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Names: John Nelson

Nebraska Place Names: Bartlett

Photographs / Images: young man crossing the finish line in a foot race



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THE FINISH LINE HAS BEEN SCRATCHED in the dirt. Stocking-footed racers compete in their Sunday best. Spectators eagerly anticipate who will deserve bragging rights. But it's John Nelson who deserves the praise, as he is the one who skillfully captures this rare scene taken in Bartlett in about 1915. What makes this photograph so special—besides its relaxed departure from the posed and serious faces of studio portraits or families lined up firing-squad-style on Grandma's front porch—is Nelson's amazing ability to have released the shutter at the exact moment the winner crossed the line.

Born in Sweden in 1864, Nelson immigrated to America with his parents as a seventeen-year-old and settled in Wheeler County in 1882. He began his prolific photography career around 1900, establishing a studio in Erickson and later moving it to his home in Cedar Valley.

Before the sedentary sport of television came into play, Sunday school picnics, ball games, and Fourth of July celebrations—including foot races, horse races, or catching the greased pig—promised a hearty laugh at the expense of your neighbor—or yourself—and a good excuse for friends and neighbors to get together. ☒

DEBRA BROWNSON