



The Role of Joseph E Johnson and His Pioneer Newspapers in the Development of Territorial Nebraska

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Article Summary: Newspapers played a large part in the settlement and development of Nebraska. Newspapers gave cohesiveness to the early settlements and guided, to a large extent, the political, economic, and social thinking of the pioneer communities. The pioneer press usually bore the unmistakable stamp of a single individual. One such colorful and individualistic person was Joseph Ellis Johnson, the editor and publisher of the *Omaha Arrow* and later *The Huntsman's Echo*.

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Photographs / Images: Portrait, Joseph E Johnson; Drawing: offices of *The Western Bugle*; Article from *The Omaha Arrow* promoting Nebraska; Motto / Masthead of *The Huntsman's Echo*

THE ROLE OF JOSEPH E. JOHNSON AND HIS PIONEER NEWSPAPERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TERRITORIAL NEBRASKA

BY BENJAMIN PFEIFFER

EVER since the days of Lewis and Clark, Nebraska had been part of the vast pathway to the West. Settlers headed for the Pacific Northwest soon discovered that the broad, flat valley of the Platte provided a natural highway to that region, and during the late forties a steady stream of wagons traversed Nebraska. In 1847 the Mormons, driven from their settlement at Nauvoo, Illinois, struck a new westward trail across Nebraska along the north side of the Platte. Of the various overland routes to California, the Platte Valley—South Pass trail soon became the most popular, and in 1849 alone some 40,000 settlers passed over the "California Trail" on their westward trek.¹

¹ James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1955), p. 64.

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In spite of the fact that thousands of settlers had passed through Nebraska, permanent settlements in Nebraska in 1850 were limited to Bellevue and to old Fort Kearny on the present site of Nebraska City. When it became evident during the early months of 1854 that the Kansas-Nebraska Bill would be passed by Congress, groups of settlers immediately laid out town sites on the Nebraska side of the Missouri in anticipation of the race for the territorial capital. By 1855 six centers worthy of the name "town" existed in Nebraska: Brownsville (*sic*), in Nemaha County; Nebraska City, in Otoe County; Plattsmouth, in Cass County; and Bellevue, Omaha, and Florence, in Douglas County.²

Newspapers played no small part in the settlement and development of Nebraska. It was the newspaper that gave cohesiveness to the early settlements and guided, to a large extent, the political, economic, and social thinking of the pioneer communities. The pioneer newspapers of Missouri and Iowa took the lead in extolling the virtues of the new territory, and it was largely through their glowing accounts of the opportunities in this area that settlers from many eastern states were first attracted to Nebraska. The effectiveness of this propaganda campaign of the pioneer newspaper can be seen from the census taken in November, 1854, which showed that by that time Nebraska already had a total of 2,732 inhabitants.³

The influence of the pioneer newspaper was dependent, to a large extent, on the character and ability of its publisher. Since the owner of the paper frequently served also as editor and publisher, the pioneer press usually bore the unmistakable stamp of a single individual. Of all the early Nebraska journalists none was more colorful and individualistic than Joseph Ellis Johnson, editor and publisher of the *Omaha Arrow* and later *The Huntsman's Echo* of Wood River Center. Although Johnson was active on

² George L. Miller, "Newspapers and Newspapermen of the Territorial Period," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, Second Series, V, 32.

³ Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

the Nebraska journalistic scene for only three years, he left the imprint of his character and personality on the pioneer communities of territorial Nebraska and must be ranked with Robert W. Furnas and J. Sterling Morton as one of Nebraska's outstanding territorial journalists.

Joseph E. Johnson was born April 28, 1817 at Pomfret, Chautauqua County, New York, the son of Ezekial Johnson and Julia Hills.⁴ He spent the early years of his life on his father's farm, but because of his frail physical nature he soon sought work with a local merchant. When he was sixteen years old, he moved to Kirtland, Ohio, with his parents, who had become members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints. Since the followers of Joseph Smith were unwelcome in most communities, the Johnson family seldom remained in one place for any length of time. While Johnson was living at the Mormon settlement at Nauvoo, Illinois, he was married to Harriet Snyder. Joseph Smith himself performed the ceremony.⁵

In 1848 Johnson moved with his family to "Miller's Hollow," later known as Kanesville, and built the first house in what today is Pottawattamie County, Iowa. He served as postmaster of Kanesville for five years and was instrumental in having the name of the town changed to Council Bluffs.⁶

In 1852 Johnson bought *The Western Bugle* at Council Bluffs, which he continued to publish until 1856. In addition to publishing the *Bugle*, and later on the *Omaha Arrow*, he practiced law, ran a blacksmith shop, was an insurance agent, and carried on a general merchandising business.⁷ An advertisement in the *Arrow* shows that in addition to running these business establishments, Johnson also served

⁴ J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1907), II, 336.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ A. G. Warner, "Sketches from Territorial History," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, II, 57.

as notary public, having an office in a back room of the post office building in Council Bluffs.⁸

Johnson was a pioneer at heart and welcomed every opportunity to explore a new region. In 1850 he had accompanied a wagon train to Utah and returned from that trip with the firm intention of moving to that territory, but this desire was not fulfilled until he left Wood River in 1861. Soon after the opening of Nebraska Territory, Johnson established the first store on the present site of Omaha, and from there he sent the first trainload of goods to Denver, Colorado.⁹ After leaving Council Bluffs in 1856, Johnson helped found the town of Crescent City, Iowa, and for a short time published *The Oracle* in that community. The following year he returned to Council Bluffs again and for a year published the *Council Bluffs Press*.

