



Love of

Barrack June 6th 1865

not write? well you say that I could
 to convince you of your mistake and
 to show that I can write and write
 well "I take my pen in hand &"
 For a few weeks past I have been on the go
 have been to Virginia home again to last
 chance home to Virginia and home
 again right before last. I suppose
 Mary has written but little about the
 country here we are within 15 miles of
 the summit of the Rocky Mountains. here
 it is warm sunshine. up there is
 perpetual snow. the stream that runs
 by our door rises in sight in bald
 Mountain and is the very head waters
 of the Missouri. a few weeks ago when
 in Virginia we had fine radishes
 and lettuce. and in five minutes
 walk from the table one could roll
 in snow. between here and Virginia

THE GOVERNOR'S LADY

from all to all

by JAMES L. THANE, JR.

On June 1, 1863, Mary Wright Edgerton, a thirty-six-year-old housewife from Tallmadge, Ohio, left home, family and friends to join her husband, Sidney, in pursuit of his political ambitions. Twice before, these ambitions had taken her from Ohio to Washington, D.C. Now, in the early summer 111 years ago, they were leading her 2,500 miles away to the gold fields of sprawling new Idaho Territory, on the very fringes of American civilization, in what is now Southwestern Montana. They were also leading her to a crude log house in Bannack — Montana's first Governor's Mansion — where she was to spend two years struggling to make a livable atmosphere for her family while her husband sought to bring political and civil order out of mining camp lawlessness and chaos.

Between domestic chores, baby tending and concern about her older children's lack of cultural advantages in Bannack, Mrs. Edgerton wrote a series of letters to her family in Ohio, vividly describing her life on the frontier. As the wife of Montana Territory's first chief executive, she was a witness to many of the most important events in early Montana history, and her letters contain additional information about them. But much more importantly, they provide an insight into the thoughts of a Nineteenth Century woman, attuned to life in the more ordered structure of the Midwest, suddenly thrust into a raw new atmosphere. Far from basking in the glory of First Lady status, being escorted to public functions on the arm of her husband, she spent much of her time waiting for him to return from interminable journeys and worrying about keeping her brood fed and clothed and safe. A sampling of her letters which form the basis of the article which follows indicate in poignant sequence the frontier experiences of Mary Wright Edgerton, wife of Montana's first chief executive.

WRITES HOME TO OHIO

BORN IN Tallmadge, Ohio, on January 21, 1827, Mary Edgerton was the daughter of Alpha and Lucy Foster Wright. Somewhat better educated than most women of her time, she attended Tallmadge Academy and Oberlin College, the first co-educational college in the United States. Sometime in the late 1840's, she met her future husband who was then a law student in Akron. Her parents originally opposed the match, but finally relented, and the two were married on May 18, 1849.

Sidney Edgerton established his law practice in Akron and began to dabble in politics with some success. Both he and his wife were sympathetic with the new Republican party, and in 1856 he was a delegate to the first Republican National Convention. In 1858 and again in 1860 he was elected to Congress from Ohio.¹

In the meantime, the Edgerton family was growing rapidly: Martha (Mattie) was born in 1850, Wright in 1853, Sidney in 1856, and Pauline in 1858. At least one child, Franklin, died in infancy and was buried in Tallmadge.

Sidney Edgerton had finished his second term in Congress when President Abraham Lincoln appointed him chief justice of Idaho Territory, created in March, 1863. Edgerton was decidedly more enthused about the new job, the long trip and the severe family dislocations it involved than was his wife. As their oldest daughter later recalled, "I know how bitter for her was the thought of leaving her twin sister and her home." Edgerton, however, "welcomed the opportunity to aid in the building of a new territory, without concerning himself about the womenfolks' homesickness or the risks we must run to get there."²

When the Edgertons began their long journey, they were accompanied by their four children and a group of other relatives, some of whom were to make significant marks on early Montana history. They included Edgerton's niece, Lucia Darling, who became one of Montana's first school teachers; his nephews, Henry Tilden and Wilbur F. Sanders and Sanders' wife, Hattie, and their two children. Sanders not only became one of Montana's first two U.S. Senators after statehood but played a key role in the earliest development of the territory.

¹ Wilbur F. Sanders, "Notes on Montana History," Hubert H. Bancroft Collection, Bancroft Library; Martha E. Plassman, "Biographical Sketch of Sidney Edgerton," *MHS Contributions* III, 331-334; Paul C. Phillips, "Sidney Edgerton," *Dictionary of American Biography*, VI, 20.

