycle whereby he could ride down the railroad tracks from South Ravenna to Nantasket, or to Pleasanton. Joe stated that in the years when he was taking care of business at both places, he estimated he had traveled about 4,000 miles.

On February 11, 1908, Joe secured the position of station agent at the village of Poole, five miles down the line to the west, and the family moved there. The depot had just been completed, and was an attractive structure for this little community. The young couple and their children took up residence in the small, but cozy living quarters in the depot. At that time the community had a bank, a grocery store, and a few other businesses. Approximately 200 people lived in the community.

In April 1910 the village of Poole was incorporated. The Poole Board of Trustees held its first meeting in May 1910, and five trustees were named by the Board of Supervisors. Joe was appointed as village clerk, and he would serve in this capacity for 28 years, until his death. Joe also served as township clerk of Beaver town-

ship for two terms and for several years on the school board. He held membership in the Granite Masonic Lodge of Gibbon and was also a member of the Methodist Episcopal church of Gibbon. Additionally, he was a member of the Order of Railway Telegraphers and the Union Old Timers club. Two more children were born to Joe and Dolly: Joseph Carroll Jr. (called Carroll) in April 1912 in the depot and Thomas Wolburn in September 1916, also in the depot.

Joe was a quiet, kind, and patient man, and indulged his wife and children as much as his meager salary could afford. By 1926 his salary was 54 cents per hour, with

no Sunday hours. He also received a small express commission of about \$67 that year. His daughter, Myrl, enjoyed helping in his office, such as filing bills of lading, and Joe enjoyed having her help.

In June 1913, Joe received a new Underwood typewriter that his daughters, age 12 and 11, tried out while he was attending a ball

game in Ravenna. They each typed a letter to their mother, who was visiting relatives in Arkansas. (She had taken 14-month-old Carroll, which must have been a challenge on a long train trip.) The girls enjoyed the red and blue ink and thought the new typewriter was better than the old "Oliver" [Olivetti]. Their typing needed quite a bit of improvement, but their letters preserved all these years are a treasure to the family.

In summer 1934, Joe wrote a touching letter to his oldest daughter, Laura, nicknamed "Todd", who lived in Goff, Kansas, with her husband. She had written him, inviting him to go fishing with her and her husband. Joe answered her, graciously declining the offer, and then commented on the desperate people trying to exist in the heart of the Depression. He said with the drought, many of them had sold off their livestock, and he didn't know how they would survive.



*Joe Mahoney in his Poole Depot office, circa early 1938*

Often Joe would take a hungry hobo from the trains over to the café for a sandwich or go to Dolly's kitchen to see what she had to spare.

In May 1938 Joe was preparing to retire. He had worked as a station agent for the Union Pacific for nearly 41 years and would be 69 on June 28. It was time to hang up his telegrapher's hat and enjoy his family. Myrl was living six miles away with her husband and six children. Often in the previous years, her children had come to visit and sometimes stay a few days at Poole. There was a particular magic to the little community and the kids always begged to come again. Granddaughter Mary Lee Pesek recalls how Grandpa Joe, called "Granddaddy" by the little kids, would greet each child when they would arrive. "Well, who do we have here?" he'd say as he'd bend down to their height, and often he'd then stand up and do a little Irish jig to make them laugh. Carroll and his wife were living in Kearney and Tommy at 21 was still a bachelor living with his parents.

On June 19, 1938, Joe became ill with pneumonia and a couple days later was taken to the Grand Island hospital. He lingered for four days, and died on June 25, three days before his 69th birthday. He was buried at Gibbon's Riverside cemetery beside his mother, father, and brother. Dolly was devastated as she knew what a wonderful husband she had lost. She would grieve for years.

Sadly, since Joe was not "officially" retired on his birthday, his employer did not think it proper to award his pension to his widow. Without it she would be destitute. Carroll intervened, wrote several letters, and in a few months the pension was established. It was only about \$30 per month, but Dolly survived thanks to the generosity of her children. After Joe's death, Dolly and Tommy had to leave their quarters at the depot. For a

time they lived in the little former bank building that was abandoned after the bank was moved to Ravenna. Later they rented rooms at the Criffield apartments in Poole.

Joe was spared seeing both of his sons go off to war, but Dolly's diary details the anguish of those two years. Carroll joined the Army and served in the Burma-China-India Theatre, and Tommy in the Navy in the South Pacific. Both sons returned unscathed, however.

In 1945 Dolly moved to Ravenna and bought a little house of her own. By then her youngest son was married and he and his wife had presented her with two grandchildren. Two more would follow. Carroll was now a professional photographer, and took several photos of his father in the depot a few months before his death, and the family treasures these.

In February 1950 Dolly became a great grandmother and again in September 1951, with the birth of this author. They shared many wonderful times before she went to join her beloved Jody in August 1960. And as for my great grandfather Joe, I never knew him, but I feel as if I do from what my family has told me and from the records he left. He was a good man—and a gentleman in the truest sense of the word. Our family celebrates our partial Irish heritage every St. Patrick's Day in memory of our Irish grandfather. This June will be the 70th anniversary of his death. (In 2004 I moved to South Ravenna, and live about 100 yards from where my great grandparents once lived.)

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*About the Author: Valerie Lee Vierk was born in Kearney and grew up in Ravenna, where she has lived most of her life. She has been employed by the University of Nebraska at Kearney as a department secretary for 24 years. Besides historical articles, Valerie writes poetry, short stories, and books. Her first book, *Gold Stars and Purple Hearts—the War Dead of the Ravenna, NE* was published in 2005. Her second book, *Sailing the Troubled Sea—A Nebraska Boy Goes to War*, was co-authored with her father, Herbert Nolda. It is an account of his World War II Coast Guard career. The author wishes to thank her relatives, Nancy (Mahoney) Stewart, Thomas J. "Buck" Mahoney, and Mary Lee Pesek for the information they provided.*



# Director's Report

Summer is right around the corner and that means school kids are arriving. We have been very lucky (cross your fingers) with the weather this year. With all of these kids out here, it is a great reminder of the importance of the upcoming expansion needs: school buses show up and have difficulty parking. Then, throughout the day, the kids are lined up in the depot waiting for the restrooms. We currently have only one for boys and one for girls. The weather forecast has us on our toes. If something should go awry, the kids are swiftly moved into the depot basement to huddle with our stored artifacts. The archive ladies are on a forced mini-vacation from the stacks of queries that are waiting for them, because the kids are using the parking lot and our green grassy section for the outdoor games. The expansion will solve these issues plus many of our other opportunities. You will be hearing more about this in the very near future.

There are two other exciting ventures. First, UNK's Frank House and the Buffalo County Historical Society are teaming up to offer the Power House bricks with our logo and name of your choice. For a \$100 donation, you can choose if you want your name, company name, not-for-profit organization, neighbor or relatives' names on it and then display it in your home! We are now taking pre-paid orders, and you will be contacted when the brick is ready to pick up. The proceeds will be split between the Frank House and BCHS and will be used for preservation and sharing of this area's history. Order now, before we run out of bricks!

The other great item you need to know about is a wonderful web site: [www.saving-treasures.org](http://www.saving-treasures.org). This is an amazing resource from the Nebraska State Historical Society for everyone to be able to access information on how to save what you have: paper, material, objects... your heirlooms!!!!

I want to hear from you about what you want and expect from us! Please e-mail me at: [bchs@bchs.us](mailto:bchs@bchs.us)

I look forward to hearing from you!!

Sincerely, Jennifer

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