



*Nebraska History* posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

## Article Title: The Joslyns of Omaha: Opulence and Philanthropy

Full Citation: Dennis N Mihelich, "The Joslyns of Omaha: Opulence and Philanthropy," *Nebraska History* 83 (2002): 2-14

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH2002Joslyns.pdf>

Date: 9/21/2012

Article Summary: George and Sarah Joslyn were Nebraska's wealthiest family in the early 1900s. Their lavish lifestyle was widely recognized. Their philanthropy, less well known in their time, still influences Omaha's cultural life.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: George Joslyn, Sarah Hannah Selleck Joslyn, Violet Carl Joslyn Magowan, David Magowan, Herman Kountze, Dewitt Sutphen, Charles Sutphen, John McDonald, Angie Boyce Farnsworth, H H Fish, George Norris

Place Names: Omaha, Nebraska; Berlin, Vermont; Chicago, Illinois

Institutions Supported by the Joslyns: Joslyn Museum of Art, Child Saving Institute, Brownell Hall, Humane Society, Fontenelle Home for the Aged, University of Omaha (now the University of Nebraska, Omaha), Visiting Nurses Association, AkSarBen, Community Playhouse

Keywords: George Joslyn, Sarah Hannah Selleck Joslyn, Joslyn Art Museum (originally the Joslyn Memorial), Joslyn "Castle" (Lynhurst), Western Newspaper Union (WNU), Western Paper Company, John McDonald, Violet Carl Joslyn Magowan, David Magowan, League of Women's Service, H H Fish, Joslyn Liberal Arts Society, "Portrait of Miss Franks"

Photographs / Images: George Joslyn; Sarah Joslyn; George and Sarah Johnson on horseback; "Lynhurst," the Joslyns' residence, known as "the Castle"; girls from the Child Saving Institute, one of Sarah Joslyn's favorite charities; Violet Carl Joslyn, the Joslyns' adopted daughter, in her wedding dress with inset photos of her attendants: Alice Carter, Margaret McPherson, and Bertha Dickey; the Child Saving Institute's new building, a project supported by the Joslyns; greenhouse complex at the "Castle," destroyed by a tornado in 1913; Sarah Joslyn at groundbreaking for the Joslyn Memorial in 1931 with C W Russell, John McDonald, H H Fish, and C L Farnsworth; Joslyn Memorial

# The Joslyns of Omaha

## OPULENCE & PHILANTHROPY

*By Dennis N. Mihelich*



By the turn of the twentieth century George Joslyn had become the wealthiest man in Nebraska. His generosity—during his lifetime and through bequests from his estate—created a legacy that continues to resonate in Omaha and throughout the state. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska



A long and distinguished life of service and philanthropy brought Sarah Joslyn wide respect and many honors. The Joslyn Art Museum, called her “greatest gift” by a local newspaper, is now remembered more in her honor than in George’s. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska

By the outbreak of World War I, George Joslyn had amassed Nebraska’s largest fortune. Even today his namesake monuments, the Joslyn Art Museum and his palatial home,

---

*Dennis N. Mihelich is an associate professor of history at Creighton University in Omaha.*

the Joslyn “Castle,” remain Omaha landmarks. George and his wife, Sarah, fulfilled the American Dream by attaining wealth and material abundance, but they also fulfilled the promise of American democracy by sharing their good fortune, and their legacy is an amalgam of opulence and philanthropy.

The source of the Joslyn wealth was the Western Newspaper Union (WNU), an auxiliary printing company, which sold reams of ready-print—sheets of newsprint with pre-printed news features on one side—to the editors of weekly newspapers who printed their local news on the other. Later the company also sold

## The Joslyns of Omaha

“boilerplate,” lightweight stereotype plates containing typeset features that editors could use as they wished. By the time of George’s death in 1916, the WNU held a virtual monopoly in the auxiliary printing business east of the Sierra Nevadas.<sup>1</sup>

The general public in Omaha and throughout the state was well aware of the Joslyns’ opulent lifestyle, but knew much less about their philanthropy, which, under Sarah’s influence, reached prodigious levels after George’s death and still continues to influence Omaha’s cultural and social life.

Married on September 24, 1872, in Berlin, Vermont, George and Sarah arrived in Omaha in 1880 after several years in Montreal, Canada, where George had been a bookkeeper for the Rice Brothers Paper Collar Manufacturers, owned by his mother’s brothers. A struggling young entrepreneurial couple, George and Sarah first resided at the Western Newspaper Union plant where George was employed. As they accumulated wealth, however, their lifestyle grew increasingly opulent. In 1883 they moved into the Metropolitan Hotel, one of two hotels George operated. Three years later they abandoned the hotel business and became homeowners, purchasing a modest dwelling at 2522 Davenport Street. The house was razed in 1966 to make way for the I-480 segment of the interstate highway system.<sup>2</sup>

In 1891 the Joslyns signaled their arrival among Omaha’s wealthy elite with the purchase of a fourteen-room residence at 2111 Emmet Street in the fashionable Kountze Place subdivision developed by Herman Kountze, one of the city’s leading bankers. The architect Louis Mendelssohn had designed the house as his personal residence only two years earlier. Situated on a three-lot site, it included a stable, allowing George and Sarah to indulge their passion for riding and horse breeding. Nevertheless, the Joslyns did not put down roots in that chic neighborhood.<sup>3</sup>

In 1893, the couple purchased a five-acre dairy farm near 39th and Davenport streets from Dewitt Sutphen and his son



By 1900 George and Sarah Joslyn were well established among Omaha’s wealthy elite, and could afford to indulge their passion for horse breeding and riding. They were soon to begin construction of an opulent residence near Thirty-ninth and Davenport streets. Historical Society of Douglas County Library/Archives Center, Omaha, Nebraska

and daughter-in-law, Charles and Olga. In turn, the young Sutphen couple purchased the Joslyns’ Emmet Street property. A dispute over the transaction generated a lawsuit that lingered in the Douglas County District Court for sixteen years until, in 1909, the court denied George’s claim that he had not received a legal warranty deed on the sale and exchange of properties and ordered him to pay the Sutphens the contested five thousand dollars and transfer to them the Kountze Place lots he had not abandoned. Fifty years later the house on Emmet Street succumbed to the ravages of a changing and deteriorating neighborhood and was razed. In 1958, the site became home to the North Christ Child Center, which serves a neighborhood now much less affluent than it was in the Joslyns’ time.<sup>4</sup>