² Martha Edgerton Plassman, "Judge Edgerton's Daughter," typescript, Montana Historical Society (MHS), 66.

The Edgerton party traveled first to Omaha by way of Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago and St. Joseph, then across the plains by wagon through present-day Nebraska, Wyoming, and Idaho to what is now southwestern Montana. The immediate objective for the travelers was Bannack, a crudely constructed mining camp that had sprung up along Grasshopper Creek, where John White and William Eads had made the first significant gold strike in the area on July 28, 1862. Some five hundred miners had already spent one winter there, and while new strikes were already drawing many away, Bannack was still a lively camp.

ORIGINALLY the Edgertons intended to remain in Bannack only a few days before continuing far to the west to Lewiston, the designated capital of new Idaho Territory. Learning that early snows had already made the road impassable, the Edgertons decided they would winter in Bannack, unaware that it was to be their only home in the two years they were to spend in Montana.

Before immersing himself in the business of bringing some legal order out of the crude miners court rule which was Bannack's only legal structure, Judge Edgerton bought a log store building in which to house his family, converting it with his own hands into a three-room dwelling with kitchen annex. The house was poorly heated, and the family had to improvise most of its furnishings. Water for drinking, bathing and cooking had to be carried from Grasshopper Creek, which ran behind the house. Mrs. Edgerton washed clothes in a wooden tub, which doubled as the family bath tub. At night the only light came from candles and kerosene lamps. Mrs. Edgerton did the best she could to beautify the house by covering the log walls of the front room with sheets. All in all, "it was a poor excuse for a house," her daughter recalled, but "there was no better house in town."³

Crude as it was, for the next two years, Mary Edgerton's world revolved almost entirely around this house. Judging by her letters and her daughter's recollections, she seldom went far from its walls. Bannack was a man's world; proper women like Mrs. Edgerton "led secluded lives — almost

³ Plassman, "Edgerton's Daughter," 116.

SIDNEY EDGERTON (inset) brought his family to the raw mining camp, seen below, in 1863, and although he soon became Montana Territory's first chief executive, the title made little difference in family living conditions. Bannack, pictured a few years later, experienced only a brief boom. In 1862, strikes along Grasshopper Creek attracted a population of several thousand and made the mining camp the logical choice to be Montana Territory's first capital. However, the diggings proved shallow, the miners moved on. In 1864 the legislature voted to move to more prosperous Virginia City.



cloistered in the lack of contact with the world outside." Mrs. Edgerton's daughter concluded: "I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of women we knew in Bannack, and calls were never exchanged between them."⁴

Undeniably, Bannack was a rough community. The gold discovery had attracted a group of outlaws who organized under the leadership of Henry Plummer, the local sheriff. Generally, the townspeople remained ignorant of Plummer's dual identity; for example, the Edgertons and the Sanders shared Thanksgiving dinner with him in 1863.

At this point, Bannack was simply too far removed from civilization for established authorities to deal with the outlaw problem, and as in many other gold camps, as the situation worsened, the citizens took action. First they organized a vigilante group and began cleaning out the outlaws. Then, late in the fall of 1863, the citizens sought a division of the Idaho Territory in the hope that a regularly constituted government, closer to their settlements, might provide the stability necessary for social and economic development.

⁴ Martha Edgerton Plassman, "Excerpts from Letters of Mary Edgerton, 1863-1865," typescript, MHS.

Sidney Edgerton agreed to return to Washington to lobby for the project. When he left Bannack in January, 1864, his wife, then several months pregnant, had only her thirteen-year-old daughter, Edgerton's niece, and an unfamiliar doctor to help her through the pregnancy. Edgerton was still absent when their sixth child, a girl whom Mrs. Edgerton named Idaho, was born on May 23, 1864. When Edgerton finally did return in July, it was as governor of the new Montana Territory. Mary Edgerton was now Montana's first lady, but the distinction meant little, for her husband's title did not change her life style.

Mary Edgerton began writing her letters home as soon as she was settled in Bannack in 1863. Most of them were addressed to her twin sister, Mrs. Martha Carter, but many were to her mother and another sister, Mrs. Lucy Ann Shaw. The following excerpts taken from the total collection in *The Montana Historical Society* serve as a sequential commentary on what she experienced in Montana before her husband, out of political favor in Washington, decided in 1866 to resign and resume his law practice in Ohio. Mrs. Edgerton's words are interrupted only when clarity is needed, with informative material placed in bracketed italics.



