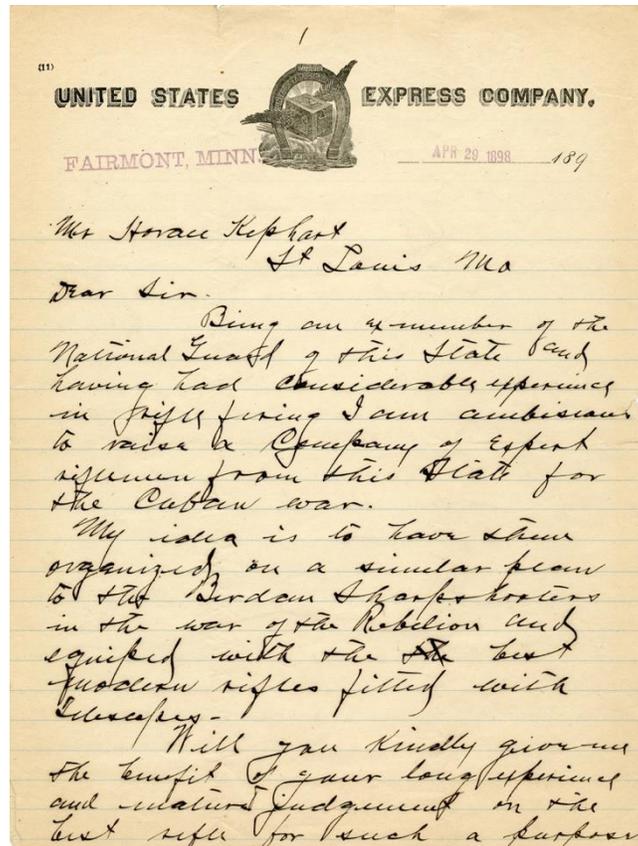


Letter from EW Bird to Horace Kephart

April 29, 1898

MS 12-05-04-35-7



Transcribed and Edited by Kevin Jenson

For ENGL 618: Research Methods in English

Instructor and General Editor: Dr. Brian Gastle

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## Introduction to the Series

This transcription and its attendant annotations, explanatory material, and bibliography were prepared by students in ENGL 618: Research Methods in English, the required gateway class for the MA in English at Western Carolina University. The learning outcomes for this class include the following:

1. Conduct appropriate, effective, and ethical scholarship
  1. Effectively find and use advanced research tools (handbooks, databases, guides, bibliographies, etc.) appropriate to a subject.
    - Students will be able to use a wide variety of such tools and evaluate those tools.
  2. Find appropriate advanced research (print and electronic scholarship) and apply that research to specific disciplinary questions or issues.
    - Students will be able to find a variety of scholarship, evaluate both the appropriateness and rigor of that scholarship, and incorporate that scholarship correctly and effectively.
  3. Develop accurate bibliographies and reference citations.
    - Students will be able to annotate, abstract, and cite materials following standard MLA format.
1. Understand the process by which the texts we use are made available.
  - Students will be able to conduct basic editorial work and evaluate the editorial work of others.

All work is presented as submitted by the students. While these students take great care with their transcriptions and annotations, errors are always possible. As these students learn throughout this class, good scholarship requires checking of sources and corroboration by authoritative sources.

It is hoped that the transcription and annotation of WCU Special Collections materials will be useful to the institution, students, scholars, and other patrons and users of WCU's Special Collections materials.

## Introduction

Edward Wallace Bird posted a letter to Horace Kephart on April 29, 1898 from Fairmont Minnesot seeking advice on how to outfit and organize a company of sharpshooters from his hometown to participate in the Spanish American War. This was a unique proposal because the Berdan Sharpshooters of the Union Army had only pioneered this model of warfare within the past 50 years. It is possible that Bird was inspired this direction by the publication “Shooting and Fishing,” in which Horace Kephart had placed an advertisement to raise a similar company of select marksmen. The war was over before either company could form, train, and muster. However, the letter offers a unique look at the perspective of a northerner on the Civil War and insight into the most modern rifle technology of the day.