After buying the Sutphen farm George

and Sarah left Omaha for a brief sojourn in Chicago, where the WNU headquarters, editorial, and advertising offices were located, as were the offices of its chief competitor, the A. N. Kellogg Company. Probably George felt impelled to move to the Windy City for business reasons, but the couple may have decided to establish dual residences. Whatever their reasons, the *Omaha City Directory* listed Chicago as George Joslyn’s place of residence in 1894 and 1895. In 1896, however, they were back in Omaha, boarding at the Paxton Hotel. Even business concerns, if that was what took them to Chicago, apparently could not overcome the Joslyns’ desire to build their dream home on the Sutphen property.<sup>5</sup>

George and Sarah lived in the existing two-story, fourteen-room farmhouse while their lavish plans unfolded. They enclosed the site with a limestone wall

crested with a wrought-iron fence. Later, in an era with different priorities, part of the fence was donated to a World War II scrap-metal drive, and eventually the ornate iron driveway gates, wide enough for horse-drawn carriages, had to be removed so automobiles could enter. Within the walls they planted about two hundred varieties of mature trees and shrubs, even though George was fifty years old and did not think he would live to see the saplings grow to full stature. Two adjacent ponds having the appearance of a figure eight straddled by a footbridge, held lilies and fish. A large greenhouse, for palms, orchids, and other exotic plants, completed the horticultural grand design. The greenhouse basement contained a massive steam plant that eventually heated all the buildings on the site through a system of large pipes in tunnels.

Built in 1897, a seven-room gatehouse was the first new building on the site. Built for the groundskeeper, Isaac Roman, and his family, it later stood unoccupied for years, was vandalized, and razed in 1949. In 1901 a two-story stone carriage house was built, and its upper level became the abode of the coachman (later, when automobiles replaced horses and carriages, the chauffeur).

That building also was the site for a lavish two-night inaugural party. On May 1, 1901, the Joslyns held a dinner for two hundred guests in the "barn," and invited them and others back for a dance the following evening. Flowers from the greenhouse decorated the coach room where Dimick's full orchestra played. Punch was served in the harness room.<sup>6</sup>

Construction of the new residence at "Lynhurst," as the Joslyns' called their estate, began in 1902, and it was completed ahead of schedule eleven months later in 1903. John McDonald, a friend George had met in Canada, designed the home in what some have called the "Scottish Baronial" style. Omahans eschewed George's nomenclature and referred to it simply as "the Castle." It was constructed of limestone from Kansas (not, as legend has it, from



Among the many lavish features of "Lynhurst," George and Sarah Joslyn's imposing residence (known popularly as "the Castle") was a glass-ceilinged conservatory with rock ledges for the display of plants. Historical Society of Douglas County Library/Archives Center, Omaha, Nebraska



## The Joslyns of Omaha

George and Sarah's native Vermont), and a railroad spur was built to haul in the thirty-foot slabs that workmen then cut to size. The three-story structure contained thirty-four rooms, including a ballroom, den, gymnasium (George is said to have exercised regularly), bowling alley, billiard room, smoking room, card room, conservatory (including a stone wall with "outcroppings" for the display of plants), wine cellar, sauna, and servants' quarters.

The Joslyns contracted with the firm of Sperling and Linden of Chicago for interior decoration. Some of the furnishings were associated with the Columbian Exposition, celebrated in Chicago in 1893 to herald the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America (it was held a year late due to construction problems). Other furniture and trappings were acquired ten years later at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904.

That year also marked a bizarre episode shrouded in mystery because the relevant Douglas County tax and assessment records have been lost. According to vague and contradictory newspaper accounts that confused the taxes at issue, George boarded up the windows of the Castle, put two cows out to graze on the lawn, and left for Saratoga, New York, proclaiming he would not return to Omaha "unless the Nebraska legislature shall repeal the absurd and unjust personal taxation law passed at its last session.... I would rather tear down the house stone by stone," he asserted, "than abandon my silent protest against unjust and discriminating taxation."<sup>7</sup>

Seventy years later an Omaha newspaper reported that George had turned sheep onto the lawn and forced the Nebraska legislature to repeal an "unfair" personal property law. However, the facts match neither story. First, Joslyn's "silent protest" was quite vocal and was orchestrated through newspapers in New York and Chicago. Second, it seems strange that he and Sarah would be purchasing furnishings for Lynhurst at the 1904 St. Louis World's

Fair while vowing to tear the house down. Moreover, the Nebraska tax code did not change in any significant way by amendment or new personal property statutes during the years of this alleged dispute. Serious tax dispute? Prank by a renowned trickster? The absence of relevant historical records precludes a reliable answer.<sup>8</sup>



**The precise location of this grape-picking outing is uncertain, but needy children, possibly including these girls from the Child Saving Institute, an orphanage and foundling home that was one of Sarah Joslyn's favorite charities, were often entertained on the Castle grounds. Child Saving Institute, Omaha, Nebraska**

In 1907, George and Sarah gilded their jewel with the addition of a music room. It abuts the west end of the house and sits lower than the other first-floor rooms so that the organ pipes would not obscure the second-story windows. Neither of the Joslyns played, but musicians occasionally sojourned at the Castle and volunteered their talents. At other times professionals were hired for performances, and well into the 1920s Sarah made the room and the instrument

available for church recitals. The organ was removed to the Joslyn Memorial (now the Joslyn Art Museum) upon its completion in 1931 and was enlarged to concert-hall size. Eventually it was sold to Miliken University in Decatur, Illinois.

On the estate George and Sarah raised horses and dogs, and are said to have showed them competitively. Photographs from the time show the couple proudly mounted on their favorite steeds (other snapshots document their adaptation to the automobile by the turn of the century). One of their favorite dogs was named Modjeska in honor of the famous international stage actress Helena Modjeska. The Joslyns also enjoyed assembling jigsaw puzzles, and a completed puzzle was incorporated into a screen that stood in front of the living room fireplace.