MATTIE EDGERTON



LUCIA DARLING

BANNACK — October 18, 1863

DEAR SISTER:

I don't know that I shall have time to write a very long letter to you today but will write as much as I can. It does not seem very much like Sunday here for they do not have any kind of meeting. There is no minister here except a Catholic minister. I think the town is very quiet and orderly for such a mining town — much more so than I expected to find it. We have not got our house finished yet, but hope to soon. I have made my rag carpet and as soon as we can have a fireplace and chimney built shall put it down on our front room . . .

We are all very well now. Wright has been quite unwell until he has grown very poor but he is very well now and eats very heartily and his food seems to agree with him. Before you will get this letter you will probably have had Thanksgiving. We would all like to be with you, but that cannot be. But we shall think of you all about that time, think of what good times you are having. Last week was election in Ohio. Would like to hear the results. It takes news a long time to get here but we value it all the more when we do get it. . . .

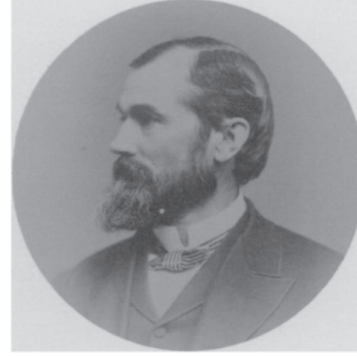
Tell Lucy [*this Lucy is apparently a friend, not Mrs. Edgerton's sister, Lucy Ann*] that the fixings that were in that medicine satchel have done us lots of good. I don't know what we should have done without them. I think of her whenever I have occasion to use any of them and that is pretty often. . . . How does Benja [*Mrs. Edgerton's brother, Benjamin Wright*] get along at the Depot? Does he like the business? I wish he could run the cars out here. It would be a great sight . . .

Who teaches the academy now? I suppose Mary and Homer [*children of Mrs. Edgerton's sister, Martha Carter*] attend the school if you have one. How do they get along with their music? Have you got the song called "The Battle Cry of Freedom?" If you have not, get it for you will like it. I am sorry that Mattie cannot keep along with her music but hope she will improve enough to make up when she has another opportunity to practice. She helps me do the housework now. Lucia expects to teach this winter, will commence her school this week if she can get a room for her school. Expect to send Wright and Sidney. [*These are the two Edgerton sons. Mary always referred to her husband as "Mr. Edgerton."*]

Mr. Edgerton has just finished a pine table and I tell you we feel proud of it. He is going to make some chairs next and by the time you come to visit us we shall be well supplied with furniture of home manufacture. I wrote in my last letter to have you save dried fruit (if you have any) for us and if we have a chance to send for some we shall do so. I must stop and get supper.



HATTIE SANDERS



WILBUR SANDERS

BANNACK — November 29, 1863

DEAR SISTER:

I have been waiting for an opportunity to send a letter to Salt Lake or I should have written before. We have to pay a dollar for sending or receiving each letter. Perhaps you will be surprised to see Mr. Edgerton this winter. It does not seem half as far to go back as it did to come here, but it will be a cold and tedious journey. I don't like to think of his going, still I know that it is best that he should go. . . . I wish some of the folks would come out here next summer. We should all be glad enough to see anyone from home. . . .

Lucia and Mr. Edgerton and myself had invitations to a Thanksgiving supper. We had an excellent supper equal to any that we ever had in Ohio. I tasted butter for the first time since we came here and it was a treat I can assure you, but as long as it is ten and twelve shillings a pound (and poor at that price) I think we shall do without it most of the time. Everything is very high here. Sugar is 75¢ per pound, pork sixty, flour from twenty-five to thirty [*dollars for a hundred pound sack*], nutmeg 50¢ an ounce, etc. etc. I am going to send you a list of things that I would like to have sent if, after Mr. E. gets there and talks the matter over he should think it best to have them sent. . . .

In sending dry goods don't send anything nice for I never should wear it here, but send things suitable for everyday wear. The boys have not had on cotton shirts since we left Omaha. Their woolen ones are nearly worn out but shall try to make them last until Mr. E. gets back. Mr. Edgerton put on a white shirt on Thanksgiving Day for the first time.

We have had some very cold weather but there is one beauty about it. We never have rain and but little snow. How are you all? Who made Thanksgiving supper this year? We would all like to have been with you. . . .

Mr. Edgerton will tell you more in one evening than I could write all day. I would like to go with him but we can't both leave home at the same time. The winter will seem long but I hope he will be able to come back early in the spring. I should write more letters to send by Mr. Edgerton but I do not get but little time to write many letters so this will have to answer for all. Give my love to all. When you write tell all the news you can think of.

