James E Lawrence, Dedicated Nebraskan

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Article Summary: Lawrence was a Nebraska journalist, professor, and public servant.

Cataloging Information:

Photographs/Images: James E Lawrence at his desk; breaking ground for the North Loup Irrigation Project, October 2, 1936; dedication of Bryan statue at State Capitol; serving as chairman of Missouri Basin Survey Commission, 1952; Opening Day at Historical Society's new building, September 27, 1953

(Photo, courtesy **The Lincoln Star**)

James E. Lawrence

Through Journalism, Service to His Fellow Men

JAMES E. LAWRENCE, DEDICATED NEBRASKAN

BY JAMES L. SELLERS

JAMES E. Lawrence served as President of the Nebraska State Historical Society from 1940 to 1955. During those fifteen years the Society progressed steadily. There was never any looking back or any wavering in direction. There were times of differences and delays. At such moments decisions were not announced, and the problems were left on the table to be faced at the next meeting. They were discussed and re-examined until a consensus of agreement had been reached.

His long service as President entailed presenting budgets to eight legislatures. While he did not cultivate intimacy with any legislators for political advantage, no Nebraskan has ever had more respectful and devoted friends among them. Despite successively and sharply increased budgets no legislature ever refused his full requests.

Dr. James L. Sellers is President of the Nebraska State Historical Society. A member of the University of Nebraska History Department, Dr. Sellers enjoyed a personal and professional association with Mr. Lawrence for many years.

If the writer could tell why this happened, the reader would have a full-length picture of James E. Lawrence.

He was born in Gage County sixty-eight years ago last Fourth of July. As a youth he knew the delights of the old swimming-hole, the pleasures of the sunburned paths and cooling shades, the competition of comrades, and the companionship of pets. These experiences of boyhood were burned deep into his nature. He could never resist the exploits of a dog, and he understood their ways. One summer evening while he and his devoted little cocker "Sissy" sat before me on the grass, Sissy, impatient at a long delay in her evening ramble, made one flying leap and snapped at the writer's nose. Her master's firm grip on the leash brought her to a halt within inches of her objective. The master's combination of reproof and affection dismayed the spirited Sissy so much that her embarrassment was most evident.

Some of his acquaintances have been greatly surprised to find that J. E. Lawrence for a time considered the ministry as his life work. He changed his objective when he found journalism an equally effective field in which to serve his fellow men. Starting in high school, he devoted his entire allotted life to this work. He often carried two or three jobs and always worked overtime. All manner of persons brought him their problems and he heard their stories. He always took time to do the extras, but he always stayed with his own work until the presses were running.

Even in his college days Jim Lawrence was never content to do only his assignment. He was busy with sports, student publications and even assisting the late Professor Fogg of the Journalism Department who placed considerable responsibility on him. During his student days he worked for the *Lincoln Star* and upon graduation in 1911 he became city editor. He became managing editor in 1914 and editor in 1922. In all, he devoted fifty-one years of his life to this one paper.

His long years of continuous service on the *Star* made him increasingly valuable to the paper and to the community. His talent and style of writing became distinguished, his skill in handling public and personal topics became remarkable, and his understanding of local and state history became profound. To knowledge he added wisdom and to courage he added personal consideration.

Every problem that affected this community, this state, this nation, or mankind at large commanded his attention and interest. He recognized that every social situation and crisis had its human agents. The news, he held, should accurately fix the responsibility of individuals, no matter who was involved. He always wanted the facts on every situation. Trained in the law, he liked to put every situation in its legal perspective and associate the appropriate responsible officials, but he wanted their story before anything was printed. This gave him a sound and dependable approach to many difficult situations. When he had the full facts upon any critical community problem he was not content merely to write about it. He was always ready to help do something about it.