In 1859 Johnson moved his family to the Wood River area in south central Nebraska and established the first home at the place where the present town of Shelton stands. Johnson's Rancho, as the place was called, became an important stop-over point for the Mormons on their way to Utah. In connection with the supply store which Johnson operated at Wood River Center, he had a blacksmith and general repair shop. The large number of wagon trains passing through that point soon made the wagon repair shop a more profitable venture than the store.¹⁰ Johnson himself estimated that during his two years' residence at Wood River Center at least 15,000 emigrants passed his log cabin store on their way to California and nearly as many on their way to Utah.¹¹

As in Council Bluffs and Omaha, so also in Wood River Center Johnson conducted a number of unrelated business enterprises. In addition to running a general store and blacksmith shop, he raised large quantities of vege-

⁸ *Omaha Arrow*, August 4, 1854.

⁹ Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

¹⁰ Samuel C. Bassett, *History of Buffalo County* (Chicago, 1915), p. 23.

¹¹ *The Huntsman's Echo*, July 4, 1861.

tables which he sold to the wagon trains passing through. He also operated a mill and furnished accommodations for man and beast. In spite of his many business activities, Johnson still found time for one of his favorite hobbies. Johnson was very fond of flowers and small fruits, and he had one of the finest flower gardens ever planted west of the Mississippi.¹² Buffalo frequently broke down the fenced enclosure in which Johnson cultivated his flowers and garden stuff, but he was reluctant to kill them.¹³ He planted many trees around his log cabin store which remained landmarks for many years.¹⁴

Soon after his arrival in the Wood River area, Johnson began publishing *The Huntsman's Echo*. Throughout its existence the *Echo* was not a financial success, perhaps because the news articles frequently contained references to stupid merchants who failed to see the value of advertising and to dishonest persons who failed to live up to their advertising contracts. In October, 1860, he wrote: "If they 'can't afford' to support a paper devoted to their home interests, we can't afford to find both brains and money to carry it on. We don't want something for nothing—but we do want those who are benefited by our publication to come up like white men and help out."¹⁵

Johnson was a man of vision and foresight. From the beginning he saw that the north side of the Platte River was the logical route for the proposed Union Pacific Railroad.¹⁶ He anticipated that in the future when the railroad was built, a city would be established at the point where he had located his store. There is every reason to believe that had he remained at Wood River Center during the building of the railroad, the influence exerted by an ably edited newspaper would have been strong enough to locate

¹² A. T. Andreas, ed., *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), p. 414.

¹³ Samuel C. Bassett, "A Broken Axle," *Collection of Nebraska Pioneer Reminiscences* (Issued by the Nebraska Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1916), p. 27.

¹⁴ Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 414.

¹⁵ *Echo*, October 26, 1860.

¹⁶ Bassett, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

the division point of the Union Pacific at Wood River Center, instead of at Grand Island where it now is.¹⁷

Although Johnson recognized the commercial potential of Wood River Center, he, nevertheless, left it during the summer of 1861 and moved to Utah, first locating in Salt Lake City for a few months until he could find a suitable spot for settlement. Several factors combined to cause his departure from Wood River. Johnson had two wives and numerous children on his arrival at Wood River Center in 1859, and the following year another woman came from Iowa to join his establishment. The increasing prejudice against the Mormons and especially against polygamy hastened Johnson's departure for Utah, whose residents were more sympathetic to the beliefs and practices of the Mormons.¹⁸ The principal reason, however, for Johnson's departure from Wood River Center was his stand on the issue of slavery. The final editorial of *The Huntsman's Echo* reveals a tinge of bitterness as Johnson bids farewell to his pleasant home in Wood River Center:

Friends and patrons—adieu. We have seceded, and tomorrow shall start westward and probably become a citizen of Utah, and perhaps—soon our Echo may be Re-Echoed from the tops of the mountains. . . . We go from turmoil, strife and bloodshed to seek quiet in the happy, peaceful vales of Utah.

This Republican reign of terror, blood, tyranny and oppression is too much for our Democratic style of free thought, free speech and freedom, where men who may chance to differ in opinion with wild, blood-thirsty fanatics, are threatened and sometimes despoiled and murdered. . . .¹⁹

Johnson could not conscientiously espouse the cause of either the North or the South, and so he felt that Utah, far removed from the fraternal struggle, had more to offer than strife-torn Nebraska. He hoped "in some quiet mountain dell to make a little Eden-like world of sunshine, flowers, smiles and happiness, where peace and plenty

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Echo*, July 4, 1861.

abound, and the clamor of strife and bloodshed may not be heard."²⁰

After living in Salt Lake City for a few months, Johnson secured a large tract of land about seventy-five miles south of Salt Lake, where he established a home which he named Spring Lake Villa.²¹ Here he published for a while a paper called the *Farmer's Oracle*. The cold winter climate, however, caused him to move to St. George in the southern part of Utah, in 1868, where he published *Our Dixie Times*, and later the *Rio Virgen Times* and the *Utah Pomologist and Gardener*.²² After rebuilding his store in St. George, which had been destroyed by fire, he sold out and moved to Arizona "to open up a place of refuge for the Saints of God."²³ He died in Temple, Arizona, December 17, 1882.