The Joslyns entertained regularly, apparently giving George an opportunity to unleash the prankster in him. Reputedly, he sometimes jolted guests when they sat in an amusement-house style electric chair. Sometimes a late-arriving guest would unsuspectingly sit in a vacant "musical chair" at the rear of the music room only to have his tardiness tunelessly announced to the gathering.<sup>9</sup>

Legend also portrays George as a hard-drinking gambling man who regularly used the heating tunnels to sneak cronies into the card room, against Sarah's wishes, for a male soiree. The tales make for good telling, but a contradictory myth depicts George as a perfect example of sobriety and frugality. According to that yarn, he went daily to the Rome Hotel where drinks were two for a quarter; he made the purchase and drank one in the "forenoon" and then came back for the other in the afternoon.<sup>10</sup>

Sarah periodically opened the Castle grounds to neighborhood children, and arranged visits there for underprivileged children. At the time of Sarah's death, Miles Greenleaf, who grew up in the area, related stories of neighborhood children frolicking about the grounds, swimming in the pond, snacking on ice

cream and lemonade, and receiving bouquets of flowers from the conservatory to take home to their mothers. The Joslyns held an annual Fourth-of-July party for children, at which George patriotically fired his miniature brass cannon, obviously to the delight and wonder of all.<sup>11</sup>

In 1873, the year after their marriage, Sarah had given birth to a baby boy, Clifton Howard, who lived only three months and sixteen days. While the couple never had other children of their own, George opened his business and Sarah extended the hospitality of their home to many family members over the years, including George's cousin Ferdinand Joslyn, his brother Fredrick, his sister Jennie Joslyn Jones, and several nephews.<sup>12</sup>

One persistent story of Joslyn family relationships remains unconfirmed by census and school records. In a 1967 newspaper interview, Eugene Boyce of Long Island, New York, stated that in 1878, upon the death of his father's first wife (Sarah Joslyn's sister Lucelia), the eight-year-old daughter of that union, Angie, was sent to Omaha to be raised by Sarah. However Angie is not listed with the Joslyns in the 1880 United States census or the 1885 Nebraska census, nor is she recorded on the rolls of the Omaha Public School district or the rolls of Brownell Hall (today's Brownell-Talbot school). The manuscript census for 1890 no longer exists, but by the 1900 census Angie was married to Coit Farnsworth, secretary-treasurer of the WNU, and was living in Chicago. Thus it is highly unlikely that the Joslyns reared her.<sup>13</sup>

They did, however, care for a child named Violet Carl (not Carlson as reported in some news stories). How they became acquainted with her is a mystery; Violet's children believe she was the child of German immigrants who moved to Omaha and that her grandmother cared for her until, at the age of five, she came to the Joslyns. Possibly she was introduced to them by the Child Saving Institute, an orphanage

## McGowan-Joslyn Wedding Party



The social event of the season in fall 1913 was the wedding of Violet Carl Joslyn and David Magowan. Violet, taken in by the Joslyns when she was five years old and reared as their adopted daughter, may have been introduced to them through the Child Saving Institute. *Omaha Bee*, Oct. 17, 1913

## The Joslyns of Omaha

and founding home that was one of Sarah's favorite charities, or met them at one of the parties the Joslyns held for underprivileged children.

Although George declared in the 1900 and 1910 censuses that she had been born in Nebraska, her birth was not recorded in Douglas County, and she listed Kansas as her place of birth on her marriage certificate. Mementos from her sixth birthday party, August 7, 1898, firmly establish her residence with the Joslyns by that date. They included a picture book with a poem inscribed and dated by the Rev. Newton M. Mann, which read:

Six years old today, my pet  
Dearest little Violet!  
Here are pictures for you now  
Bird and Horse and Sheep and Cow.<sup>14</sup>

Violet's children believe that George and Sarah adopted Violet, but their lawyer failed to file the papers. Strangely, however, in the 1900 census (three years after the supposed adoption), George listed her as a boarder, and in his will he referred to her as a person "reared by myself and my wife." Yet, she graduated from Brownell Hall as Violet Carl Joslyn, newspaper articles always cited her as Violet Joslyn, and on her marriage certificate she named George and Sarah as her father and mother. Moreover, when she graduated from high school in 1910 the Joslyns gave a lavish debut at the Castle, and at the time of her wedding in 1913, held a gala that was the social event of the season.<sup>15</sup>

Violet's husband, David Magowan of Kane, Pennsylvania, was an employee of the Swift company, but, in 1915 when Swift wanted to transfer him to Argentina, he went to work for Joslyn's WNU. By the time of his death in 1952 Magowan had risen to vice president of the company. Violet lived until 1983, and she and her husband are interred in the family plot in Kane.<sup>16</sup>

While George built the business, Sarah immersed herself in community service. The first public notice of her involvement came in November 1887 when she joined seven other women to

file articles of incorporation establishing a Board of Charities for the city of Omaha. Concern for the underprivileged continued to guide most of her community efforts, but in 1898 she also served on the executive committee of the Bureau of Entertainment for the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, Omaha's "World's Fair," arranging amusements for notable visitors. By then her stature as the prominent mistress of a five-acre estate no doubt helped the committee impress regional and national celebrities with the sophisticated and cultured nature of the town, but such "high society" functions did not exemplify Sarah's civic priorities.<sup>17</sup>

More typical was her life-long commitment to the Child Saving Institute. She was not among its incorporators in 1901, but was listed as a member of the executive board when the articles were amended in 1913. Its name conveyed its mission: "to provide for the physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual needs of the orphan, dependent or homeless children."<sup>18</sup>

Sarah also was dedicated to the Humane Society, first organized in 1875 in Omaha, and revived in 1886. She joined its executive board two years later. Its 1896 articles of incorporation stated its mission as "the prevention of cruelty to children and animals and for their protection." Thus, in one society she engaged two of her passions. She quickly became its most prominent representative, and in 1912 was one of seven members commissioned as "humane and traffic" officers of Omaha's Volunteer Police Force. At the 44th annual convention of the American Humane Association held at the Fontenelle Hotel in Omaha, Sarah was elected third vice president (along with honorary first and second vice presidents, William Howard Taft and Thomas R. Marshall, president and vice president of the United States). Indicative of the association's early mission, the convention's first session addressed the topic of preserving the American home.<sup>19</sup>

Sarah also found ways to promote her

love of flowers. In 1916, for example, she offered a fifty-dollar gold medal for the best pink peony in the annual peony exhibition of the Garden Committee of the Civic League held at the Douglas County Courthouse.