Specifically, Bird was interested in an opportunity to participate in that part of the Spanish War taking place in Cuba. He had narrowly missed the chance to muster the local national guard unit (with which he was formerly affiliated), which had just recently sent a group of 80 soldiers to Georgia for training. They never made it to the war. However, Bird’s goal was to form a select company following the model of the Berdan Sharpshooters and he wanted more information about this unique group from Horace Kephart, who lived in a confederate state, but was born and raised in the Union. Most likely, the purpose of his request was to gain insight on the four brands of gun manufacturers he is considering to supply his company with rifles: Winchester, Remington, Stevens Action, and Springfield. His descriptions hint at the early use of scopes instead of metal sites, and of various alterations which could be made to the guns offered at the time.

Although the Kephart family and the Bird family were connected by marriage through a New York family line, I could find no link between the New York and the Pennsylvania (then Minnesota) Birds. It is, however, quite possible that in addition to a common interest in guns, the connection between E.W. Bird and Horace came through Minnie Bird (the niece of Edward Bird) who appears along with Horace Kephart in the list of American libraries and their caretakers (Patterson). She was the listed contact for the Fairmont Public Library at the same time as he was listed for the St Louis Mercantile Library.

The timing of this letter is unique because it came at the end of April just as the Minnesota National Guard was being mustered into service for the Cuban War. It would not have reached Kephart until the 80 soldiers from this county began their training at Camp Thomas at Chickamuga Park, GA. According to the Martin County Veterans Memorial, they “returned home on September 23 after seeing no action.” Is it possible that Edward Bird had missed this muster and so wished to raise a company of sharpshooters similar to the one Kephart was advertising in St. Louis at the time? There were only 10 days between the composition of the letter and the shipping out of the regiment from the local county, so it is unlikely that Mr Bird had intended to go with them. It seems that he was preparing a more exclusive company of sharpshooters, which would not have experienced the same kind of trouble as recorded above. I could not, however, find any record of this company forming.

## **Editorial Statement**

### **Manuscript**

The letterhead indicates that the paper is official and comes from EW Bird's employer, the United States Express Company. At the center of the letterhead is a horseshoe with the words "United States Expre..." with the last part hidden by the wings attached to a trunk that is flying through the middle of the horseshoe away from the fingers of a sunrise or sunset and overtop of what appear to be clouds and ocean waves. The top of the horseshoe has a little sign attached to it which says "security dispatch." All the letters in the letterhead are capitalized. The entire run of stationery must have been printed with an intent to be used in the last decade before 1900 because it includes an open line which ends with the first part of a date stamped "189\_\_" with room for the writer to fill in the final number of the year. Another peculiar feature of the letterhead is the inclusion of the number (11) about 1 inch from the top and half inch from the upper left hand corner. It appears the same way on all three sheets.

The paper is yellowed and thicker than typical notebook paper of today. It has blue lines on both sides which appear to be at a distance of today's college rule. Compared to the bottom sheet of paper, the top sheet demonstrates much more browning (or yellowing) along the edges, though it appears to have been affected less in the center of the sheet and far more on the right hand than the left hand edge. The discoloration extends about half an inch inward on either side. The space around some of the letters has also turned brown giving the appearance of a shadow behind the words. Wherever more ink has been used, the stain is deeper, but all of it bleeds through to the other side of the paper where the writing is almost dark enough to be read with ease. The back of the third sheet shows the clear outline of a paper or book being placed at a slight angle almost covering the entire sheet. Everything not covered by that protector has yellowed so deeply that a clear line can be seen between what was covered and what was exposed to the air. This gives the impression that the letter sat for quite some time at the top of a partial stack. The front sheet does not have the same clear lines indicating either less weight, or perhaps a more complete level of protection from the elements. At one point, the entire letter had been folded (along with the other two sheets) in half, and then into thirds. However, the markings indicate that it was stored unfolded during the discoloration process.