Although Joseph E. Johnson was on the Nebraska scene for only a little more than three years, his newspaper activity left a deep imprint, not only on Nebraska journalism, but also on the political and social development of territorial Nebraska. Both the *Arrow* and *The Huntsman's Echo* were on the scene when the political and social thought of Nebraska Territory was in the formative stage, and the editorials which dropped from Johnson's pen influenced in no small way the early development of Nebraska. The *Arrow* and *The Huntsman's Echo*, though relatively short-lived, can claim some of the honor which Harrison Johnson, an early historian of Nebraska, bestows on the newspapers of the state:

We are glad to believe that every paper in Nebraska has a place in its history, and that no other agency—not even the great corporations with all their wealth and farseeing enterprise, not even the governing men and statesmen who have labored to give Nebraska position, influence, and fame—has wielded a greater influence for the prosperity and

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ J. Cecil Alter, *Early Utah Journalism* (Salt Lake City, 1938), p. 230.

importance of the State, than the cloud of news print which every week settles down among its busy population.²⁴

The *Arrow* was one of the institutions which brought Nebraska nation-wide attention before the Civil War. The flamboyant nature of its editorials, its obvious appeal to people of culture and refinement, and its relentless crusade for democracy all combined to give the *Arrow* an audience far beyond the confines of territorial Nebraska. The numerous testimonials about the *Arrow* from papers all over the eastern United States attest to the widespread circulation of this frontier newspaper.

Considerable speculation has existed about the authorship of the striking editorials and articles of the *Arrow*. The masthead simply lists J. E. Johnson and J. W. Pattison as editor and publisher. Earlier historians generally credited Pattison, later associated with W. W. Wyman in publishing the *Omaha Times*, with authorship of the editorials and articles.²⁵ A comparison of the articles and editorials of the *Arrow* with those of *The Huntsman's Echo*, however, makes it quite clear that the same person was the author of both. A letter from Johnson himself to the editor of the *Omaha Herald*, dated May 12, 1872, reveals that Pattison played a relatively minor role on the *Arrow*.²⁶

From the very beginning the *Arrow* set for itself a wide sphere of influence. In the line under the masthead of the paper the reader was informed that the *Arrow* was to be "a family newspaper, devoted to the arts, sciences, general literature, agriculture, and politics." Johnson made it clear from the start that he was interested not only in the political developments in Nebraska Territory, but in the cultural, economic, and educational aspects as well. During the five months of its publication the *Arrow* faithfully attempted to cultivate all these areas.

²⁴ Harrison Johnson, *Johnson's History of Nebraska* (Omaha, 1880), p. 176.

²⁵ Alfred Sorenson, *History of Omaha* (Omaha, 1889), p. 61.

²⁶ Frank Burkley, *The Faded Frontier* (Omaha, 1935), p. 316.

The Kansas-Nebraska Bill was one of the hot political issues of 1854. Many thoughtful people saw in this bill the opening wedge for the unrestricted extension of slavery into all the western territories. Johnson had no such fears about this measure and defended it with all his eloquence. He was convinced that those who were most fearful about the consequences of this bill had never read the provisions of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and so he devoted the front page of the first two issues of the *Arrow* to a complete text of the bill as it had been passed by both houses of Congress. He attacked the proponents of a repeal measure, showing that their opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act was not because it raised the possibility of the extension of slavery into western territories, but because it gave a greater degree of self-government to Nebraska than any other territory had enjoyed.²⁷

One of the prime needs of Nebraska Territory in 1854 was a large influx of permanent settlers who would lay the foundations for the future development of this territory. The *Arrow* used its fullest powers of persuasion to make Nebraska attractive to people in the eastern part of the United States who were contemplating moving westward. The lead editorial in the first issue paints the beauty of the Nebraska landscape with lyric rapture:

An elevated tableland surrounds us; the majestic Missouri just off on our left goes sweeping its muddy course adown toward the Mexican Gulf whilst the background of the pleasing picture is filled up with Iowa's loveliest, richest scenery. Away upon our left spreading far away in the distance lies one of the loveliest sections of Nebraska. Yon rich, rolling widespread and beautiful prairie dotted with timber looks lovely enough just now as heaven's free sunlight touches off in beauty the lights and shades to be literally entitled the Eden land of the world, and inspire us with flights of fancy upon this antiquated heaven. . . .²⁸

Johnson was impressed not only by the physical beauty of the new territory; he envisioned the natural route through Nebraska for the Union Pacific and even had dreams of the future capital of the United States rising

²⁷ *Omaha Arrow*, September 8, 1854.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, July 28, 1854.

up from the Nebraska plains.²⁹ Ironically it was the development of the means of transportation and communication, which Johnson advocated so strongly, that made the relocation of the federal capital unnecessary. .