George, by contrast, did not actively participate in civic affairs. He held a few memberships—in the Omaha Club, the Commercial Club, the Omaha Country Club—but they were business and social memberships. Although he headed one of the city's major firms, his name does not appear on community boards, including the Knights of AkSarBen, a prominent civic organization whose members included many of the city's business and social elite. He is said to have attended the Christian Science Church (he was raised a Congregationalist), but he made no provision for it in his will. He identified himself as a Republican, but other than voting and, possibly, donating to campaigns and causes, he was not politically active. Nonetheless, George rendered community service through philanthropy, some of it apparently influenced by Sarah's commitments and associations.<sup>20</sup>

The pattern of philanthropy that George and Sarah established persisted after his death, and his obituaries described him as a generous man who did not seek publicity:

His business associates say that in the last ten years of his life there was scarcely a day when half a dozen or more persons did not visit him in his office, asking for aid. If the case seemed a worthy one, he gave \$10, \$15, \$25, \$50 or whatever sum he believed was needed, and made no record or public announcement. He aided many churches.<sup>21</sup>

He gave larger amounts to community fundraisers, such as his 1907 donation of one thousand dollars to the Omaha Auditorium Building Fund for a new roof.<sup>22</sup>

Two years later he gave twenty-five thousand dollars to the Child Saving Institute for a new building, the largest donation to an Omaha charitable project to that date. Today the gift would be called a challenge grant; he stipulated



**In 1909 the Joslyns gave twenty-five thousand dollars to the Child Saving Institute toward the construction of a new building. The gift was the largest donation to an Omaha charitable project to that date.**  
Child Saving Institute, Omaha, Nebraska

that the remaining fifty thousand dollars needed for the building was to be “subscribed by the community.” It was pledged in a matter of months, and the new building at 42nd and Jackson streets was dedicated on May 11, 1911. The Joslyns also donated the site and money for the construction of the Fontenelle Home for the Aged.<sup>23</sup>

After his father’s death in 1912, George gave thirty-five thousand dollars for the construction and maintenance of a library in his hometown, Waitsfield, Vermont. It was named in honor of George and Sarah’s grandfather, Joseph Joslin, who had migrated to the village in 1798 (Sarah’s mother was the daughter of Joseph Joslin and his first wife; George’s father was the son of Joseph and his third wife. Thus George and Sarah were half first cousins).<sup>24</sup>

The following year, on Easter Sunday, 1913, a tornado devastated much of Omaha, and the Castle was in its path. Much of the greenhouse complex was destroyed, and the Joslyns decided not

to rebuild. Instead, they donated the flowers and the undamaged orchid house to the city and had it moved to Hanscom Park where it remained for the next fifty years.<sup>25</sup>

The Joslyns also developed a sustaining relationship with the University of Omaha, established as a private college in 1909 (it became a municipal institution in 1930, and since 1968 has been the University of Nebraska, Omaha). In its inaugural year Joslyn offered fifty thousand dollars, one-third of the cost of a proposed science building, but the building campaign failed.

By 1916 the school had outgrown its quarters in the Redick Mansion at 3612 North 24th Street, and Joslyn again stepped forward, pledging twenty-five thousand dollars, half the cost for a new building. This time the match was quickly subscribed and Joslyn Hall was built at 24th and Pratt streets, serving the college until 1938 when it moved to its present Dodge Street campus. The Joslyns even anticipated that move by

subscribing twenty-five thousand dollars of the one hundred thousand dollars needed to purchase land for expansion west of 42nd and north of Center streets. The outbreak of World War I halted the fund drive, the option to buy lapsed, and on October 4, 1916, George died. The 1917 college yearbook, *Gateway*, was dedicated to him posthumously for his “kindly interest and generous help.”<sup>26</sup>

George died at home with Sarah and Violet at his bedside. He had been in failing health for a year, and for a few months had tried to recuperate in California. The funeral service took place at his residence and he was interred at Forest Lawn Cemetery in a large, gray granite mausoleum of classical Greek design. His active and honorary pallbearers included many of Omaha’s most prominent businessmen. His obituary in a trade newspaper published by the WNU, concluded:

All in all, Mr. Joslyn was a man among men, with the faults common to humanity, but with so long a list of good qualities



## The Joslyns of Omaha



**The Castle was in the path of a massive tornado that devastated much of Omaha on Easter Sunday 1913. Although the house itself was largely spared, the greenhouse complex was destroyed.** Historical Society of Douglas County Library/Archives Center, Omaha, Nebraska

and good deeds to his credit that in his passing the country has suffered a serious loss.<sup>27</sup>

He died the richest man in Nebraska; his estate of \$6,706,850 (well over \$110

million in current value) was nearly twice the size of the next largest estate probated in Nebraska, that of John A. Creighton in 1907. Most of Joslyn's wealth came from the ownership of the

WNU, but he also owned property worth nearly \$2 million and stock in other companies valued at \$400,000 (no market value was placed on some of his stocks). Most of the property consisted of WNU buildings in various cities, but also included lots valued at \$1 million at 16th and Harney streets and 17th and Farnam streets. They were said to be under consideration as the site of a WNU headquarters skyscraper.

George's "good deeds"—bequests from his estate—created a legacy that influences Omaha to this day. Several bequests ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000, plus two hundred to five hundred shares of WNU stock went to close relatives. Violet received \$5,000, one thousand shares of stock, and the WNU building on 15th Street. The Fontenelle Home for the Aged, the Visiting Nurses Association, and the Nebraska Humane Society each received five hundred shares of WNU stock, valued at \$85 per share, a total gift of \$43,500 each. The remainder of the estate, about \$5,500,000 (after Douglas County inheritance taxes of \$27,535.25) went to Sarah, making her the richest person in Nebraska.<sup>28</sup>

Although she was sixty-five years old, she did not retreat to an idle life of travel or retirement to sunny California. Asked why she had not relocated to a warm climate, she reportedly responded, "The money was made in Omaha and it will be spent here," and she remained active in community affairs well into the 1920s.<sup>29</sup>

In 1915 Governor John H. Morehead had appointed her to the five-member state Child Labor Commission. In December 1916, two months after George's death, she donated ten thousand dollars to the Brownell Hall Building Fund, and shortly thereafter she gave property at Thirteenth and Farnam streets to Omaha University.<sup>30</sup>

A few months later the United States entered World War I, and Sarah immediately volunteered with the newly organized National League of Women's Service created to support the war effort by arranging for volunteer women to fill

jobs left by departing soldiers. The Omaha League earned money to support its activities by making horse socks, “slippers” with carpet soles and burlap tops that fit over horses’ hooves and gave them better traction, especially on hilly, snow- or ice-covered streets. Through the Humane Society those “safety devises” were placed in drug-stores for public purchase, especially by teamsters whose horses had to pull wagons.<sup>31</sup>

Sarah also opened the Castle to soldiers stationed at Fort Omaha. She told a newspaper reporter:

I want the soldiers in this vicinity to know that my home and all it contains is open to them every night. They may come here and smoke, bowl, play billiards, read, lounge, chat, play the Victrola, listen to the pipe organ [outfitted to play rolls] or do anything else that they want. I have here cigars, cigarettes, matches, chairs, bowling alleys, billiard and pool tables, books, and musical instruments.