Mattie received two letters from Tallmadge three weeks ago written in July last. How is Mary Thomas [*a girl who worked for Mrs. Edgerton in Ohio helping with housekeeping chores*]. Is she married yet? Do you have the same girl that you had when we left? Do you keep up the glee club yet? . . . I will write on a separate sheet the list of things that I want sent.

January 17, 1864

[No salutation, probably to her sister, Lucy Ann Shaw]

Mr. Edgerton has not been able to leave here for Washington yet but now expects to start next Tuesday or Wednesday. He got already to go a week [ago] last Friday but it was so very cold that he did not think it prudent to do so, as he would be obliged to go horseback as far as Salt Lake.

The past week has been a very eventful one here. Travellers from here to Virginia City (a mining town seventy-five miles from here) going anywhere, have been very much troubled by highway robbers. A great many have been robbed since we have been here and some have been murdered. A few weeks ago there was a vigilance committee formed at V.C. [Virginia City] and a number of these highwaymen were arrested and hung; before they were hung they made confessions and implicated many others. Their confessions was that there was a regularly formed band of them and that the sheriff of this district was the capt. He lived here, was a very feminine-looking man, but the greatest villain of them all. During the past year they have committed about one hundred murders — and these murders had not been discovered by the people here. The victims were those who had made money and had started for the States. They were murdered and robbed and then their bodies, some of them, cut into pieces and put under the ice; others were burned and others buried.

A week ago last night, four of the vigilance committee came here from Virginia City and told some of the men here what they had learned and what they had done, and wanted to have the people to form themselves into a vigilance committee and hang those here that were known to belong to the band. They did so on Saturday night and on Sunday night they arrested three men, Henry Plummer, our sheriff being one of the number, and took them to the gallows, and hung them.

On Monday they attempted to arrest another of the band — a Mexican — and two of our men were shot by him (one died the next day, the other was not seriously wounded), which so exasperated the people that they came to our house and got the howitzer that has been left in Mr. Edgerton's care, and with that threw shells into the house which exploded and injured the man. They then took him out and shot and hung him. They then tore down the house and set it on fire and threw the body on and burned it up. You may think that was hard, but the house had been headquarters for all those villains for a long time and no one would bury the body. Some were in favor [of] drawing it onto one of the hills near here and leaving it to be devoured by the wolves. Others proposed to throw it onto the burning house, and they did so. Tuesday they hung another of the band that had been arrested about ten miles from here and brought here, making the fifth that had been hung here, and there have been nine men hung in Virginia City and Nevada, a mining town eight miles from V.C. and they are now in pursuit of others. A number have been banished from the country on short notice. I hope the Committee will not have to hang any more here for I do not like such excitement but I shall feel that Mr. Edgerton will go much more safely now, than he would have gone two weeks ago, for I have no doubt that they intended to have robbed him, for they were very anxious to know when he expected to leave here and how much company he would have, etc., etc. I think that there is no danger of his being robbed now. I do not know how long Mr. E. will be gone, probably three months. . . .

We had extremely cold weather here the week before last. The mercury in thermometers after going forty degrees below zero froze in the bulb. I never knew such cold weather or anything like it. I was so afraid that the children would freeze their noses or ears in the night that [I] got up a number of times in the night to see that their heads were covered. Their beds would be covered with frost. I saw their frozen breath. . . .

EAST BANNACK — March 27, 1864

DEAR SISTER:

We have just received a package of letters from Lewiston. Among them were two letters from you to me, one dated July 12, the other October 5, '63. I was glad to get them if they were not of late date. I think we must have received most if not all, the letters you have written. . . .

We have been looking for the Salt Lake express all day. When it comes we expect letters of later date. I hope that I shall hear from Mr. Edgerton. You don't know how long the time has seemed since he went away. I have not heard from [him] but once. I wish he was here now, for I need his advice about many things. We are all pretty well. Lucia has not quite got over her cold, but is much better. During the last week, Lucia and I have been making over dresses for Mattie and Pauline. I made that brown dress of mine . . . for Mattie. It looks very well. She has worn out and outgrown almost every dress that she had. This is a great country for wearing out clothes, particularly if they are not very strong. . . .

The weather has been some colder for a few days past but today it is warmer again. The "miners" here are all waiting anxiously for warm weather to come, so that they can wash the dirt they have got out during the winter. From the claim that Mr. Edgerton "shook" that pan of dirt last fall the men washed fifteen hundred dollars in one day, a thousand dollars another day, and six hundred dollars another day, but that is all the good the money will do them, for as soon as they get any, they gamble and drink it all up. . . .



