

“Their business is all new to me”

Effie Jones describes her 1890s office jobs



There is no photograph of Effie Jones in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa, but there are four letters that begin to sketch a vivid portrait of a young, ambitious Iowa woman in the late 19th century. From what can be deduced from the letters, Effie Jones, like many young people at that time, was seeking a position as an office worker in the world of business, first in St. Paul and then in Chicago.

The letters give colorful details about her work life and social life, her friendships and flirtations. She sends news of fashion trends back to her mother, with advice on how to update her hats. And in late 1892, she is an astonished witness to a great international event, as Chicago extravagantly launches its first world's fair, the 1893 World Columbian Exposition.

The letters also reveal her gradual ascent in the 1890s world of office work. Her descriptions hint at changing duties, as well as growing confidence, responsibility, and supervisory authority.

Here then, are the four letters (slightly edited for publication) that Effie Jones wrote to her family back home in Iowa.

—The Editor



10 p.m.

Farley [Iowa] 10-11-89

My Dear Father,

I arrived here only yesterday, and found your letter awaiting me. So you have really been away down in New Mexico. Whither next? Yes, I had a good time in St. Paul, and my friends were very cordial. They all insisted on my staying two weeks longer but I thought it would be wiser to leave while they were

Effie Jones's four letters to her family in Iowa describe the world of business in the early 1890s—a time when many young men and women sought jobs as stenographers and “type-writers” (the word originally meant both the machine and the typist). The illustration is from the April 1890 *Business Woman's Journal*. The letters are in the William Griffith Jones Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City center).

not tired of me. . . . I am getting tired of Iowa, I guess. I saw a good many “wants” in the St. Paul papers for stenographers & type writers. I could have procured a position if I had known enough. Oh dear, isn't it an awful pity I don't know a little bit more? Say, papa, just before I went up to St. Paul, a gentleman here in Farley was so foolish as to ask me if I wouldn't marry him! I was kind of mad at him for daring to, as I had always avoided him. He was always bothering the life out of me, asking me to go places with him, and I never would accept his invitations when I could help it. I guess he is a good sort of fellow. He is the I.C. [Illinois Central?] telegraph operator. But he was always so, oh, soft. But he had no bad habits. I haven't seen him since then, and I don't want to, because it would be so uncomfortable. What in the world would I want to get married for, I wonder? I wouldn't marry him anyway because, (oh, whisper it low) his name is Smith! But, really, I had never even thought of such an event happening as that any of the men I know would think of marrying me, for the thought never entered my head in connection with them. And—why should it? I have about come to the conclusion, lately, that boys are a “nulence,” because most of them are not content to be friends. When they are, though, they make better ones than girls do. As a rule, the girls are so insincere, you can never tell whether they mean what they say or not, but boys are different. Now, today I noticed that the girls that I am most intimate with, would come in and kiss me, and ask a few questions, and say they were glad to see me, and were, really, entirely indifferent as to whether I ever came back or not. But about 4 or 5 of the boys were really glad to see me again, and put more warmth into a handshake, than there were in a dozen of the girls' kisses. I wonder what makes women kiss each other so much. I never think of kissing just every girl I know, when I don't like some of them at all, but they will just more than run up & kiss a girl, and the minute she turns away, will tell how “they just hate her, she thinks she is so smart,” ect. ect., I found everyone well when I returned. It's rain-

ing very hard this evening. The stores are to be closed at 8 after this, except during the holiday season, from Dec. 23 to Jan. 1st. That will be more pleasant for me. Give my love to the family, and to uncle John, and write soon to your affectionate daughter,

Effie.

What a foolish letter this is, all such utter nonsense.



[Typed on letterhead of "Chas. D. Stone & Co.,
113 Adams Street . . . customs and forwarding agents"]
Chicago, Aug. 11, 1890.

Dr. W. G. Jones
Williamsburgh, Iowa

Dear Papa:-

I have a few minutes to spare now, and I think I can employ them in no better manner than to tell you what I am now doing.

I am substituting, while the regular stenographer is away on his vacation. I began work Saturday morning, and will stay here two weeks anyway, and then I can either go back to the college again, or take a position if I can get one, and I don't think I will have much trouble.

Mr. Harrison, World's Fair Commissioner from Minn. says he will get both Agnes Smallwood and myself a position as secretary to some of the Fair commissioners. I think that will be very nice, and it will bring my old chum here where I can see her.