Another political issue which the *Arrow* espoused with enthusiasm was the protection of settlers against attacks by the Indians of the Plains. The massacre at Fort Laramie in the fall of 1854 and the inclination of the "Shian" to be troublesome gave Johnson ammunition for his propaganda campaign to get more federal troops into Nebraska Territory. He suggested that unless more soldiers were dispatched to this territory, the pioneers themselves would "have to shoulder their trusty rifles and in true frontier style take to the bush for a 'free fight'."

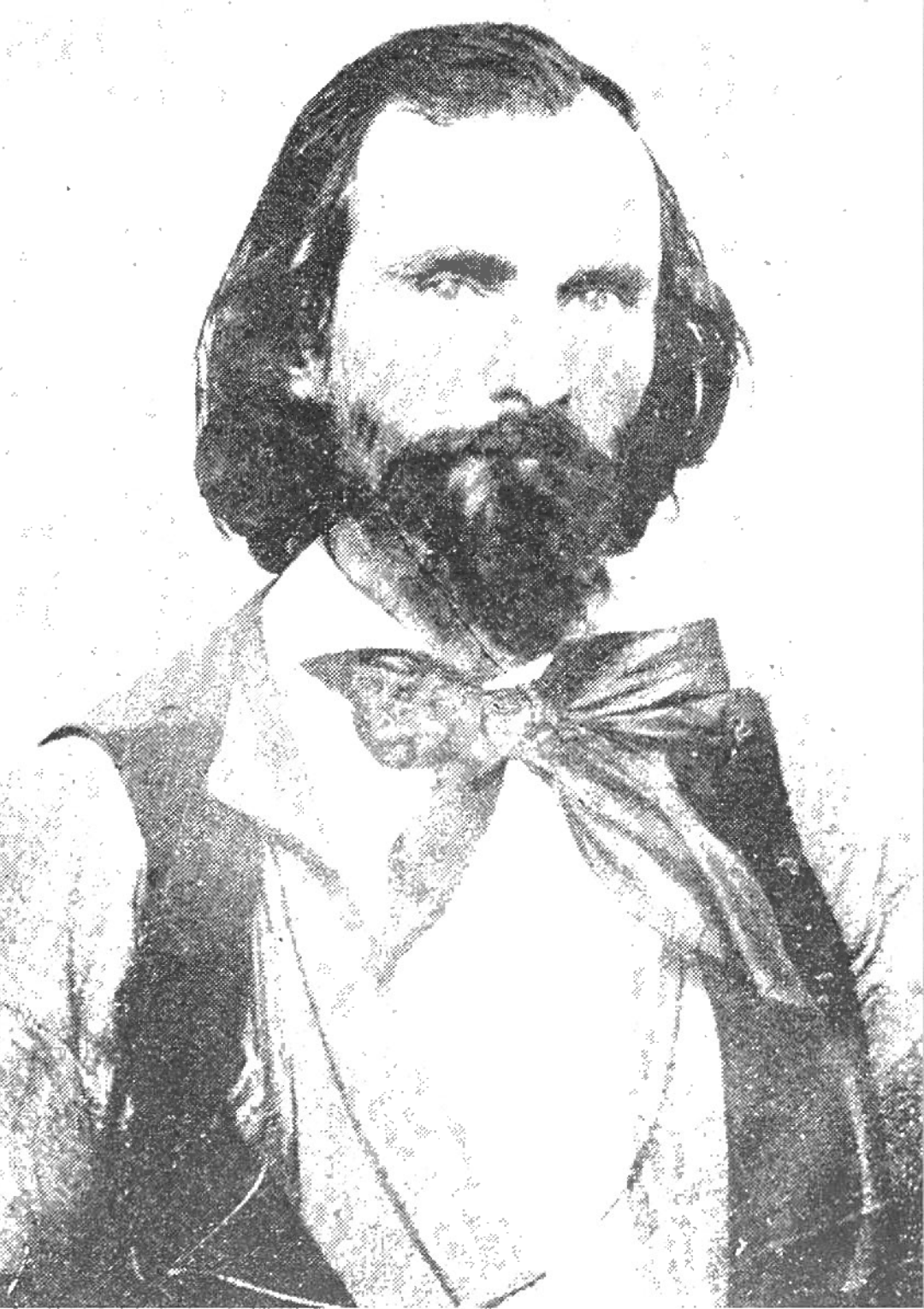
Johnson, however, was also greatly interested in peaceful means of settling disputes with the Indians. He followed with interest the negotiations which the federal government was carrying on with the leaders of the Plains Indians and later published the full text of the treaty concluded between George Manypenny, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, and the chiefs of the tribes of the Oto and Missouri Indians and also with the chiefs of the Omaha.³⁰

One of the burning issues in Nebraska during the summer of 1854 was the location of the new territorial capital. The two logical contenders for this honor were Omaha and Bellevue, and the *Nebraska Palladium* at Bellevue made a vigorous campaign to have the capital located there. Johnson countered the campaign of the *Palladium* by pointing out Omaha's location on a delightful plateau, its excellent ferry landing, its central location on the eastern boundary of the territory, and its strategic location on the most direct route from Chicago to the north bend of the Platte.³¹ The decision to locate the territorial capital at Omaha gave that city an impetus which contributed to its becoming the largest city in Nebraska.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, September 8, 1854.