This readiness to correct involved him in endless community and civic enterprises and campaigns. He was an active promoter of the Nebraska capitol construction with a special building levy. He promoted the Lincoln water bonds for the pipelines to the Platte Valley. This was a ten year campaign and it soon had to be repeated. He supported numerous Lincoln school bond issues. He was a member of the Lincoln Park Board for many years and was always promoting beautification and recreational projects.

In the construction of the Historical Society building he was unwilling to accept anything less than the maximum for the taxpayers' dollars. The building could have been built on the Society's "H" Street lots with much less delay and much less effort on the part of the Executive Board. Envisioning a development similar to Pennsylvania

Avenue in Washington, D. C., Mr. Lawrence saw in the Fifteenth and R Street location an opportunity to develop a civic center axis between the Capitol and the new Society home. In this he foresaw not only a new local pride for the city of Lincoln but an added distinction to the state and additional usefulness for the Society. To Mr. Lawrence could be applied Lee Lawrie's inscription for his profile bust of Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, "Patriae amoenitatem extollit" (he exalted the beautiful things of his country). This he applied not only to the appearance of the community but to the taste and moral standards that the capital city and its state should promote.

Mr. Lawrence was a builder in the most worthy sense of the term, a builder of youth through the guidance and opportunities that he provided for successive generations of students. He never gave up his teaching contact with the University. He had slight interest in elaborate programs. He was interested in the personal contacts with pupils, interested in their opportunities to build careers. He was never willing to dismiss a student that worked because of a single error of judgment or even low attainment. He would work with those who tried. Many brilliant journalists have cut their eyeteeth under his guidance, both in his classes and as beginning reporters on the *Star's* staff.

His interest in the University was centered in its position as a state institution and its service to the state as a whole. He held that the University should not expect to do things that the state could not support, but he well knew that if the funds were well administered the state would profit by all that was spent upon the University. He felt that the first criteria of a university was the quality and strength of its teaching staff in the basic subjects of knowledge. He felt that there was always the danger of the vocational and the professional colleges and departments overshadowing and possibly robbing the basic scientific and cultural developments on which alone the professions in the long run must feed. While at times not

uncritical of the University, he was always the University's staunchest supporter in its biennal requests for funds from the legislature. The faculty remember that he was their wisest counselor in their direct efforts to gain cost of living relief at the end of World War II.

His close association with the late regent Vincent C. Hascall gave the University a quiet and effective leadership in securing funds and planning the beautification of the University's downtown campus. He was probably the prime mover in arousing a belated interest in this project on the part of the University. The city of Lincoln and the state can be grateful for the results produced.

It was in the preservation and development of natural resources that J. E. Lawrence put his most profound and unremitting effort during the last twenty-five years of his life. The drought years, the depression, and the state's loss of population brought home to him the precarious tenure on prosperity of his beloved native state. Senator Norris was leading the way in his gallant struggle to develop the Tennessee basin watershed. In Nebraska the problems were different from the Tennessee basin, but many of the remedies were applicable. Norris' two decades of struggle with public problems and questions had netted knowledge and wisdom unequaled in the nation. Lawrence, a long time supporter, recognized the Senator's profound knowledge and judgment and joined his cause. He saw in the multiple purpose development program the nearest solution to Nebraska's economic and social ills that could be found. Water held the answer, and water meant irrigation, power, navigation, flood control, sanitation, conservation, and recreation.

As a close associate of Senator Norris and one of the three members of the Nebraska Public Works Advisory Administration, "Mr. Lawrence was a key figure in what came to be called Nebraska's little TVA, on which $70,000,000 of federal funds were spent creating the water storage, irrigation and public power development now

known as Tri-county on the Upper Platte River." (*The Lincoln Star*, September 17, 1957).