She fretted that some soldiers hesitated to take the offer because of her wealth. An *Omaha World-Herald* photograph, however, illustrates that on one occasion, at least, others took her at her word.<sup>32</sup>

Sarah continued the Joslyn philanthropy after the war. In 1919 the Knights of AkSarBen formed a corporation to purchase the former state fair grounds, then located west of Omaha on Center Street. She became one of the largest single investors, purchasing stock worth ten thousand dollars, facilitating the conversion of the property into AkSarBen Field, where a racetrack and buildings for the Knight’s agricultural fair were constructed. In 1924 she again gave thirty thousand dollars to Omaha University toward the construction of a new building, and she also financed the construction of a new headquarters for the Humane Society at 924 North 21st Street. The facility not only served large animals but also included the first small-animal hospital in Nebraska or Iowa. She also continued to use her home for public service. In 1923, for example, she made the Castle available to the

First Unitarian Church for a fundraising “musical” that featured organist Eloise West McNichols.<sup>33</sup>

Sarah’s wealth also made her a target. After 1923, when federal income tax records were opened to the public, anyone who read the newspaper knew she was the richest person in Nebraska, earning up to \$400,000 per year (twice the income of her nearest rival) and paying \$177,708 in federal income tax. Ironically, Senator George Norris of Nebraska, whose 1924 federal income tax was \$412.72, sponsored the bill that made income-tax records public.

That year the federal income and estate tax structure changed, and many taxpayers were owed rebates. The situation bred unscrupulous accountants and lawyers who charged huge service fees for “arranging” the rebates. Sarah became the victim of such a scheme and was embroiled in a long court battle over taxes on George’s estate. Eventually she received a rebate of \$454,000, and the Washington, D. C., lawyers who illegally used contacts in the Treasury Department to learn the names of wealthy individuals about to receive refunds were indicted for fraud.<sup>34</sup>

Sarah continued some business activities during the 1920s (as an investment she purchased the Buckingham Manor apartment building in 1928 for \$225,000), but by then in her seventies, she increasingly concentrated on creating a memorial to her late husband. In 1929 she sold the majority of her stock in the WNU to the officers of the company for \$4 million plus stock in the reorganized company worth \$1 million.

Some saw her actions as an act of charity. A headline in a Boston newspaper, for example, read: “Woman Gives Big Business to Faithful Employees [sic],” the newspaper in one of the cities where the WNU had a regional office declared that “three years ago a group of eastern bankers looking for an opportunity to turn a penny, offered her \$14,000,000 for her business. It had a book value of \$12,000,000 and bankers out this way placed a value of

\$20,000,000 on the property.” The company had a surplus of \$5 million, and according to the paper “she simply emptied the cash box and made a present of the great business, a gift of \$15,000,000 without batting an eyelash.”<sup>35</sup>

The recipients of Sarah’s largess included H. H. Fish who first became associated with the WNU in 1893. He rose to manager of the Lincoln office in 1896, secretary of the company in 1900, vice president and general manager in 1916, and to president upon George’s death. George had declared that Fish was the “only living man who thoroughly understands the ready print business from the ground up and who materially helped to build up the mammoth institution [the WNU].” The other officer-owners of the new firm included secretary-treasurer Coit L. Farnsworth, vice-president and general manager E. W. Julian, and assistant general manager W. M. Harper, all long-serving officers.<sup>36</sup>

Sarah sold the company at the peak of its prowess. A few years later, during the Great Depression, the WNU had nearly gone bankrupt. It survived only to meet its demise at the hands of new technology. Ready-print operations ceased in 1952, the victim of the Linotype machine (which greatly reduced the labor and cost of typesetting), radio, motion-picture newsreels, national news magazines, and, eventually, television. Today only the Western Paper Company, a wholesale paper company Joslyn created about 1910, still exists. Under new ownership and with a new name—Xpedex—it is all that remains from the once sprawling holding company.<sup>37</sup>

Sarah used the money from the sale of the WNU to build a cultural institution for the people of Omaha as a commemoration of George and his accomplishments. Plans for the memorial had become public as early as 1921. She retained architects—John McDonald, who had designed the Castle and the WNU Building at 15th and Jones streets, and his son Alan—to help fashion the concept of a public cultural institution embracing the arts and to design a building to