The author used a pen that enabled thin sharp strokes as well as wider strokes depending upon the angle. It appeared to have a very even flow and the ink must have dried quickly in spite of the author's rapid movements. I got the impression of rapid movement from the way in which the dots of the i and the cross of the t were usually removed to the right by at least one letter space from the base where they belonged. The letter p and f include a long straight stroke that extends to the bottom of the second line and the letters j and g go even further with their tails. The writing is mostly tall and thin, with even the tops of the letter m getting shaved into mere points that could be mistaken for the letter i.

### **Transcription**

The following transcription adheres the "diplomatic" editorial style, which attempts to reflect as closely as possible the content of the letter including its layout, spelling, placement of words, capitalizations, etc. For example, the author included and then crossed out a repeated word,

which has been included in the transcription with a slash through it. The first page of the manuscript includes stamped language included the location and date of writing, which have been transcribed following the same method as the penmanship of the author. Exceptions to this method of exact transcription include the signature, the author's unusual punctuation, and a couple of words that could not be clearly identified.

The most difficult part of this transcription was deciphering the signature at the end. The first transcription delivered the word Ellor, which is not a name that anyone seems to have used. By eliminating the first l as a potential flourish at the end of the 'E' and comparing the last letter of the name to previously written 'n's the name Elon seemed to be a viable alternative. But again, no such person could be found in association with Fairmont, MN. In fact, the only records of any male whose name began with an E was a certain E. Bird, whose census records from 1875 showed parents born in Scotland and a birthplace of Pennsylvania (Ancestry). He was 26 years old at the time. Census data from 30 years later show an E.W. Bird at 56 years old with parents from Scotland and a birthplace of Pennsylvania. E.W. Bird had lived in Martin County (of which Fairmont is the county seat) for 35 years and in Minnesota for at least 40, which implies that he had moved with his family from Pennsylvania around the age of 16 (Ancestry).

Further connection appeared in the magazine "Shooting and Fishing" in 1906, in which E.W. Bird, an excellent marksman, is associated with the National Guard of Fairmont, MN (another part of the signature). Six years after the date of this letter to Kephart, E.W. was still a better marksman than either of the two visiting military leaders who came to inspect the National Guard unit he must have still been associated with. The journal, which included Horace Kephart among its contributing authors, also noted that Bird had won another local shooting competition (Humphrey). It is quite likely that this E.W. Bird was the same who wrote to Horace Kephart.

In spite of all the evidence, I was unprepared to give up my search for a name that matched the signature on the document more closely. However, I could find no one else from Minnesota with the initials E. Bird, and E.W. met all of the criteria for the writer of this letter: affiliation with the national guard, sharpshooter skills, residency in Fairmont, MN...but a final piece came from the census data of 1905, which identified the occupation of E.W. Bird as employed by the company on whose letterhead the note was drafted. I concluded that the E. Bird who signed the letter to Horace Kephart is the same E.W. Bird identified by the genealogical research is Edward Wallace Bird, son of William and Mary Bird from Scotland.

Even so, there is no way to infer "Edward" from the minims preceding "Bird" in the signature of this letter. Given the overwhelming evidence and the contradiction, the only other possibility I could see for the signature was a kind of elaborate penmanship forming the initials EW, with no intervening period. A consideration of the author's writing of "w" indicates this is a distinct possibility, especially if the second curl at the bottom of the "E" is purely decorative. Although, this is not a fully adequate explanation of the appearance of the handwriting, the author's established identity demands the transcription of the signature as E.W. Bird.

A unique stylistic feature of Mr Bird is his use of a dash to indicate a period, and a single dot to indicate a comma. This stylistic feature has not been copied in the transcription where these are translated into the periods and commas they represent for the sake of clarity. The author never

used a question mark to end sentences designed as a question. Instead, both instances have no punctuation and none has been added to the transcription.

Wherever a word could be equally relevant one way or another, the most likely translation has been included in the transcription with its alternative explained in the footnotes.

