

CHAPTER V

JOSEPH E. JOHNSON

The first postmaster in Buffalo County and editor of the first paper published in Buffalo County and in the territory of Nebraska west of Omaha.

THE FIRST NEWSPAPER PUBLISHED IN BUFFALO COUNTY

The first newspaper published in the territory now embraced in Buffalo County was *The Huntsman's Echo* at Wood River Center (now Shelton) from April, 1860, to August 1, 1861. The editor was Joseph E. Johnson, who also appears to have been one of Nebraska's first editors.

Several copies of *The Huntsman's Echo* are on file in the library of the State Historical Society and in consulting this file one learns much of the history of the county and its people in territorial days. The *Huntsman's Echo* carried a quite full line of advertising, discussed men and measures of public importance in the free and breezy western style but of necessity had little of local news. The editor was a most pronounced democrat, a warm friend of J. Sterling Morton, who seems to have been a standing candidate for office and from the columns of *The Huntsman's Echo* we learn that Mr. Morton, in the interests of his candidacy for office, visited Buffalo County and spoke on the streets of Wood River Center, and, at the June election in the year 1866, received thirty-two of the forty-two votes cast in the county for governor and in the October election in the same year, Mr. Morton being a candidate for Congress, received seventeen of the twenty-nine votes cast in the county.

There seems no question that Mr. Johnson was a man of much more than ordinary abilities and the writer has been inclined to question just why a man of his attainments should have located and engaged in the publication of a newspaper at a point where in those days there was no local patronage for its support.

Mr. Johnson had been a strong advocate of the building of the Union Pacific Railroad and of its location on the north side of the Platte River and as the location had been determined previous to his arrival at Wood River Center, possibly he had in mind that in the near future a city might be established, when the road was built, at the point where he had located. There is every reason to believe that had he remained at Wood River Center during the building of the road, that with the influence exerted by an ably edited newspaper, the division station of the Union Pacific, now at Grand Island, might have been located at Wood River Center instead; possibly the state capital, who can tell? While Mr. Johnson was editing a newspaper at Council Bluffs and Omaha, there had been established by the general government, a military road described as follows: "From Florence, (about five miles north of the present City of Omaha) via Elkhorn City, Fremont, North Bend, Emerson, Buchanan, Columbus and Nebraska Center to New Fort Kearney." Also at the same date, June 14, 1858, there was established a military road from Bellevue, via Hazelton connecting with the first mentioned at Elkhorn City. As Mr. Johnson had traveled the Platte River trail to Utah and return in 1850 there seems little question that he foresaw that when the Union Pacific was constructed it must pass in the immediate vicinity of Wood River Center and that possibly an important city might be established at that point. Mr. Johnson was a Mormon, having two wives and numerous children on his arrival at Wood River Center in 1859. In 1860, it is related, another woman came from an Iowa point to whom later, in Utah, he was married, and possibly the increasing prejudice against the Mormons and especially polygamy caused Mr. Johnson to abandon this suggested financial venture and remove to Utah, there to dwell among a people more in sympathy with his beliefs and practices.

By permission we copy from the Morton History the following brief sketch of Joseph E. Johnson, Nebraska's first editor, as prepared by his son, C. E. Johnson, a resident of Salt Lake

City: "Joseph Ellis Johnson was born April 28, 1817, at Pomfret, New York, being one of a family of sixteen children. At the age of sixteen, he moved with his parents, who had been converted to the faith of the Latter Day Saints, to Kirtland, Ohio. After this he followed the fate of the Saints through their various persecutions till he got as far west as Council Bluffs, Iowa. At Nauvoo, Illinois, he was married to Harriet Snyder, the ceremony being performed by the Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith. At the time he went to Council Bluffs in 1848 it was known as 'Miller's Hollow,' afterwards 'Kanesville.'