He helped promote the other great irrigation projects within the state and played a most important role in securing the enabling legislation for thirty-five of Nebraska's rural electrification districts. He also served on the advisory board of the Farm Security Administration. In all his work Mr. Lawrence surveyed almost every nook and cranny of the state, mastered its geography and resources, and met with numerous leaders and interested groups. It was an exhausting and often thankless effort, but he never lost the gleam of his objective. It is doubtful if any other Nebraskan put so much energy and effort into these developments, and he was proud to his dying day of his achievements. He knew the Nebraska land, and he became acquainted with many of her best and most public-spirited citizens. He knew the generosity and the devotion of the state's citizens, and he genuinely respected and reciprocated the fine support that he received.

When the recent drought years parched much of the state's agriculture, he dreamed anew of expanding the state's water resources. He studied the irrigation maps again to see where the state could double its existing irrigated acres. He felt that wells would have to supply the major expansion.

He knew full well that piece-meal projects could never attain the most successful utilization of nature's great water and land resources. Despite his physical condition he undertook the great responsibility of heading President Truman's Missouri Basin Survey Commission in 1952. He held hearings in seventeen different locations across the full extent of the Basin, and he and his associates summarized their findings in a report of 295 double column pages. Unfortunately, the facts and findings of this wise and knowledgeable commission have so far gone unacknowledged and unnoticed by the policy makers of today.

Above—Breaking Ground for the North Loup Irrigation Project, October 2, 1936. Left to right in foreground, James E. Lawrence, Senator George W. Norris, and Former Congressman Edgar Howard.

Scenes from a Busy Life

Below—Tribute to the Great Commoner—Dedication of Bryan Statue at State Capitol, September 1, 1947. On platform left to right, James E. Lawrence, Rev. Douglas Clyde, Britt Pryor, Woodrow Bryan Shurtleff, and Governor Val Peterson.

(Photo, courtesy **The Lincoln Star**)

Above—Chairman of Missouri Basin Survey Commission, 1952. Left to right, James E. Lawrence, President Harry S. Truman, and Senator Thomas C. Hennings, Jr.

Conservationist and Civic Leader.

Below—Realization of a Dream—Opening Day at Historical Society's New Building, September 27, 1953. Signing guest book—Governor Robert B. Crosby. Left to right, Clark Jeary, John K. Selleck, Senator Carl T. Curtis, C. Y. Thompson, James E. Lawrence, James C. Olson, Daniel Garber, and Nathan J. Gold.

(Photo, courtesy **The Lincoln Star**)

When Mr. Lawrence reached his majority, William Jennings Bryan was the great power in Democratic politics. He admired the great Commoner and remained registered in the Democratic Party throughout his life. He was always an independent Democrat and even went so far as to file petitions for the independent candidacy of Senator Norris in 1936 and 1942 and served as his campaign manager in both campaigns.

His interest in politics was not in parties per se or in personal favorites, but always in the securing of the most competent officials who would bear in mind their service and responsibility to the people. He shared Senator Norris' conviction that the unicameral was a great improvement over the old bicameral legislature and, most important of all, he believed that the nonpartisan feature expedited the public service in a state legislative body.

As a journalist and an inspirer of youth he loved to portray great leadership at its best. Perhaps his finest writing is "W. J. Bryan Comes Home," delivered at the dedication of the Bryan statue, September 1, 1947. A clipped passage may give a fleeting highlight.

> Knightliness itself is rare in American politics and rarer still is that articulate voice standing before thousands in an hour of great solemnity to voice grateful appreciation for those near and dear to him.

And again:

> There he stood that July morning, framed in the doorway, bright sunlight streaming in upon him, casting its benedication upon his features, his eyes warm, bright and kindly, the flowing cape around his shoulders. Millions before had experienced it [;] there came that morning the irresistible, muttered unconscious thought: "What a noble warrior stands there in all the strength and the purity of his faith."