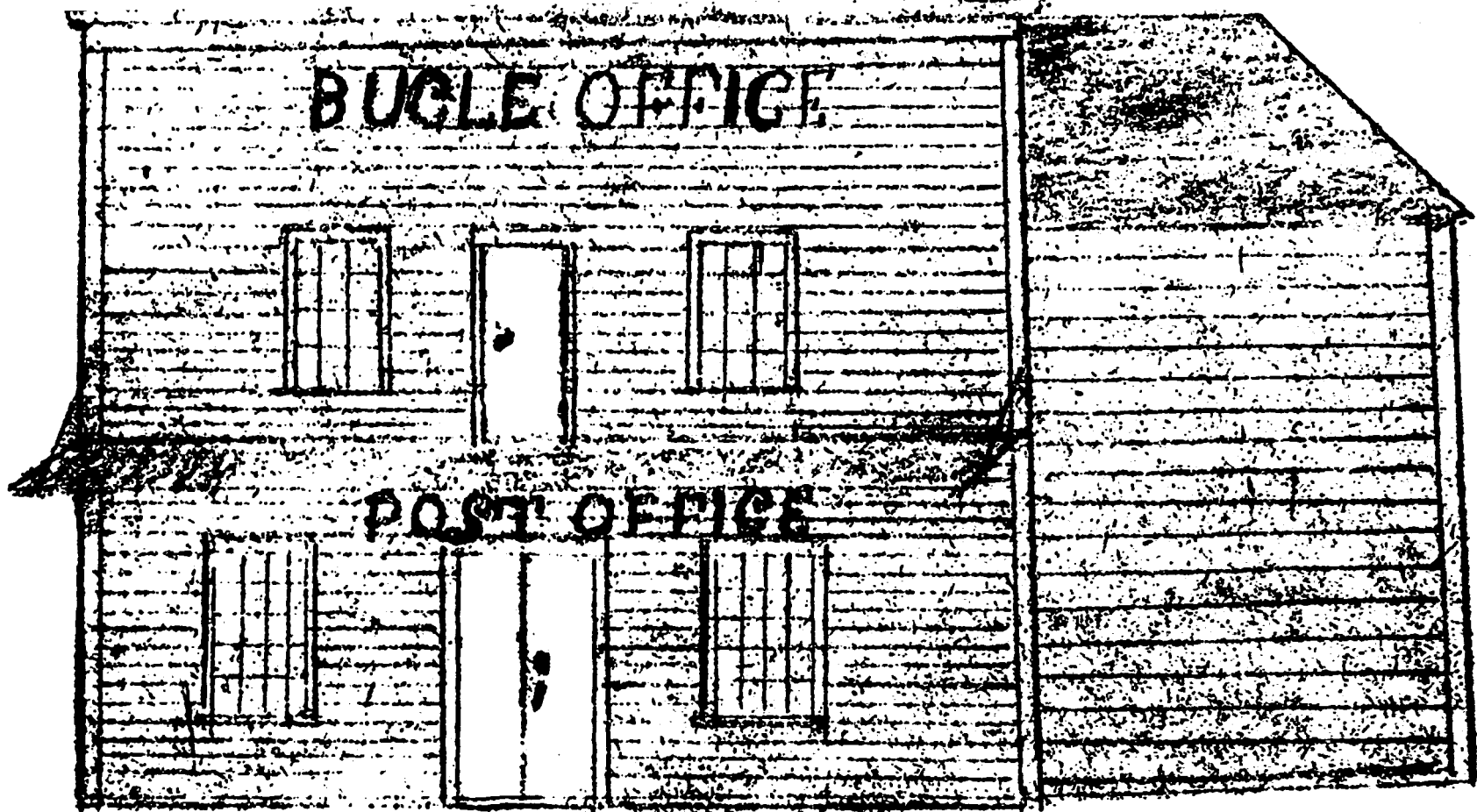
³⁰ *Ibid.*, September 1, 1854.

³¹ *Ibid.*, August 4, 1854.



Joseph E. Johnson

An outstanding pioneer journalist, he left the imprint of his character and personality on the communities of territorial Nebraska.



Offices of The Western Bugle were in the second story of the Council Bluffs post office.

THE OMAHA ARROW.

THE PEOPLE—SOVEREIGNS OF THE SOIL.