## The Joslyns of Omaha

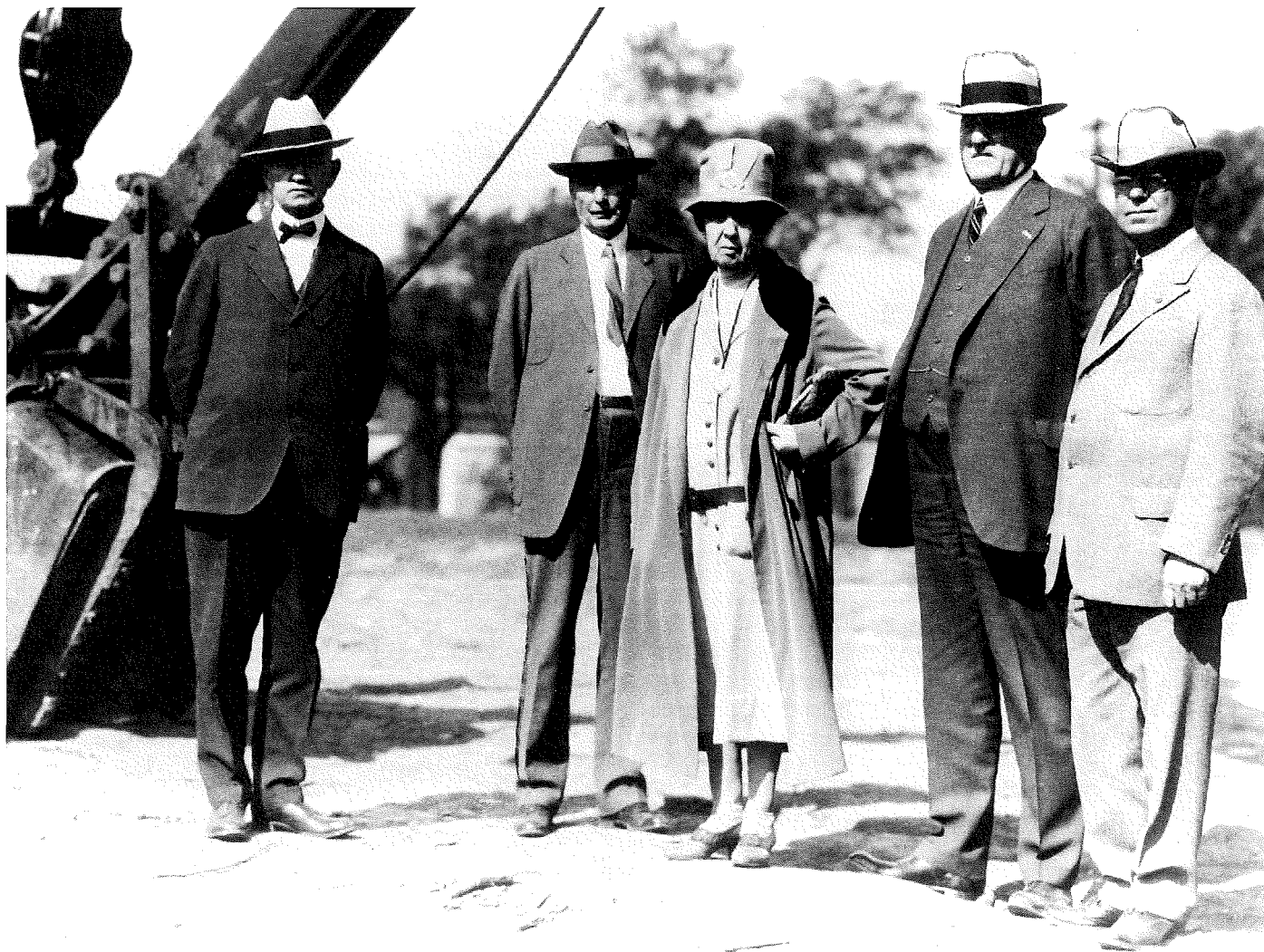
sustain them. It was duly named the Joslyn Memorial. The groundbreaking ceremony occurred on October 3, 1928, and the Peter Kiewit and Sons Company completed construction three years later.

The Joslyn Memorial, called "Mrs. Joslyn's greatest gift" by a local newspaper, opened on November 29, 1931. According to reports, Sarah and Violet stood in the crowd with the public and waited for the doors to open. They were among the last to enter, and took seats in the unreserved section of the auditorium; few people recognized them.

Sarah may not have "pulled rank" at the opening, but she did maintain close control of Memorial operations. She organized the Joslyn Liberal Arts Society, chose its trustees, served as president of the board until her death, and actively participated in its meetings until the onset of illness in 1939.<sup>38</sup>

After the Joslyn Memorial was conceived, most of Sarah's money and effort went toward it (she purchased the "Portrait of Miss Franks" for the collection in 1934), but even then she continued to dispense gifts to others. In 1937, she

donated \$12,500 to the First Unitarian Church for a pipe organ. Other requests from the steady flow of entreaties for money and personal support—such as the request from a woman asking Sarah to reprimand the Humane Society for euthanizing her dog, one from an author wanting her to publish his manuscript about John Heywood, entertainer to Henry VIII, and one from a former, "too liberal" Methodist clergyman seeking a ministry in the Unitarian Church—did not receive as generous a response. All such inquiries were



At the groundbreaking for the Joslyn Memorial in 1931 Sarah Joslyn posed with members of the board of trustees of the Joslyn Liberal Arts Society. Left to right are C. W. Russell; John McDonald, architect of the Memorial and the Castle; Sarah; H. H. Fish; and C. L. Farnsworth. *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 3, 1928

handed over to the Memorial's director, Paul H. Grumann, who penned short, respectful refusals.<sup>39</sup>

Sarah's long, distinguished life of service and philanthropy brought her much respect and many honors. In 1928, Omaha Post No. 1 of the American Legion named her Omaha's most valuable citizen. In 1937 the University of Omaha conferred upon her its first honorary degree. Three years later, a few months after her death, she was selected as one of ten charter members of the University's newly created Omaha Hall of Fame. In 1975 the Nebraska International Women's Year Coalition inducted her into its Nebraska Women's Hall of Fame.<sup>40</sup>

Along with the accolades came gossip about her habits and lifestyle, and some of it lingers on. Interviews shortly after her death contributed to myths of Sarah as a reclusive, excessively frugal woman. While some friends, servants, and others contributed tales to feed the public desire for "inside information," Violet refused. As late as 1974, in answer to a request for information about Sarah, she wrote:

I must tell you such conversation would be impossible. Mrs. Joslyn was first of all things a private person who insisted on keeping personal actions and beliefs separate from any public activities. Since you have all the statistics of importance to the Museum the only things I could add would be personalities and anecdotes. For me to do so would be disloyal.<sup>41</sup>

In 1965 when a story by Ben Sylvester in the *Omaha World-Herald's* "Magazine of the Midlands" reported that Sarah's alleged miserliness "involved so much scrimping, the wearing of old hats and darned gloves, that the Chauffeur was embarrassed to be seen with her," it prompted a rebuttal letter by the wife of the chauffeur denying the tale.<sup>42</sup>

The supposed reclusiveness and penny pinching no doubt grew out of Sarah's diminished public activity and infrequent entertaining. By then she was in her eighties, and the country was in the midst of the Great Depression. The tales also grew from the reporting of

off-hand, unconfirmed comments taken out of context by reporters and gossip columnists. Responding to the gossip, Sarah's son-in-law wrote, "You know Mother Joslyn wasn't always the quiet, conservative woman you have known. From girlhood until her early 60s, she loved pretty clothes, jewelry, and social life. In fact...I think she was about the best dressed woman in Omaha." The fact that the 83-year-old Sarah took an airplane ride in 1934 to see the Memorial "from the clouds" suggests an indomitable spirit. Moreover, even at her advanced age, she took daily rides around town, allowing her chauffeur, Edgar Rogers, to choose the route.<sup>43</sup>