It was not in the struggles of politics and government that Mr. Lawrence found his greatest satisfaction. It was on his vision for the future of his own native state that he loved to dwell. The improved opportunities for its people filled and held his fancy. On the occasion of the dedication of the Kingsley Dam he described this vision:

> In their thoughtlessness, nations and people wrote the death sentence to their own cultures and civilization, to their own proud cities, to their own flourishing works, through their indifference to the conservation of those gifts that God placed in their hands . . .
>
> We would like to think it will be different here. We would like to believe that where there is the industry and will to establish the finest democracy man has produced, there is also the foresight to perpetuate it with material tools through which the standards of living for men, women, and children can be fashioned. . . .
>
> This is what Kingsley Dam means.
>
> The tools are Nebraska's basic and sole resources. They are the soil, the water and the sun . . . .
>
> We could hope for nothing more, ask for nothing more, seek for nothing more than that there shall come to the people of Nebraska a full appreciation of a new state, now dimly taking form, of stronger, more stable, and more beautiful homes and businesses.

He then dedicated Kingsley Dam, "to the reverent memories of those who first dreamed of it . . . to their sons and daughters . . . to a new Nebraska, strong in purpose, clear-eyed in vision, resolute in the decent aim to create here a continuing culture and civilization under which people may live forever and forever in peace, plenty and happiness." (Ms, Nebraska State Historical Society).

On another occasion he expressed most happily this vision of the new development of Nebraska after its baptism with newly conserved water. He wrote in 1949:

> In fifteen years Nebraska has been reborn.
>
> Its soil has a new vitality, its fields a new abundance, its people a new perspective.
>
> Its farm homes . . . are bright in new coats of paint, well-kept lawns, flowers and shrubs; and at night in the gathering darkness the lights come on. In the yuletime season thousands of living Christmas trees shed their radiance and the spirit of good will. The sleek herds graze on the range not far from the shining waters of the lake. The waters sing a merry tune as they move through hundreds of miles of canals and laterals to thirsty acres. A state has found new freedom in the planning and labor of its people, through a responsive state government inspired by the grandeur of its own vision. (J. E. Lawrence, "Nebraska," in *Our Sovereign State*, ed. Robert S. Allen [New York, 1949], pp. 310-311).

Nebraskans cannot do better than to remember James E. Lawrence by the closing paragraphs of his chapter in this book:

> High in the mountains the eagle builds his nest. Above him are the ice fields, the accumulation of snow and sleet, freezing and thawing. In the summer the glistening rivulets of snow water dance down the mountainside, rushing to the sea, sometimes boisterously and destructively.
>
> They have been put to work in Nebraska.
>
> Far to the east on the rolling plains they gather in concert to give voice to the anthem of human aspirations.
>
> In the white moonlight of a summer's night old hills reflect the mysteries of the ages. They look down upon the embers of the campfires of hunters, trappers, and gold seekers. The rumble of covered caravans long has been stilled, and after eighty-two years of Statehood the people of Nebraska have found the "gold" others scorned. Year after year they have mined it in courage and decent purpose, in humility and industry.
>
> It remained for one of their own, George W. Norris, to school them in guarding the soil against the ravages of erosion and impoverishment, and to control the waters of their rivers against flood and drought. He led them into the electrical age, lighting their homes, their farms, and their industries.
>
> They have been so eager to learn.
>
> Before their eyes appear new vistas of a more stable economy, a better rural life, more prosperous, attractive, neighborly towns and cities.
>
> There in the moonlight the soft breezes blow. Over the stretches from the Missouri to the high hills of the Nebraska panhandle they say that the best is still ahead.
>
> Norris sleeps in his beloved valley. Eighty miles away on the Frenchman another great dam is taking shape, and up and down the valley engineers are constructing other works. Norris's people have seen the glory of a reborn land.
>
> There is much to be done. Yet in all it has done, and in all that it has failed to do, Nebraska is beautiful.

This vision he would enshrine deep in the lives and history of its people. In these poetic lines shine forth the character, purpose, and career of Jimmie Lawrence, clear and sparkling as the evening star on a moonless night across the Nebraska prairie.