About my work here, I write about 25 letters a day, and address the envelopes, and that is all. The office boy folds and seals the letters after they look them over, and they do their own copying, so it is a very easy position. They only pay me \$6.00 this week,

I had to work to understand what they said as they would dictate with a cigar in their mouth and "mumbled so."

but say they will pay me more next week if I suit them. So far I have made only one mistake, and that was in a proper name.

Their business is all new to me, and one-half of the letters they dictate are like Greek to me, and I can't tell for the life of me if I have them right or not. Then I had some trouble finding out how to suit

them, as one of the men wants words abbreviated, and the other wants them written out in full. Saturday I had to work to understand what they said as they would dictate with a cigar in their mouth, and "mumbled so." I do a great deal better today. They always had a man before, and said they did not know whether a lady would do or not, but I think I will do just as well. One thing, I am afraid I will lose all my speed, as they only dictate about 75 words a minute, and then stop and think a long while what to say next. They spell almost all of the names out for me, and have me write them in long hand, and it is a very good plan, as no one ought to be expected to spell them correctly who is not acquainted with them. The names of the French towns and the names of the steamers, especially, are hard. The office is very nice, and I have a nice desk, right by the window. We are all opposite the P. O., and I amuse myself looking at the people who are always around there, when I am not busy. My hours are from 8:30 to 5:30, and an hour at noon. I suppose you will be in here before long. I have not heard from mamma for some time, but expect she is busy enjoying herself. Aunt Mary is quite well, and grandma says she feels a little better, but she says she grows weaker every day, and I am inclined to think so myself. The city was very gay all last week, with the Odd Fellows, but I never went down to see them at all, not even to the fireworks. Well, I can't write much more, as I don't know whether the "boss" will like it or not, so I will say "goodby" like the children. Give my love to uncle John, and write soon to

Your loving daughter
Effie.



[Typed on letterhead of "Oliver & Showalter Law Offices,
84 & 86 La Salle Street (Opposite City Hall)"]
Chicago, 9/21/92

Dear Mamma:-

I have tried in vain to write you since receiving your letter, but have been terribly rushed through the days, and so tired evenings that with one or two exceptions I was only too glad to pile off into bed as soon as dinner was over. Yesterday they got me an assistant for a couple of weeks, so that I have a little breathing spell for a moment or two. . . . I moved last Saturday evening, and like my new place very well. They have a piano, and we can use it as much as we please, and then my room is about four times as large

as my last one—board the same price. I have a large closet, too, and hot and cold water in the room. I will lose Miss Saeger this week, as she goes to Oskaloosa

I have had to put a stop to novel reading....Romance and Chicago business life do not go hand in hand.

to stay until Christmas, so will devote most of my evenings to her, I expect. I dread to have her go, for she is about the only girl I know in the city that I care anything about. There is a young lady boarding where I am, but she affects to be very intense, and enthuses over everything and everybody until I grow fatigued. The "boys" are nice enough—very much so, and I am in hopes they will prove what they say they will—a mine of pleasure this winter, as I cannot study much. . . .

. . . For the last week I have been getting Mecartney ready for the Supreme Court, two cases, and have spent two or three days over at the Law Institute looking up law in a presumption case. I had to hunt in English records, for there have been very few cases like it in this country, and found some as far back as Elizabeth's time, and plenty of them in the Georges. It is interesting work, but I could not stop for letters and small papers, so have another girl here to help me out on them.

You asked me, I believe, about hats. Well, as far as I can see, the hats this year are the craziest, brightest, "loudest" ones it has ever been my fortune to meet. Even the black ones are so covered with jet and rubber snakes, dragons, bugs, etc, that they look giddy. Miss S. is getting me up a brilliant red felt walking hat, trimmed in velvet same shade, but I could hardly advise you to get one like it. I think a felt "English walking hat" trimmed in stiff loops of ribbon and velvet would be about the thing. For a traveling hat, take off the trimming off that turban of yours, and have the felt cleaned, and trimmed with tall loops of velvet, wired to stand straight, and unhemmed. I talked with Miss S. about the hats, and she says that if you could get scarlet or yellow tips—three of them—and put on the front of the girls black beaver hats, they would be as stylish as anything you could possibly get them. I would like to go out and see what there is in town, but never have time except after half past five, and the stores all close at six. . . . I wish I did not have to pay for my board—it makes a