Some of the reclusiveness may have arisen from justifiable apprehension. In 1973 Violet repeated a story that had been told to her by Sarah's banker: In 1934, when Sarah was purchasing the "Portrait of Miss Franks," she had asked him to bring the money to the Castle in cash. He refused, saying that would be an invitation for someone to go to the house and murder her. Violet wrote, "he might have added 'on a dark night in your bed'—I'm not sure."<sup>44</sup>

That dire warning came shortly after an extortion plot had unnerved Sarah and the community. Earlier that year two Creighton University students sent her several letters claiming they were in a position to negotiate with vandals to prevent them from harming the Memorial. Since an unknown assailant had splashed paint on the exterior stairway three years earlier, and because this threat came at the time of the sensational Lindbergh kidnapping, the police and Sarah reacted decisively. One of the "extortionists" was arrested getting off the trolley after collecting one thousand dollars wrapped in newspaper, and the other was apprehended shortly thereafter. Sarah admitted she had been "badly frightened" by the "prank that got out hand." She supported the idea of parole and reentry to classes for the young men, but refused to write letters of support to the newspapers or the university. Apparently the episode ended without a trial,

but both students were dismissed from school. Thus, in context, an elderly woman who no longer holds public entertainments and who has "withdrawn" to a close circle of friends does not seem unusual. Nor does it seem strange that a woman her age would be uninterested in buying new hats.<sup>45</sup>

Sarah died at home the morning of February 28, 1940, shortly before her eighty-ninth birthday. Bedridden for four months, she had rallied in January and resumed her daily auto rides. In mid-February, however, she fell ill again and ultimately perished from an apparent heart attack. The funeral took place at the Castle, and she was interred next to George in the Joslyn Mausoleum at Forest Lawn Cemetery.<sup>46</sup>

Sarah bequeathed one hundred thousand dollars to Violet, fifty thousand to each of Violet's three children, and seventy-five thousand to Angie Farnsworth. She also gave bequests ranging from five thousand to twenty-five thousand dollars to a score of relatives, and sums ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars to her servants and a few friends. Her favorite charities received bequests ranging from three thousand dollars to fifty thousand dollars, and two, the Community Playhouse and the Nebraska Humane Society, received bequests in the form of debt forgiveness of sixty-five thousand and fifty thousand dollars respectively.

Family and friends were given an opportunity to choose items from her personal possessions, and the remainder of the estate went to the Liberal Arts Society for the maintenance of the Memorial. Thus, through her final act of generosity Sarah used her wealth to promote her life-long concerns for children, animals, and music, and, through the Joslyn Memorial, now remembered more in her honor than George's, to promote the cultural well being of Omaha and the region.<sup>47</sup>

In its editorial obituary the *Omaha World-Herald* lamented, "Mrs. Sarah H. Joslyn was at the same time one of the



## The Joslyns of Omaha



**The Joslyn Memorial was the culmination of Sarah's determination to build a cultural institution in memory of George, who died in 1916. Built with proceeds from the sale of the Western Newspaper Union, it opened to the public in 1931. Historical Society of Douglas County Library/Archives Center, Omaha, Nebraska**

best known and least known of Omaha personalities. Many people knew of her, few knew much of anything about her."<sup>48</sup>

The same, of course, could be said about George. The couple from Vermont arrived in Nebraska in 1880 and began life here in modest circumstances. By the dawn of the twentieth century they had become the state's wealthiest family, and for the next fifty years they established the standards both for opulence and philanthropy. Although twentieth century technology consigned the source of their wealth, the Western Newspaper Union, to the realm of "ancient history," the Castle still stands as a landmark to their once lavish lifestyle. Moreover, while much of their philanthropy goes unrecognized today,

the Joslyn Memorial, officially renamed the Joslyn Art Museum after exhibition space was added in 1994, remains their "greatest gift."

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Dennis M. Mihelich, "George Joslyn: America's First Media Mogul," *Nebraska History* 82 (Spring 2001), 26–37.

<sup>2</sup> Marriage Certificate, Joslyn Manuscripts, Library of the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska (hereafter Joslyn MSS); *Lovell's Directory* (Montreal), 1865–75; *Omaha City Directory*, 1880, 1883, 1886; *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 8, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, n.d., Joslyn MSS; Alan McDonald to Dr. Hartley Burr Alexander, Nov. 29, 1929, Joslyn MSS.

<sup>4</sup> Records of the District Court of Douglas County, Nebraska, 1909, Document 102, 128ff., Douglas County Courthouse, Omaha, Nebraska.

<sup>5</sup> *Omaha City Directory*, 1894–96.

<sup>6</sup> *Omaha Excelsior*, May 4, 1901.

<sup>7</sup> *Chicago Chronicle*, June 7, 1904; see also *Omaha Daily News*, May 20, 1904, and *Omaha Excelsior*, June 4, 1904.

<sup>8</sup> *The Metro* (Omaha), Nov. 13, 1974; Statutes of the State of Nebraska, 1900–07.

<sup>9</sup> Josephine Frisbie, pamphlet prepared for the opening of the Joslyn Castle as headquarters for the Omaha Board of Education, n.d. [1945], subsequently privately printed as "Joslyn Castle," Joslyn MSS; Roger Fitch, "The Story of George and Sarah Joslyn and of the Joslyn Castle and Grounds," privately printed, 1995, Joslyn MSS; Landmarks, Inc., *Joslyn Castle Estate Cultural Landscape Report*, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> *Nebraska Education News*, Nov. 11, 1960; *Omaha World-Herald*, "Magazine of the Midlands," Dec. 24, 1967; *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 5, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d., Joslyn MSS; Oral interview conducted by Josephine

## Nebraska History – Spring 2002

Frisbie with Mrs. John Brain, niece of George Joslyn, Aug. 9, 1944, Joslyn MSS.