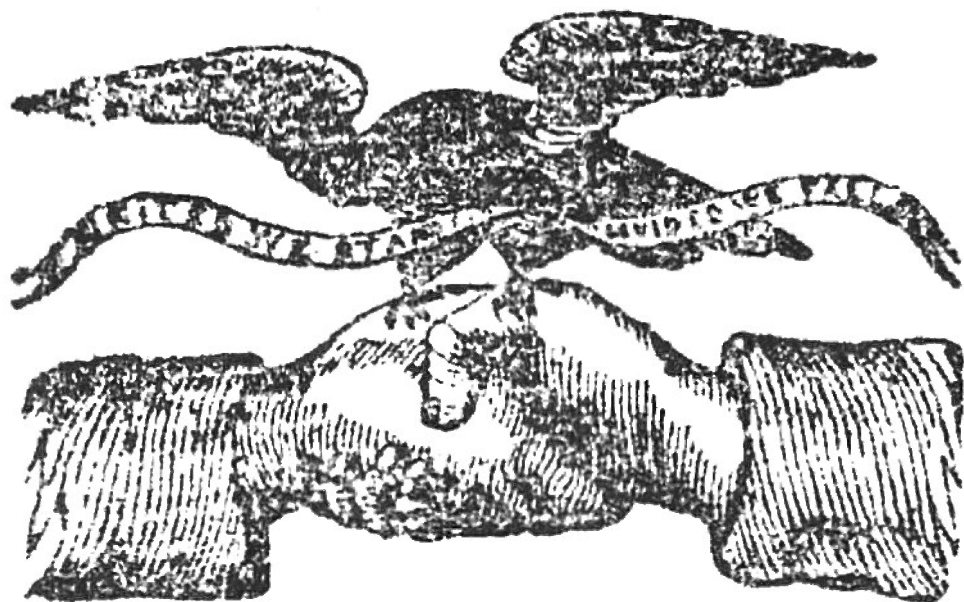
J. E. JOHNSON, } EDITORS &
JNO. W. PATTISON, } PROPRIETORS.

OMAHA CITY, NEBRASKA TER.

Friday, July 28, 1854.

Well, strangers, friends, patrons, and the good people generally, wherever in the wide world your lot may be cast, and in whatever clime this Arrow may reach you, here we are upon Nebraska soil, seated upon the stump of an ancient oak, which serves for an editorial chair, and the top of our badly abused beaver for a table, we purpose editing a leader for the OMAHA ARROW. An elevated tableland surrounds us; the majestic Missouri just off on our left goes sweeping its muddy course adown toward the Mexican Gulf, whilst the background of the pleasing picture is filled up with Iowa's loveliest, richest scenery. Away upon our left spreading far away in the distance lies one of the loveliest sections of Nebraska. Yon rich, rolling, wide spread and beautiful prairie dotted with timber looks lovely enough just now as heaven's free sunlight touches off in beauty the lights and shades to be literally entitled the Eden land of the world, and inspire us with flights of fancy upon this antiquated beaver, but it won't pay. There sticks our axe in the trunk of an old oak whose branches have for years been fanned by the breezes that constantly sweeps from over the oft-times flower dotted prairie land, and from which we purpose making a log for our cabin, and claim.

Joseph E. Johnson, like other pioneer editors, was dedicated to the task of promoting Nebraska. His editorials bear the inimitable stamp of his vigorous personality.



THE HUNTSMAN'S ECHO.

**PUBLISHED AT
WOOD RIVER CENTER, N. T.**

EVERY THURSDAY MORNING.

Terms Per Year, :: :: :: :: :: :: :: :: \$2 00

**Independent in Everything--
Neutral in Nothing.**

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1880.

The motto of *The Huntsman's Echo* reflected the individualism of its editor, Joseph E. Johnson.

When Nebraska was organized as a territory in 1854, much of the region was still unknown to the white man. Johnson made it a point to become personally acquainted with eastern Nebraska. Early in October, 1854, he took a 300 mile trip through this section, viewing the advantages and the disadvantages of the land. His enthusiasm was not lessened by what he saw. He was more convinced than ever that "a flattering and prosperous future awaited this delightful section of Nebraska."³² Later trips took him to the Elkhorn Valley, the Platte Valley country, and the region around Nebraska City, south of the Platte. After each trip Johnson shared his discoveries with the readers of the *Arrow*.

Johnson, however, was not interested in only the political and economic aspects of the new territory. He was equally concerned about the moral and cultural side of life in the Nebraska communities. Throughout its short career the *Arrow* was an ardent champion of honesty, fair play, and moral decency, and led a vigorous campaign against deceit and corruption. One of the most flagrant cases of political thievery was that of Captain Throckmorton, skipper of the river boat *Genoa*, who had charged the United States government nearly double the ordinary price for transporting Indian goods from St. Louis to the Indian Agency below Omaha. Johnson publicly reprimanded Throckmorton in the pages of the *Arrow* and made it clear that all similar nefarious schemes would receive the same unwelcome publicity. He advised his readers that it would afford him pleasure to be informed of similar acts so that the *Arrow* could treat the case as it might deserve and "send an Arrow that will stick in the bodies of the aggressors."³³

A double standard of morality was abhorrent to Johnson, whether in public life or in private. Commenting editorially on an article on "Hypocrisy" from the *Williamsburg Times*, Johnson stated: "The same hypocrisy we have

³² *Ibid.*, October 13, 1854.