EAST BANNACK, June 4, 1864

DEAR SISTER:

I received your letter of May 3rd just one month after date. How strange it is that you don't hear anything from Mr. Edgerton. Do you suppose that he is sick? I have not heard a word from him for a number of weeks past and I am afraid that he is sick. I shall be glad when he gets back again — the days have seemed very long since the baby was born. [*This is the first mention that Mary Edgerton made of her baby or of the fact that she was pregnant. Perhaps she felt that her pregnancy was not a fit subject for the mails, or perhaps she did not want to alarm her family at home about her condition. Possibly she preferred to have Edgerton deliver the news in person while he was in Ohio.*]

If I was able to be around at work the time would not seem so long. I am getting along very well, have been out to eat supper with the rest of the family, twice. The baby is very quiet — have not had to be awake nights with her at all. She is not only a good baby but they all say that she is pretty. Lucia and Mattie attended a wedding last week, May 25. Mattie can give Mary a description of the performance at the wedding — but I doubt if anyone can give a description of the "chivaree" that they had about eleven o'clock. It was before the girls came home. I knew that the couple were to be chivareed, but after all it startled me so that I did not get over it for some time. I did not sleep very well that night. The next night we had a regular serenade and it was really very fine. That did not disturb me, I slept better after hearing it. Lucia and Mattie have been to call on the bride this afternoon and have just got back. . . .

Sunday afternoon. I received letters this morning from you and Lucy Ann mailed May 6th. You wonder that we don't get your letters sooner? We have lately got them in about a month after they were written. There was a time that the mails were very irregular because of the deep snow between this place and Salt Lake, but they are very regular now and we often have two or three extra mail coaches and expresses come in during the week loaded with passengers.

I must not write much more for my arm aches. I am not very strong yet. Tell Lucy Ann that I will write her the next letter. Would write today if I was not so tired. Love to all from all.

BANNACK, September 18th, 1864

DEAR MOTHER:

It is a long time since I have written a letter to you, but do not think that I have forgotten you. I do not get much time to write "these days." We are now in the midst of the dirtiest kind of work. Mr. Edgerton has been taking the mud off of both the outside and inside of our house and plastering it over with lime. [*Sidney Edgerton finally returned to Bannack on July 1 after an absence of five and a half months*]. It makes us a great deal of hard dirty work. If we could finish one room and then work at another we could get along much easier but we are obliged to have all the rooms turned "upside down" if not "inside out" at the same time. I hope that we shall get straightened around again this week.

I have wished a great many times that Mary Thomas was here for I think that she would help me occasionally. There is a woman who lives near us that helps me wash sometimes and I would hire her every week but she cannot leave her family always when I want her. I pay her two and a half dollars (everything has to be paid in gold here. It would [be] twice as much in greenbacks) for doing all the rubbing. We bring all the water, tend the fire and wring and hang out all the clothes. If Mary was here and was willing to do so, she could make much money, but she would have to endure many privations. Mr. Fenn and Mr. Sackett have finished their cabin, all but the floor, slept in it for the first time last night. [*Charles Sackett and Richard Fenn were friends from Ohio who moved to Montana after the Edgertons*].

It is very pleasant to have them so near us. Their cabin is right opposite us with the "Grasshopper" between. We expect to stay here this winter even if the Legislature should be called to meet at some other place. I am very glad, for it is so much work to move, even if we have but little to move. . . .

We have made arrangements to send to "Bitter Root" [*no doubt Mary means the settlements near present-day Missoula*] for flour and vegetables to use this winter. We can get them there much cheaper than at Salt Lake. We have to pay from twenty-five to twenty-eight dollars a sack for flour now and I don't [*know*] how much higher it will be before the winter is over.

We have not heard from the States for a long time. I shall be glad when the mail can go through again without any interruptions from the Indians. I will then try to be more prompt in writing home. We are all well. The baby grows finely and is the best baby that I ever had the care of. She is perfectly healthy. You would be surprised to see how much Pauline has grown since we left Tallmadge. She talks about Grandma very often. Give my love to all the "folks at home."



BANNACK—Sunday Eve., November 20, 1864

DEAR SISTER,

Lucia is writing to you, so I have given the baby to Mattie to hold a while so I can write a few lines to you too. We received your letter dated Oct. 18th today. I am sorry to hear that Mother is lame — hope she has got over it before this. I have thought a great deal about her this fall. I hope [*that*] she will be spared to us for many years yet. Lucia received a letter from Belle today. She wrote that there were a number of cases of typhoid fever in Tallmadge when she wrote. I hope you will all escape it. . . .