Page numbers appear to be included twice in the transcription, but the second listing of the page number is actually a transcription of the numbering system used by the author. Additional space has been left between this and the text to account for the nearly two inches of header that divide the two in the actual manuscript.

**Transcription Section**  
**HL MSS12-05 04 35 007 (Page 1)**

1

FAIRMONT, MINN. APR 29 1898

Mr Horace Kephart  
St Louis Mo

Dear Sir,

Being an ex member of the  
National Guard of this State and  
Having had considerable experience  
in rifle firing I am ambitious<sup>1</sup>  
to raise a Company of Expert<sup>2</sup>  
riflemen from this State for  
the Cuban war.<sup>3</sup>

My idea is to have them  
organized on a similar plan<sup>4</sup>  
to the Berdan Sharpshooters<sup>5</sup>  
in the war of the Rebellion and<sup>6</sup>  
equipped with the ~~the~~ best  
modern rifles fitted with

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<sup>1</sup> Although Bird is generally a good speller, the 1806 dictionary by Noah Webster does not include this alternative spelling of ambitious, so he got it wrong.

<sup>2</sup> Based on his top scores in rifle competitions (Humphrey), he would be the right person to do this.

<sup>3</sup> Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines were all sites of the Spanish American War in which the US drove out the Spanish forces bringing the war to an end on December 10, 1898 ("Spanish American War"). The short duration explains why there is no official record of this sharpshooter company materializing.

<sup>4</sup> The author has included an extra dot on the upper left corner indicating a possible insertion of another language, but any possible substitutions do not change the meaning and it is quite likely he just dropped an extra dot of ink on the page.

<sup>5</sup> Wicklund and Williams describe the role of the Berdan Sharpshooters in the Civil war. This company was formed of the top marksmen from the northern states and won a wide-reaching reputation in the war.

<sup>6</sup> By "war of the Rebellion," the Minnesota author is referring to the Civil War, a uniquely northern perspective.

Telescopes.<sup>1</sup>

Will you kindly give me  
the benefit of your long experience  
and mature judgement on the  
best rifle for such a purpose<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> At this point, scopes were not commonly used on rifles, so the term “rifle scope” had not been differentiated from the telescope used for looking at the sky (Sniper Encyclopedia).

<sup>2</sup> Two years later, Kephart published “The Gun. Telescopic Rifle Sights.” *Outing*. Vol. 37, issue 6 (March 1901): 728, which indicates his apparent expertise on the question.

2.

Covering the make style of action  
whether magazine or single shot,<sup>1</sup>  
whether set or single trigger,<sup>2</sup>  
length of barrel and weight of<sup>3</sup>  
gun complete. Kind and make  
of Scope. Of course they should be  
adapted to the Gov't Service 30 Cal<sup>4</sup>  
cartridge.

If a single shot rifle the only  
thing obtainable now would be  
the Winchester, Remmington, or<sup>5</sup>  
Stevens Action with possibly  
the Springfield as a makeshift but  
that could not be adapted to  
the use of a 'Scope.<sup>6</sup>

Can you advise me where I  
can obtain a history of the  
Berdan Sharpshooters giving the<sup>7</sup>  
plan of selection and the method  
of this organization together with  
with a record of their service<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The magazines of 1898 were not like modern magazines. For example, the Berdan Sharpshooter magazine was like a six-shooter revolver mounted on a rifle and could sometimes be dangerous to the shooter (Berdan Sharpshooter History).

<sup>2</sup> The set trigger is a two-step function that clicks halfway and then holds for a hair trigger. Compared to a single trigger, this would reduce the motion required to fire – probably a helpful feature in shooting at a distance.

<sup>3</sup> The length of the barrel determines the spin of the bullet and is very important for the accuracy of a sharpshooter.

<sup>4</sup> This size may appear large today.

<sup>5</sup> Remmington had been manufacturing guns since 1816 and supplied the army since 1845 (“About Us”).

<sup>6</sup> Note the t in front of scope – quite likely reference to the telescope mentioned in page one. Probably not an asterisk. Scopes were just coming out at the time and a major improvement on metal sights.

