

Word of the courtship spread through town

(Editor's note: this is the seventh article in a series based on letters written between 1889 and 1904 from Barrington's Octagon House by Emaline Hawley Brown and her daughter Hattie Brown Porter to another daughter, Laura Brown Nightingale.)

By BARBARA BENSON

The Courtship of Hattie Brown and Lorenzo (Ren) Porter began during the winter of 1890 after Ren, as a director of the Porter School on Buckley Road, had hired Hattie as a teacher there. They were not to be married until June 1, 1893, and in between, the progress of the relationship was shared by Hattie with her sister Laura in Fairmont, Minn. Perhaps the catalyst, which finally resolved Hattie's feelings for Ren was an attempt by a previous beau to court her again.

Barrington, Oct. 9, 1891

Dear Sister;

It again falls to my lot to write so here I am curled up in the rocking chair by the north window, prepared to state the home events of the week. Guess I will begin this letter where the last left off.

Sunday, went to church and Sunday School. Heard the new minister. General verdict is he's a success, but he may not hold out. I think he will though. He is tall and dignified, about thirty I should say. Saturday morning, I had not finished that last sentence when someone came to the door. It was Jessie West, the girl across the street. She stayed all the P.M. so I couldn't write but I was very glad she came. She is a very nice American girl. Likes to go to church and prayer meeting as well as I do. She went with me last

night, we have ours on Friday so Mr. Ward can be here. (Hattie is referring to the Methodist Episcopal Church.)

I can't write nearly all that has happened this week, so will write only those things I remember the best. The first adventure of the week was Sunday night, and it was with George Barnett. He's home for a while. It was a dark cloudy night so my treasure (Ren) was not up. But I went to church and came home with Mrs. Wilmer. She came up as far as Mr. Farrar's then I skipped along alone. George took Jessie home. They were at the gate and we got to talking back and forth. I spoke first of course. Then he wanted me to come over there. I wondered if I better till he said I dare not come over. You know a dare is always too much for me so over I went but with intentions to be loyal to Ren and not do anything to cause him to feel bad.

We three talked a little while, then Jessie went in and I started to come right home. But no, "come around by the cross-walk, don't go cross there." He took hold of my arms and I had to go. We walked a little while then stood by our gate and talked a while. I kept thinking I wish I was out of this. After I had gone so far I thought I might as well die for an old sheep as a lamb so I stood and talked till he was tired of it. He quizzed continually to find out about Ren's and my business but I did not tell him one thing. He wanted to find out my opinion of Ren and I told him he was the best feller in the world, "Better than all the others?" he asked. "Yes," I said, "none of the other fellers I ever went with are half as good."

We talked to nearly ten, and his chief



Lorenzo (Ren) Porter

objects seemed to be to see what he could find out and try to get me to like him again, neither of which he succeeded in. I told him every word of what he said was going to be told to Ren.

I am just completely disgusted at him and I told him I did not want to go with him for I had too much regard for Ren's feelings. "Has the word passed, have matters gone so far?" I knew he wanted to know whether we were engaged or not, but I pretended not to understand till he pressed the question so hard that I said "George, I don't consider it any of your affairs." Do you believe, he had the check to ask the same question over again, and he got the same answer.

"You see Sister, I am not a flirt anymore..."

In the next four pages of the letter, Hattie describes the various maneuvers which took place to try and get her to go out with George together with another couple. Finally, Hattie does indeed tell Ren the story, and reports his reaction to her sister:

He laughed considerable over it, and didn't blame me a bit. Said I mustn't think I could not have any fun. He said he saw George downtown and George was trying to tease him when Mr. Powers came out of the store and wanted to know what the blab was about. "Well," George said, shall I tell you the real truth?" "Why of course, Mr. P. said. "Well you see we both want the same girl." George said, "but I guess Mr. Porter's chance is better than mine." Ren and I agree with George in that to a dot. You see Sister, I am not a flirt anymore, and I guess my heart his whole. (Ren's).

Later, in the same letter, she shows that she is really relishing all the speculation:

Ren told me that Misses Johnson and Dodge were very sure we were to be married this fall. Mrs. J. told Mrs. Porter about it and neither she nor Hattie (Porter) knew any of our plans so Mrs. J. was none the wiser. Lots of people are having a hard time over our affairs. It doesn't bother either of us a bit. We both catch it on every hand. Rob Comstock has a new cart, and he said he was going down to see Ren Sunday and find out when this thing is coming off. I told him if he found out, I wished he would let me know. Well, he said if he got an invitation to the wedding he would let me know when it is to be. Well, Ren was a good fellow any how. "Why," I told him, "I know that."

Well, now its time to get dinner. Next time you may look for a good sensible letter from Ma. We will let you know whether George or I come out best, but I am sure now in my own mind. Lots of Love, Hattie.