³³ *Ibid.*, September 1, 1854.

seen severely prayerful of a Sunday, and on Monday it bartered a pair of gaiters with a courtesan. . . . It is prevalent in some cheap groceries, in the shape of short weights; it is exhibited in wet goods—predominates in coffee; it is powerful in milk, and—it's everywhere."³⁴

Intemperance was another social and moral evil against which the *Arrow* directed its barb. The shameful attack on President Pierce on the streets of Washington by three intoxicated men was held up as an example showing how intemperance had gotten out of control. "And yet," stated the *Arrow*, "we 'take away the people's liberty' if we attempt to prohibit the extension of this debasing and almost universal evil."³⁵ That Johnson was opposed not so much to the use as the misuse of alcohol is shown by the fact that liquor was one of the commodities handled by his store in Wood River Center.

The *Arrow* stood for courtesy and decency also in politics. Feelings ran high during the eighteen fifties, and frequently violent demonstrations resulted when a speaker expressed views not in agreement with those of the audience. One such flagrant breach of common courtesy occurred in Chicago when Senator Douglas addressed a crowd of some 8,000 people. He was constantly harassed by groans, hisses, and yells. To Johnson, this demonstration was evidence of the "maniacal insanity" of the Whigs and Abolitionists who stopped at nothing to silence the champion of Popular Sovereignty.³⁶

Although Johnson was interested in the development of all phases of frontier life, he was particularly concerned with the cultural aspect of territorial life. Johnson himself was a well-read man, and he made a concerted effort to stimulate the intellectual life of the community through the pages of the *Arrow*. Johnson regarded good conversation as being frequently more useful than books for the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, August 4, 1854.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, September 1, 1854.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, September 15, 1854.

purpose of knowledge, and he himself enjoyed regular visits with friends and acquaintances in Iowa and Nebraska.

The *Arrow* itself was no ordinary dispenser of news. There was a quality of literary style which set the *Arrow* apart from most frontier newspapers. Although the style tended to be oratorical at times, Johnson's editorials and articles were vivid and striking. In an editorial entitled "Our Sanctum Again" Johnson waxes almost poetic: "... We have been out scrambling through the bushes to gather some delicious and juicy plums that grow in wild profusion around us. The reverberating echoes of the axe of the distant squatter mingled with the noontide anthem of the wild wood warbler falls upon our ear as the sound of merry music. . . ." ³⁷

Johnson's interest in literary matters manifested itself also in the appearance of poems and short pieces of fiction in the pages of the *Arrow*. The September 1, 1854 issue carried a complete story entitled "My First Lesson in Spanish" or "A Declaration of Love in Mexico." Judged by literary standards, this story is rather melodramatic, but the readers of the *Arrow* had simple literary tastes. The poetry, too, had a distinctly western flavor, but occasionally a poem of greater literary merit appeared in the *Arrow*. The issue of November 3, 1854, carried the complete text of Tennyson's "The May Queen."

With the publication of the last issue of the *Arrow* in December, 1854, Johnson disappeared from the journalistic scene of Nebraska Territory, but not for long. On June 14, 1860, Johnson began publishing his second Nebraska paper, *The Huntsman's Echo* of Wood River Center in Buffalo County. The prospectus of the *Echo* which appeared in the first issue showed that Johnson had lost none of his rugged individualism. It stated:

The *Echo* will be strictly independent upon all subjects, and will pander to the notions of none (except our own) but labor for the interests of all, by showing to the farmer and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, September 8, 1854.

landless in other regions, the rare inducement and advantages offered in the fertile Valley of this great American Nile, and so far as in us lies, enlighten, encourage, and assist in the advancement of agriculture, arts, science and stock growing, and in the development of our widespread resources, for the accumulation of the comforts and necessities of life. . . .³⁸

The *Echo* intended to cut an even wider swath than the *Arrow*, as its motto, "Independent in Everything—Neutral in Nothing," would indicate. Since settlers in the Wood River area were few and far between, the *Echo* was addressed to all who had settled along the Mormon Trail and to the thousands of settlers who passed through Wood River Center on their way to Utah, Colorado, and California. This accounts also for the advertisements from merchants all the way from Crescent City, Iowa, to Kearney City, Nebraska Territory.

Johnson's settling in Wood River Center did not lessen his interest in roaming. The very first issue of the *Echo* carried an account of a twenty day trip to Florence, Omaha, Council Bluffs, and other points in Iowa. Two weeks later Johnson made an exploration trip in a northwesterly direction toward the Loup. The following February he attempted the hazardous journey from Omaha to Wood River in the winter time. In a letter addressed to the *Echo* Johnson related his experiences in battling against the snow and cold as the party proceeded through Fremont, North Bend, and Columbus. At Columbus the group was snowed in, but Johnson was taken by private sled to Genoa. Here he spent considerable time visiting the Pawnee reservation and studying the life of the Pawnee.³⁹ Johnson attempted to make use of this opportunity by "swapping" with the Pawnee, but he found the Indians astute bargainers and received the short end of the deal.⁴⁰

The more Johnson explored the Wood River region, the more he became convinced that this region had a great agricultural potential. Corn, wheat, oats, rye and potatoes

³⁸ *The Huntsman's Echo*, June 14, 1860.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, February 21, 1861.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, April 25, 1861.

did remarkably well, and Johnson saw no reason why this section should not become the best wheat growing region in the West.⁴¹