big hole in my salary to plank down six dollars a week. I am glad you like Dreams—I think they were charming. I have had to put a stop to novel reading—or "Dreamy" reading, as it takes my mind off my business and studies. Romance and Chicago business life do not go hand in hand, I find, and I am naturally inclined to be too impractical, anyway. Yes, they wear the long wristed gloves as much as ever, and the laced ones seem to hold their own. You remember the grey ones I had last winter? I wore them until April—got a black pair like them—wore them until last week, and have just bought a pair of English tan, which comes nearer being red than anything else, of the same kind. They are the only thing that is fit to wear for business. I like them because they are cheap, too, for they are only a dollar a pair.

By the way, I must tell you of the fun I have been having. You remember the first letter I wrote you after I came here? You remember I said there was a fellow on the floor above—across the court—who smiled on me? Well, he met me on the street a few days afterward and spoke—but I hadn't been introduced, so gave him the cut direct. A few days afterward he came into the office and had Mecartney introduce him. Since then he watches until I start out to

Every desk in this office is connected with electric bells and speaking tubes.

lunch, or to go home, and then goes down in the elevator with me, and walks as far as he can with me. He imagines he is more than "rushing a flirtation" but it will be sometime before I fall in love with him. I just happened to think of it, for he is sitting at the window watching me now.

Well, I hope you will forgive a short and tiresome letter, as I have not another minute's time. Give my love to all the folks, and write soon to

Yours lovingly

Effie.

701 W. Monroe St.



Chicago Oct. 27, 1892

Dear Mamma and "folks":-

I have been trying to write to you ever since I received a letter from Logan, but never in all my expe-

rience of working life have been so rushed as since that time. Positively, I have not had time to breathe, much less to write letters, except at night, and my eyes and brain and everything else would be too tired then to do more than fool around in the parlor a little while, or take a little walk, and then go to bed, so as to be ready for the next day. Then last week we had two days of "wild gaiety" and that has piled more work into this week. I have been working from eight until the last elevator trip at six, every day, instead of from nine until five, as is usual, and today is the first time I have caught up with my work. I haven't touched a letter—my assistant attends to all that—but I have gone from one room to another taking dictation, and never getting an opportunity to write it out. It was positively amusing: every desk in this office is connected with electric bells and speaking tubes with every other desk, and I would be in one room, writing away for dear life, and would hear my bell going. Then would come an ominous silence, then a head would be poked into the room where I was. "Going to keep Miss Jones long?" "Yes, been waiting all day for her, and now I am going to finish this." "Well, Miss Jones, you come in to my room as soon as you are through there." And before I would finish there, I would have a date or two made in some of the other rooms. Tonight I am going home at five—you can "write that in your hat."

So you are at last away from the little Arcadia in

The crowd was something dreadful. It is said that over one hundred thousand strangers came into the town on that one day.

Iowa County. I have not heard from papa but once—he wrote just as he was leaving, and told me to write to him at Escondido. I did so and gave him a little good advice. As he always seems to think I am yet an infant, I suppose he will take the advice (?) for what it is worth. . . .

I wish you could have been in Chicago last week, all of you, and if you were NOT as fond of excitement as I am, you would have enjoyed it. The decorations were simply immense. I stood on the corner of State and Madison streets and looked both ways, and I could hardly see the buildings. The City Hall—across the street—was decorated in the municipal colors—terra cotta and white, and the rows of massive pillars