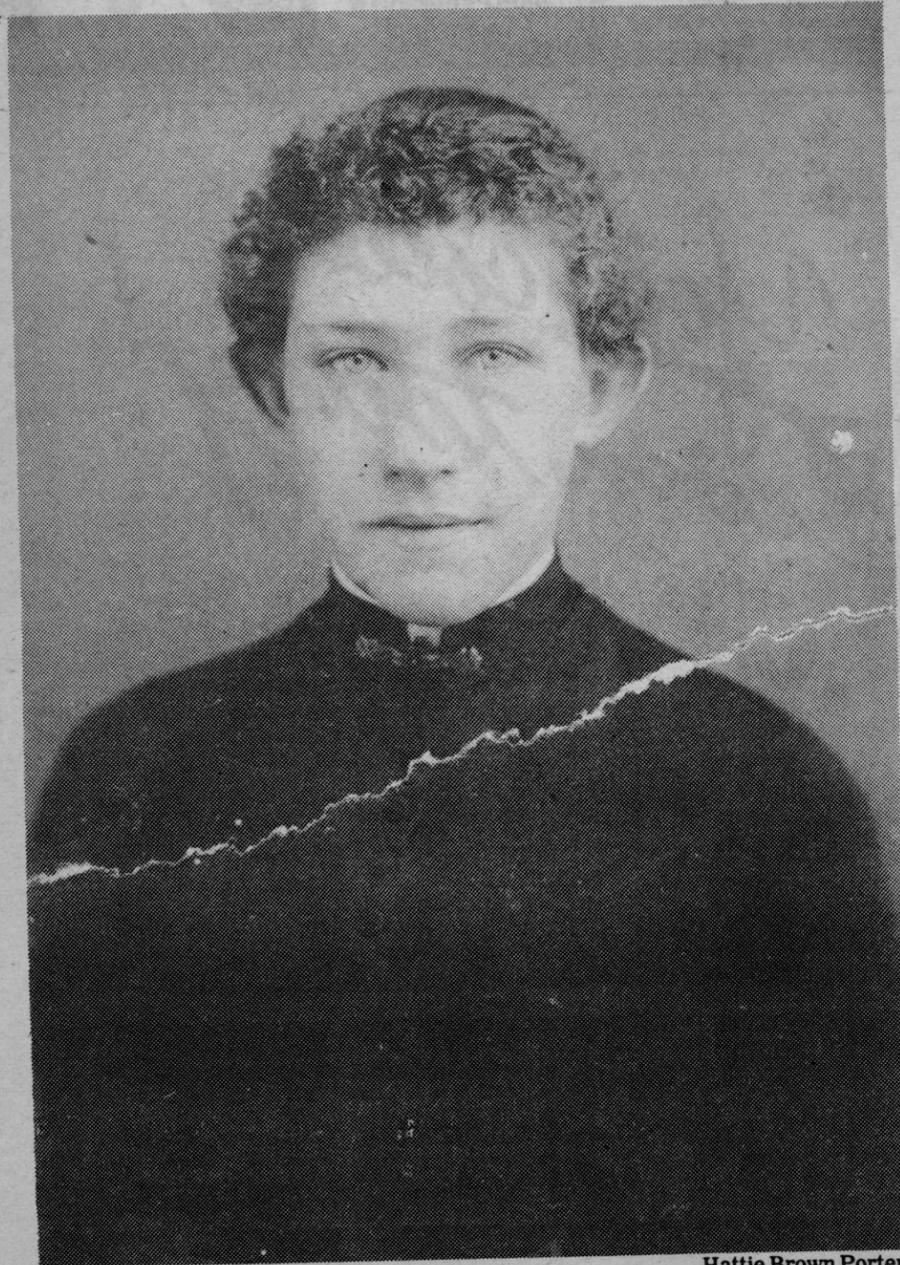
Emaline rarely mentions Ren in her letters to Laura, perhaps shrewdly preferring to let the relationship develop in its own good time. She was probably in no great hurry to have Hattie leave the Octagon House, mother and daughter appear to have been very close, and Hattie took her share of family responsibilities and chores apparently without complaint. The long and detailed descriptions of housekeeping and needlework projects which fill the letters from time to time are probably intended to let Laura know that life went on as usual in Barrington, to reassure her about that, and to paint verbal portraits of everyone and everything so that indeed, Laura might feel she had never left her childhood home.

The country children were unruly and inattentive, intent on scraping through some rudimentary arithmetic and English before getting back to work on the farm in the spring.

There is a hint that Emaline may also have had somewhat advanced views for her time and place. A September 1891 letter, after introductions about the heat wave Barrington is then experiencing, has another of her somewhat acerbic reports about a niece who is about to marry:

Zoa wants to be all ready to go to housekeeping as soon as she is married, she brings a package home from Chicago nearly every night even to fruit cans, she has only fourteen towels, has one quilt and two comforters, and is going to buy her carpets. She scolds because Florence don't keep house. I told Ariette that Zoa was mad because she had got to work and Florence did not have to. I am glad Zo has got to work and am glad she has got to get up early in the morning and get her own and Carl's breakfast, she will then know how good it is to have care and have to wait on herself, she won't have her mother to fetch her warm water to wash herself in every morning, and get her something nice to eat every day. She has got her a blue calico dress and brown gingham aprons, she quits business next week, is going up to stay with Sarah Brown a week. I should think she would hate to give up the ten dollars a week that she is earning, but the girls will give up everything for a husband."

This letter would suggest that in the 1890's young women were "commuting" to Chicago to work, besides a number of local men who regularly used the train for business in the city. While the town was growing, opportunities for employment, especially for young women, were very limited, especially since most local businesses were family owned and operated. Teaching school was of course the thing for a young woman to do, but if Emaline's accounts are followed, even that was no joy in the Barrington area. Conditions were very poor, schools in the countryside were inaccessible in bad weather, and a teacher from "out of town" who was paying board out of a meager salary certainly didn't have her own transportation. The country children were unruly and inattentive, intent on scraping through some rudimentary arithmetic and English before getting back to work on the farm in the spring. A teacher was of



Hattie Brown Porter