One of the events in which Johnson took a keen interest was the construction of the first telegraph line across Nebraska in the fall of 1860. The line was expected to reach Kearney by the end of September, and by February, 1861, the *Echo* carried a regular column of "Telegraph News." One of the first items reported under this heading was the election of Jefferson Davis as President of the Confederacy.⁴²

By 1860 politics in Nebraska Territory were clearly split along Republican and Democratic lines. The Republicans, meeting in Plattsmouth, nominated Samuel G. Daily as candidate for the office of Territorial Representative from Nebraska. The Democrats, meeting in Omaha, nominated J. Sterling Morton, Secretary of the Territory, as their candidate.⁴³ The *Echo* vigorously supported the candidacy of Morton, pointing out that he had come to the Territory with "nothing but honor, virtue, integrity, and energy to assist his advancement."⁴⁴ In supporting the candidacy of Morton, Johnson based his choice on two points: the qualifications of the candidates and their ability to serve. He considered Daily inferior to Morton on both points. The influence of the *Echo* on this election can be seen from the fact that Johnson's own district gave Morton a thirty-nine to three margin over his opponent. Since Morton was declared elected by a margin of only fourteen votes, the support of the *Echo* proved to be an important factor in the outcome of the election. Daily later contested the election, and the House of Representatives on purely partisan grounds gave the seat to Daily.⁴⁵

In the election of November, 1860, Johnson was chosen superintendent of common schools in his county, and he

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, June 14, 1860.

⁴² *Ibid.*, February 21, 1861.

⁴³ Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁴⁴ *Echo*, September 13, 1860.

⁴⁵ Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

also claimed to have received the largest number of votes for representative to the territorial legislature from his district.⁴⁶ However, when he went to claim his seat in the Republican controlled legislature, he was "beaten back by a little Dutchman" half his size.⁴⁷ Since Buffalo County had not been formally organized by 1860, the above statement seems to refer to Frederick Hedde, who according to Morton represented Hall and Monroe Counties in the Seventh Territorial Legislature.

The secession problem which confronted the country after the 1860 election caused Johnson a great deal of anguish. He was strongly in favor of preserving the Union, but only by peaceful means. The idea of brother subjugating brother by bloodshed was abhorrent to him. In an editorial entitled "Our Country" he made a fervent plea that the country's leaders find a method other than war to resolve the current crisis: "Ye men in power—Governors—Congressmen—pause—let not a hasty misunderstanding lead our country to ruin and disgrace; Soldiers—ere you aim at the life of your brother, *know* you are right. Let not a false patriotism nerve you to slay your Brother. . . ."⁴⁸

Johnson was opposed to war against the South for another reason. The outbreak of hostilities would mean the withdrawal of many of the garrisons stationed in Nebraska Territory and thus expose the settlers to attacks from the Indians who were becoming more hostile as the herds of buffalo were disappearing from the Plains. That these fears were not groundless can be seen from the numerous Indian attacks during the Civil War in spite of the fact that a home guard of cavalry had been organized.

The evils of civil war were so great in Johnson's mind that he considered the partitioning of the country preferable to war. When the North resolved to use the force of arms to bring the South back into the Union, Johnson felt

⁴⁶ *Echo*, November 2, 1860.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, April 26, 1861.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, April 25, 1861.

that the nation's doom had been sealed. In the last editorial of the *Echo* he wrote:

Pride, wickedness and injustice have become national characteristics, and our whole political moral and social system has become rotten to the core. Our greatness has departed never to return, and our boasted Union is broken, severed and destroyed, never again to rise. Our national doom is sealed—unalterably—and still thousands rush upon the sword only to meet death.⁴⁹

While political issues dominated the pages of the *Echo*, the cultural side of life was not forgotten. Poetry became one of the regular features of the *Echo*. Generally the poems were the works of obscure writers, but they served to keep alive an appreciation of literary art in this pioneer community. The short story, too, became a fixture on the front page of the *Echo*.

Humor was another feature of the *Echo*. Generally it had a frontier flavor and depended chiefly on exaggerations of human folly. Sportsmen, for instance, were advised that it might be a good idea to let the barrel of a gun get rusty inside, for then when it would go off, it would kill at both ends; or they were reminded to point the muzzle of a cocked gun at their friend's toe "for fear of blowing his brains out."⁵⁰ Humor even found its way into the advertisements appearing in the *Echo*. In advertising for a business partner, for example, Johnson asked for "an 'outdoor' partner, who don't drink, smoke or chew, can work all day at every business—from the hairspring of a watch up to feeding pigs and picking millstones, turning grindstone when it rains, preaching on Sundays, and doing all the editor's hard fighting."⁵¹

Johnson's sudden decision to move to Utah was a loss not only to Wood River Center but to Nebraska journalism. Together with J. Sterling Morton, editor of the *Nebraska City News*, and Robert W. Furnas, publisher of the *Nebraska Advertiser* at Brownville, Joseph E. Johnson formed

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, July 4, 1861.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, July 14, 1860.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, April 25, 1861.

a trio of colorful and influential journalists in territorial Nebraska. Although the primary interests of these editors were progress and politics, they were at the same time conscious of the literary aspects of their work and may be regarded as the first contributors to the literature of the state.⁵²

⁵² Olson, *op. cit.*, p. 354.