<sup>12</sup> Death Certificate, Joslyn MSS; U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Manuscript Census of the United States, Douglas County, Nebraska," 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920; State of Nebraska, "Manuscript Census of 1885, Douglas County"; *Omaha City Directory*, 1880–1920; Matt Bushnell Jones, *History of the Town of Waitsfield, Vermont, 1782–1908* (Boston: George E. Littlefield, 1909), genealogy section. The *Omaha City Directory* occasionally confused Ferdinand and Frederick Joslyn, but cross-referencing with the census and Jones establishes their correct Omaha arrival and departure dates.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, *History of Waitsfield*, genealogy section; *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 21, 1967.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Manuscript Census, Douglas County," 1900, 1910; Birth Records, Douglas County, Historical Society of Douglas County (hereafter HDDC). Before the mid-1930s, birth certificates were not required by law. Physicians were asked to register births, but many births occurred outside hospitals and without attending physicians, and the records are significantly incomplete. State of Nebraska, Marriage License, Oct. 15, 1913; Joslyn M. Birdzell (daughter of Violet Joslyn Magowan) to Elaine Sherrill, September 15, 1984, Joslyn MSS.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Manuscript Census, Douglas County," 1900; "Decree of Probate of Domestic Will," County Court of Douglas County, Nebraska, Estate of George A. Joslyn, November 4, 1916; Fanny M. Clark Potter, *Historical Sketch of Brownell Hall, 1863–64–1913–14*, privately printed, n.d.; Nebraska State Genealogical Society, vol. IV, no. 4 (Spring 1982), "Graduates of Brownell Hall" (Incorrectly lists Violet Joslyn Magowan as Mrs. T. [D.] W. Magowan). In 1913–14 she served as secretary of the Alumnae Association.

<sup>16</sup> Oral interviews with Mrs. J. B. Hersey (Sally Magowan) and Mrs. Luther Earle Birdzell (Joslyn Magowan), 1991; Hersey to Sherrill, July 12, 1984; Birdzell to Sherrill, August 10, 1984, Joslyn MSS; *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 25, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> Unidentified newspaper articles, Clipping File, HSDC.

<sup>18</sup> Miscellaneous Corporation Records, State of Nebraska, 1913, Vol. 23, 290–92.

<sup>19</sup> Unidentified newspaper articles, Clipping File, HSDC; unidentified newspaper article, Joslyn MSS; Miscellaneous Corporation Record, State of Nebraska, 1907, Vol. P, 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, n.d., Oct. 15, 1916, Clipping File, HSDC.

<sup>21</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 9, 1916.

<sup>22</sup> *Omaha News*, Aug. 7, 1907.

<sup>23</sup> Child Saving Institute brochure, HSDC; *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 5, 1916.

<sup>24</sup> Library Dedication Speech, Joslyn MSS; Unidentified newspaper article, Clipping File, HSDC.

<sup>25</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, June 19, 1968; Landmarks, Inc., *Joslyn Castle Estate Cultural Landscape Report*, 21–3.

<sup>26</sup> Harold Becker, "History in Photos," Clipping File, HSDC; *UNO Today*, "Flashback File," Feb. 1986, Clipping File, HSDC.

<sup>27</sup> *The Publishers' Auxiliary*, Oct. 7, 1916, Joslyn MSS; *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 9, 1916, Clipping File, HSDC.

<sup>28</sup> Estate of George A. Joslyn, Joslyn MSS; *Omaha World-Herald*, Feb. 3, 1917.

<sup>29</sup> "Sarah Hannah Selleck Joslyn," in *Mothers of Achievement in American History, 1776–1976*, American Mothers Committee, Inc. Bicentennial Project, 1974–1976 (Charles E. Tuttle Co., [1976]), 334–35.

<sup>30</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, July 17, 1915, Dec. 16, 1916; unidentified newspaper article, Joslyn MSS.

<sup>31</sup> *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1917; unidentified newspaper article, Joslyn MSS.

<sup>32</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Sept. 23, 1917; unidentified newspaper article, Joslyn MSS.

<sup>33</sup> Arvid E. Nelson, Jr., *The Ak-Sar-Ben Story* (Lincoln: Johnson Publishing Company, 1967), 92; *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 8, 1924; "ticket to musical," Clipping File, HSDC; *Omaha World-Herald*, "Magazine of the Midlands," May 4, 1975.

<sup>34</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, June 11, 1924, Oct. 24, 1924, Dec. 22, 1925, Apr. 28, 1926, Nov. 1, 1926.

<sup>35</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Dec. 27, 1928; *Boston Traveler*, Sept. 5, 1929.

<sup>36</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, July 2, 1929; *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 5, 1916; Alfred Sorenson, *The Story of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (Omaha: National Printing Company, 1923), 451.

<sup>37</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Sept. 19, 1973; Western Paper Company records, HSDC.

<sup>38</sup> *Omaha Bee*, Oct. 4, 1928, Dec. 3, 1931; Records of the Society of Liberal Arts, Joslyn MSS; Graham W. J. Beal, *Joslyn Art Museum: A Building History* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Dec. 12, 1934, Sept. 10, 1937; Sarah Joslyn Letter File, Joslyn MSS.

<sup>40</sup> Frisbie, "Joslyn Castle"; *Omaha World-Herald*, May 7, 1940; Peggy A. Volzke Kelley, *Women of Nebraska Hall of Fame* (Omaha: Nebraska International Women's Year Coalition, 1976), 23–4.

<sup>41</sup> Violet Joslyn Magowan to William McGonagle, Mar. 8, 1974; Interviews with Mrs. E. A. Undeland, Katherine Nielsen, Alan McDonald, John McDonald, Mrs. John Brain, Earle Sutphen, and Dick Stewart by Josephine Frisbie, 1944, Joslyn MSS.

<sup>42</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, "Magazine of the Midlands," Apr. 18, 1965; *Omaha World-Herald*, May 19, 1965.

<sup>43</sup> David Magowan to Dr. Paul H. Grumman, July 15, 1950, Joslyn MSS; *Omaha World-Herald*, April 15, 1938, Feb. 28, 1940.

<sup>44</sup> Violet Joslyn Magowan to William A. McGonagle, Jan. 25, 1973, Joslyn MSS.

<sup>45</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, June 10, 1933, Apr. 24, 1934; *Omaha Bee*, Apr. 22, 24, 25, 1934.

<sup>46</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Feb. 28, 1940.

<sup>47</sup> The will of Sarah Joslyn, November 14, 1936, Codicils added June 28, 1937 and May 27, 1939 (original draft), Joslyn MSS; Chairman, Society of Liberal Arts to Mrs. David Magowan, Mar. 30, 1940 (two letters). Joslyn MSS.

<sup>48</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Feb. 29, 1940.