The people here are building an office for Mr. Edgerton (the governor) joining our house. I think it will be a very "good looking" building for this place. This "City" has improved very much during the last two months.

By the turn of the century, Bannack was almost a ghost town. A few visitors in 1908 found the ruins of Edgerton's three-room, log governor's mansion and it became one of the town's most interesting curiosities.



Monday eve. We have done our washing today, had supper, and Lucia has gone to her "German" lessons. Mr. Edgerton has gone up town and if no one comes in I will try to finish this tonight. I don't know how we shall manage to send out letters for we are nearly out of postage stamps, and the P.M. will not send them without.

Our minister is going to preach a Thanksgiving sermon next Thursday. I would like to get up a supper that day if you could all be here. It would seem like Thanksgiving then. Mr. Edgerton is very busy now getting buildings ready for the legislature. It is the secretary's business to see to all those things, but he is not here, and the legislature meets here in three weeks. It will take some time to get the buildings ready and the furniture made. I do not think the room will be fitted up quite in the "style" that they are in Washington.

You wrote about the school. I wish our children could be in school this winter. They study some every day at home but it is not like being in school. I should hardly like to send them to school here, if there was one, for they would learn so many bad things that would injure them more than all the good they would learn. Most of the boys here swear as soon as they can talk. Our boys have not got any of those habits yet and I hope they will not. . . .

BANNACK—January 2nd, 1865

DEAR SISTER,

. . . I have just got through washing and it is almost time to get supper. Perhaps you would like to know what I am going to have for supper? Well! Last Saturday we had a present of a hind quarter of antelope. I am going to fry some of that and bake potatoes and soda bisquit. Those are the substantial; for dessert, mince pie. I cannot get up a very great variety for want of the materials to do it with.

I kept those "flower pictures" that were in that trunk for the childrens' Christmas presents. They were very much pleased with them. I think they are perfect beauties. Mr. Edgerton bought three apples for the younger children, paid two dollars in greenbacks for them. . . .

We have mail now only once a week. Shall expect a letter every mail. I would like to write a longer letter but must stop and get supper.

BANNACK—February 19, 1865

DEAR MOTHER,

I received a letter from Martha last Friday, written December 30. I did not expect to get any letter for some time, for the Indians are so troublesome on the plains that I supposed that the mail would have to go by California, and it would take some time for it to reach here. I am very glad to hear again from home. Since the Legislature adjourned it has been very quiet here. We have an evening now and then to ourselves. Mr. Edgerton has commenced reading "Healey's History of the War," aloud evenings, but we have so many interruptions we do not get along very fast with it. The children are all very much interested in hearing it read. They (the children) commenced their lessons again last week. I am afraid that when we go back to the States they will be behind all their schoolmates. . . .

It seems as if spring would never come here. Last year at this time there was no snow here except on some of the higher mountains, and the weather was very mild; and now the snow is at least six inches deep and the weather is cold. I hope it will not last much longer. Those who are travelling to the States must have a hard time, but the coach is full every week of men who are going back and all the seats are engaged. . . .

I think that I shall have a chance to send the baby's picture to you before long. She has changed a great deal since it was taken — has grown prettier. She can sit alone now, has two upper and two under teeth. We are all well except Lucia. She has a cold, as all the rest of us have had. The Sunday school commenced today. Our children all attend. Lucia is one of the teachers. There were about twenty scholars today; many more will attend when it is warm weather. . . .



BANNACK—March 19, 1865

DEAR SISTER,

I do not know whether you will ever get this letter if I write it but will write as if I thought you would receive it. It has been a long time since we have had any mail from the States, and I do not know that there is any prospect of the stages running again on the plains this spring. . . .

I wonder if spring has come to you yet? It does seem as if we should never have warm weather again. We shall all rejoice when it grows warmer. We have had a long cold winter; I think that streams and rivers will be very high when the snow melts. We have had so much of it. The baby has waked so I will have to stop writing for tonight.

Monday Afternoon, 1 o'clock. We have finished our washing and now will try to finish this letter but my hands feel so stiff and clumsy that it is not a very pleasant business.

The day has been very pleasant and quite warm compared to the weather we have had. People are leaving here almost daily for new diggings where they think they will make money faster than here, but many will be disappointed I presume. It is possible that we may move into some of the vallies [sic] this summer but I do not know whether we shall or not. Mr. Edgerton is going into Jefferson and Edgerton counties as soon as it is warm weather to look at the country and see where he would like to live. It is very much warmer in the valleys than here, and I think we should like to live there better particularly in the winter. I do not think we can find a healthier place than this is. We have but very little sickness here. . . .