<sup>7</sup> It seems odd for a northerner to ask someone from the south to provide a history of a Union regiment.

<sup>8</sup> The word “with” is repeated in the manuscript.

3.

Any information or suggestions  
you can off in this line I will<sup>1</sup>  
greatly appreciate.

Yours Truly

EW Bird<sup>2</sup>

Late Inspector Rifle Practice<sup>3</sup>

2<sup>nd</sup> Inf<sup>ty</sup> N.G.S.M.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “off” is shorthand for offer.

<sup>2</sup> Although the Bird family from New York married into the Kephart Family, there is no direct connection to this family from Pennsylvania. See the introduction for more details and the apparent misalignment between the annotation and signature. EW stands for Edward Wallace.

<sup>3</sup> According to Marlin, this role was implemented at every level of the national guard along with private gun clubs in order to supervise the important practice of shooting rifles.

<sup>4</sup> Infantry is annotated with an apostrophe. Most likely this was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, Company H of the National Guard which was based in St. James, about 30 miles north of Fairmont, MN (Minnesota Historical Society).

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Ancestry.com. *Minnesota, Territorial and State Censuses, 1849-1905* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2007.

*Berdan's Sharpshooter History*. <http://www.berdansharpshooter.org/history.htm>.

Provides a history of the Berdan Sharpshooter Company, how they formed, who organized them, the weapons they used, etc.

Bird, Edward Wallace. Letter to Horace Kephart. 29 Apr 1898. Box 4, Folder 35. MSS12-05 Horace Kephart Collection. Hunter Library Special Collections, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC.

This citation is for the manuscript transcribed here.

Humphrey, John, Taylor (Editor). "Shooting and Fishing: A Journal of the Rifle, Gun and Rod." Vol. XL, No. 1. New York, *Shooting and Fishing Pub. Co.*, 12 Apr. 1906. Special Collections Cornell University. Available from Google Play Books as "American Rifleman, Volumes 40-41.

This journal includes an article by Horace Kephart as well as mention of EW Bird and his excellent marksmanship. It also mentions a bullet called the 90-grain Kephart.

Marlin, Jeffrey A. *The National Guard, the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, and the National Rifle Association: Public Institutions and the Rise of a Lobby for Private Gun Ownership*, Georgia State University, Ann Arbor, 2013. ProQuest, <http://proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1353193157?accountid=14968>.

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Ockerbloom, John Mark (Editor). "Arms and the Man." *The Online Books Page*, <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=armsandtheman>.

As with the next entry, Ockerbloom outlining a simple history of dates and names with regard to the evolution of a magazine purchased by the NRA to which Kephart was a frequent contributor.

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"The Sniper Encyclopaedia: Introduction." *The Sniper Encyclopaedia*, John Walter, Casemate Group, 1st edition, 2018. *Credo Reference*, [https://login.proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/casmsniper/the\\_sniper\\_encyclopaedia\\_introduction/0?institutionId=2378](https://login.proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/casmsniper/the_sniper_encyclopaedia_introduction/0?institutionId=2378). Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.

Describes the role of the Berdan Sharpshooters in the Civil War as key to changing military strategy.

Webster, Noah. *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language: A Facsimile of the (1806) Edition*. Bounty Books, New York, 1970.

This facsimile edition of the 1806 dictionary provides insight into spelling from the time this letter was written.

Wicklund, Doug and Michael G. Williams. "How These Elite Civil War Marksmen Changed the Face of Warfare." *HistoryNet*. <https://www.historynet.com/how-these-elite-civil-war-marksmen-changed-the-face-of-warfare.htm>.

Explores the influence of sharpshooter companies on warfare and especially notes how the Berdan Sharpshooters were an innovative company. There had not been a group of marksmen like this before – at least in the United States.

Year: 1910; Census Place: *Fairmont Ward 2, Martin, Minnesota*; Roll: *T624\_710*; Page: *6B*; Enumeration District: *0115*; FHL microfilm: *1374723*.