on each side were wrapped in terra cotta. All the high office buildings, with their hundreds of windows, had flags in every window, and the effect was beautiful. Gallagher, the most noted florist and decorator in the city, had a contract for decorating the eleven bridges, and they were gay and festive. Seats along the line of march for both the civic parade and the military parade, were sold at enormous figures. A young gentleman friend of my landlady and myself got us seats directly opposite the reviewing stand for the civic parade (we found out at the office that they were eight dollars each, so you see how at the mercy of my friends I was), and from ten o'clock Thursday morning until half past three in the afternoon, we sat there and watched things. The crowd was something terrible. I could look eight down on the moving mass—no one person seemed to move, but the crowd went in waves—and I saw two or three women faint in the awful crush. . . . We were directly opposite the grand stand, where all the nobility were—watching the populace. . . . The cavalry and all the U.S.A. officers, in their uniforms, were there, and every state had a "box," and was represented. We had opera glasses, and discovered through the aid of them, that the "nobility" were very little better looking than the "populace." . . . Well, after all that looking, I came back to the office, and worked until seven, then some of the "gang" came after me, and we went over to Gunthers and had a swell little dinner—little neck clams, blue points fried with mushrooms, and several other things. We then "bummed" around town looking at the decorations and illuminations. The Inter Ocean Building was festooned with electric lights in red white and blue, and one store had an immense flag formed of electric lights, about sixty feet long. The crowd was something dreadful. It is said that over one hundred thousand strangers came into the town on that one day. When we started home, the cable had broken from the strain, and we walked. The next day I did not go to the office at all, but at seven o'clock we started for The Fair Grounds and that neighborhood, to see the military parade. We had lovely seats on the Midway Plaisance, where we were so close to the road that we could almost touch the carriages on that side. I must confess that I went perfectly wild. With all the rest of the crowd, I screamed myself perfectly hoarse, and waved my handkerchief until it was frightfully dirty. . . . How I enthused over each and every governor! Young and handsome Gov. Russell—only twenty-eight—of Mass. can have me. Or if he don't want me, the haughty and patrician governor of Kentucky can. McKinley was very af-

fable, and granted a special bow to me—oh I wish you could have seen him—his massive head and grand, intellectual face was enough to make the

**I think I will stay here—
unless I get sick, die, or
get married—until I can get
into newspaper work.**

crowd go wild, as it certainly did. . . . There were a few things about the holiday which I didn't especially care for—one was the number of pictures of Columbus. Bill Nye says Columbus died trying to look like his pictures, and that it seemed to be his favorite recreation—to have his photograph taken. Inasmuch as some of them have heavy beards, and some are smooth faced, I think he spent his time in trimming his beard in different ways, and having a snap shot taken of them. The other thing was that I expected Agnes Smallwood down Wednesday, and went to meet her. She didn't come, and like that pathetic dove in the song, I did mourn and mourn and mourn.

Mr. Oliver has returned from Nova Scotia—got back the first of last week. It is the first time I have had much of an opportunity to talk with him. He called me into his private office and interviewed me. Among other pertinent questions, he asked me if I had ever been on the stage! I asked King afterwards what Oliver meant, but he waxed complimentary, and I could get no satisfaction from him. But when he

**I have an assistant now—a
pale faced, gentle little
thing, who attends to all the
correspondence, and takes
lessons from me in the fri-
volity of mankind in general.**

finished interrogating me, Oliver told me that I had a permanent position here, as long as I chose to remain. So, if that is the case, I think I will stay here—unless I get sick, die, or get married—until I can get into newspaper work. I have an assistant now—a pale faced, gentle little thing, who attends to all the corre-

spondence, and takes lessons from me in the frivolity of mankind in general. The boys in the office are inclined to flirt—like all young lawyers and every other kind of man—and she does not seem to know what it all means. My "worldly nature" therefore, has found an object suitable for its protection, and it sees that the aforesaid young lady is not inveigled into going out to too many lunches and dinners—and many is the little flirtation in a quiet corner that I deliberately interrupt.

. . . Well, I must close this somewhat lengthy epistle, and go to work. Wish I could take the trip with you to California. With much love to all, and a kiss for my "chillen" I am

Yours lovingly

Effie.

Write soon. 701 W. Monroe St.



What happened next to Effie Jones? The only other letter from her in the archival collection is dated 32 years later, on November 2, 1924, and is typed on letterhead that reads: "Mrs. John S. Brown, 5940 Erie Street, Chicago, Illinois."

The letter is addressed to her aunt Mary, and in it Effie [Jones] Brown describes her children's and husband's activities, and her new duties as president of an organization called the Ethical Society. She writes: "It takes a good deal of time, but I suppose I owe it to the society. For instance, this morning before I began on my own affairs, I telephoned two people on ethical business, wrote a note to one of the trustees who has just lost his mother, read a long report, wrote my vote about it, wrote to the New York Society on business—then felt free for the day."

She also exercises her new right to vote, commenting: "I suppose you will vote in California tomorrow. It looks as if Coolidge will have it all his own way. We are all voting for him, here. I like Davis, but he has no show."

She signs the letter as she had signed all the rest:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Effie".