The dagurreon [photographer] was here this morning and said he would like a picture of our house the first pleasant day. When he does I will send one to you. I wish we could have the inside of the house taken too so you could see just how we look and live here. . . .

BANNACK—May 7, 1865

DEAR MOTHER,

I received your letter last week. I do not want you to think that I let Mattie attend all the "Balls" we have here, for it is not so. I should be the last one to be willing to have her associate with the "set" that generally attend them. Those she attended (she has been twice) were select parties; none of the drinking, loafing, set were allowed to go. There have been a number [of] such parties and there had been a good deal said because Lucia and Mattie did not go, thought the reason was because they belonged to the governor's family and they felt above those who attended them, as they had refused all invitations.

At this time I was urged very hard to let Mattie go. Lucia went with her, so I consented with the understanding that she should not attend another during the winter, and it was the last. Everything passed off very pleasantly and for that reason they stayed much later than they intended.

You spoke of Mattie's age? I know that she is only fourteen years old, but it is very hard to convince people here that she is under eighteen. She is so large. I think that if you had been here Mother you would have done as I did taking all things into consideration. There are no parties here except dancing parties and there is no other amusement.

Sunday, May 14, 1865. When I commenced this I thought I should finish it the next day but Mr. Edgerton came home from Virginia [City] and said that he should move to V. as soon as a house could be fixed for us which would probably be in two or three weeks, so we women have been very busy sewing during the past week. I am glad that we are going to live near Hattie and there are many other reasons why it will be pleasanter and better for us to live in V. [*For some reason, the family did not move to Virginia City. Mrs. Edgerton later mentions the possibility of moving to Helena, but that too failed to materialize, and the family remained in Bannack. She did not ever explain in any letter that survives why they decided against these moves.*]

The people there expect to purchase or build a house for us and then Mr. Edgerton can have all the "law" business that he can attend to with good fees. There is a greater variety of everything there and things are cheaper than here. I presume it will not seem so much like home there for some time as it does here, but I am glad that we are going to move, not that I like the moving part but I think I shall like the change. . . .



BANNACK — May 21, 1865

DEAR SISTER:

I received your letter dated Apr. 7th last night, and one dated Apr. 11th nearly a week ago. I was very agreeably surprised to hear that you had sent a box of good things to us. I had not expected anything of the kind, but I can tell you we shall be very glad to get them. And the lard will be very acceptable. Three weeks ago I bought eleven pounds of lard, paid eighty cents pr. lb. for it. Everything is much higher here in the spring than at any other time. You may be surprised to hear that we have paid seventy-five dollars for a sack (one hundred pounds) of flour but two days after we could have bought it for \$60 and now it is only forty-five dollars a sack. Cheap isn't it?

The snow has been so deep and the roads so bad between Salt Lake and this place that those who have had flour on the road could not get over the "Divide" with wagons but had to pack everything over. At one time, there was not a pound of flour to be bought in this town and many families lived on meat and dried fruit (if they had any). The first flour that was brought in sold for one dollar a pound. I did not write you about it at the time for fear you would think we were on the point of starvation. But we have had plenty of the necessaries of life and we can get along very well without the luxuries. I don't know how we shall ever pay you for what you have sent us. . . .

Since Mr. E. went away [to Helena], we have heard great stories about the Indians killing the whites who were on their way to Ft. Benton. I don't know how much truth there is in the reports, but if they are true, Mr. E. will raise a company of men while in Helena to go after the Indians. I hope he will not have to go, but I do want to have the Indians killed. I think that if the government would station men (soldiers) at different points on the river and on the plains instead of fitting out an expedition . . . to cross the plains every year and of no earthly use it would benefit the territories much more and cost [the] government less. . . .



BANNACK — Aug. 7, 1865

DEAR MOTHER:

I will try to write to you today but really do not know what to write to make my letter interesting to you or to anyone. Lucia and Mattie have gone on a "berrying" excursion so we put off our washing until tomorrow. . . . I churned this morning three and a half pounds of butter. Churned three times in two weeks. I make all the butter that we use now and it is first rate butter too. Would like to have you try some of it. We have but one cow now.

Wednesday. I did not get any time to write yesterday. The baby was quite sick the night before last with diarrhæa [sic]. I did not have much chance to sleep, she was so restless. I gave her some charcoal and brandy and she is much better today but not entirely well. We washed yesterday and baked today. Whenever Mr. Edgerton goes away something happens so that we want him very much. Last night our cow was sick and we thought she would die. She was so bloated that she could hardly breathe. Henry [Edgerton's nephew] got some men to help him give her melted lard and it helped her so she seems well this morning. We suppose that she had eaten alkali. I expect Mr. Edgerton here tomorrow. . . .



BANNACK — August 27, 1865

DEAR SISTER MARTHA:

I do not feel much like writing today but because it is Sunday and I have a little time that I can write, will commence a letter. I am not sick but lazy. We have had very warm weather for more than a week past and it makes us all unfit for work. . . .

Lucia commenced teaching last week, has sixteen scholars. Don't know how long she will keep it up. Sidney and Pauline attend school. Wright has to be in the (Post) Office so much that he cannot go to school.

Lucia received a letter from her sisters last week. One of them "Tina" has been very sick but is much better now. They wrote that Volney Edgerton [Sidney's brother] and all his family were going to visit in Marshall, Michigan in September. I wish we could visit there with them. If we could get aboard the cars here and go there we might do so. I hope it shall not be many years before we can have a railroad through this territory to the Pacific Coast. Then you may expect a visit from us and we shall expect you here. . . .

After supper. The girls have been to the "sing" this eve., but did not find any others there so they came back. There are only a few here now that take any interest in the Sunday School. We have no minister here now. Mr. Smith (the minister) who had been here is now in Virginia City. I don't know whether there is one coming here or not. Those who are sent out by the Home Missionary Society cannot begin to live here on the salary allowed by the society — everything is so high.

It is almost time for the mail to close so I will have to send this to the office. I hope we shall hear from you this week. We are all well. The baby walks and is in all sorts of mischief. Write soon. Tell Lucy Ann to write too whenever she can. . . . Love to all.

FROM THE CONTENT of this last letter, it seems clear that Mary Edgerton had no inkling of the fact that within the space of three weeks she would leave Montana for good. The abruptness of the Edgertons' departure from Montana Territory in mid-September, 1865, was due in large part to the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the territorial secretary, Thomas Francis Meagher. As Mrs. Edgerton noted in her letters home, the government in Washington had been extremely lax in the matter of appointing a territorial secretary to assist her husband. Consequently, Edgerton had to assume the many tasks normally performed by the secretary. Most important among these was the disbursement of government funds designated for the territory. Federal law stipulated that only the secretary could legally distribute the money apportioned for the territory. As a result, Edgerton had supported the territorial government with money out of his own pocket and out of the pockets of Republican friends, until such time as a secretary would arrive to repay him. Unfortunately, when Meagher finally did appear, he had not secured the proper bonds and thus was unable, even as secretary, to disburse any money.

At this point, Edgerton decided to return to Washington once again to lay the problems of the people of Montana before the national administration. But this time, he decided to take his family with him. He and Mrs. Edgerton had wanted for some time to place their two older children in

school in Ohio, and this seemed a good opportunity to do so.

It is impossible to say whether or not Edgerton ever intended to return to Montana. On leaving Bannack, the Edgertons sold their home and household goods, and on returning to Akron they purchased a house and entered their children in school.

After making these domestic arrangements, Edgerton proceeded to Washington, but his reception was not sympathetic. By this time, Andrew Johnson had succeeded to the Presidency and was already locked in conflict with Radical Republicans of Edgerton's persuasion. Apparently concluding that he would be replaced as Montana's Territorial Governor, Edgerton resigned in June, 1866, and returned to Akron to practice law.

Ironically, once back in her beloved Ohio, Mary Edgerton's life became shrouded in the obscurity which surrounded most women's lives in the Nineteenth Century. Once again she became a housewife in Akron, no doubt pleased with the return to a normal life for herself and her family, which now included two more children, born after the return to Ohio.

Mary Edgerton returned to Montana only once. In 1882, she came to visit her oldest daughter, Mattie, who had married and returned to the territory. Two years later, at the age of 57 years, she died and was buried in Tallmadge.



Ohio Historical Society

The home in Akron, Ohio, to which Mary Edgerton gladly returned with her family in 1865.

ABOUT JIM THANE

James L. Thane's mastery of early Montana history is already familiar to readers of this magazine, for his contribution to the debate over the Confederate influence was published in the Spring, 1967, issue. Since then Thane has received his M.A. from the University of Iowa. He is now chairman of the History Department at Black Hawk College, Moline, Illinois, where he has taught since 1967.