"Here he built the first house in Pottawattamie County, was postmaster for five years and obtained the change of name from 'Kanesville' to 'Council Bluffs.' Here he was a member of the first city council for many years. He established and published the *Council Bluffs Bugle* in 1852. The Bugle had much to do with getting the capital of Nebraska Territory established at Omaha. Here he opened the first store on the site of Omaha, and from here sent the first train (ox team) load of goods to the Denver, Colorado, (then known as Cherry Creek) mines. In 1854 he published the *Omaha Arrow*, the first paper published on Nebraska soil. In the same year he accompanied the first party of explorers for a railroad crossing on the Missouri River and the Loup Fork of the Platte River. He wrote the first article published favoring the North Platte route for the Pacific Railroad and contended for the same until so located. He crossed the plains in 1850 and went to Utah, in order to see the country, returning shortly with intention of soon removing to Utah. In 1857 he published the *Crescent City (Iowa) Oracle*, and laid out the town of that name. In 1858 he published the *Council Bluffs Press*. In 1859 he moved to Wood River (Center), Nebraska, and for three years published the *Huntsman's Echo*. At this point he had a large outfitting store for the accommodation of the many who were rushing to the gold fields of California. He had also a printing office, bakery, hotel, daguerreotype studio, etc. In 1861 moved to Utah, bringing a long train of teams loaded with all manner of goods and chattels. * * * On November 6, 1882, he was taken sick with pneumonia, from which he died December 17, 1882. He had three wives, all of whom survived him and were present at his deathbed. He had twenty-seven children and many grand children."-- (C. E. Johnson, Salt Lake City, Utah, October 16, 1905.) To be historically correct and give due justice it is perhaps best to state that the *Omaha Arrow* was doubtless the first newspaper published for, but not in, Nebraska Territory, as the *Arrow* appears to have been printed at Council Bluffs, the first issue bearing date of July 28, 1854. The first paper printed in the territory appears to have been the *Nebraska Palladium*, at Bellevue, and the first issue on November 14, 1854. On the last page of this issue appeared the following: "This is the first column of reading matter set in the Territory of Nebraska. This was put in type on the 14th day of November, 1854, by Thomas Morton."

Early settlers in the county state that the store of Mr. Johnson was not extensive in character and that in connection with the store and newspaper he also conducted a blacksmith shop and repair shop for wagons and that the repair shops were much the more profitable as a business. In one of his newspapers Mr. Johnson advertises himself as follows: "General outfitting commission merchant, keeper of Council Bluffs Mansion; as carrying on wagon making and blacksmithing and keeper of a bakery and eating saloon." The following, some wholly, some in substance, are taken from the *Huntsman's Echo*, July 26, 1860: "A few miles above on the Platte and Wood rivers, there are numerous herds of buffalo. Across the river it is said, they are coming over from the Republican in innumerable multitudes, and many, famishing for food or water-- whilst making for the Platte for a drink, are frightened back by emigrants and travelers, yet make immediate efforts to gain the water, but are again driven back by the report of fire arms, and, we are told, many thus perish before they reach the water." * * * On September 6, 1860: "Buffalo are continually coming about our farm, ranch and office, bothering us by eating our vegetables, cropping the grass, bellowing and kicking up a dust generally; and not being able to stand it longer we sent the boys and Doctor (Doctor Farner of Council Bluffs, Iowa, who was en route for Denver with a stock of drugs) out to drive them away. This resulted in prostrating the carcasses of two, and as dogs and wolves are scarce we had to breakfast, dine and sup from their flesh since. We shan't try to stand it, and give timely notice that the echo of fire arms will be a

common thing in this neck of the woods, unless these fearfully, frightful looking creatures desist from peeking into our office, and discomposing our printer. At (Fort) Kearney, it seems, they almost came into town. The driver of the express from Denver, was compelled to bring his team to a walking pace near (Fort) Kearney because of the buffalo thronging the road."

September 6, 1860, "*The Huntsman's Echo* regrets to learn that clouds of grasshoppers migrating south have for several days been doing considerable damage at some of the ranches above."

September, 1860, "It is reported that a band of thirty Cheyennes (Sioux) had recently made a descent on the Pawnee camps, but were routed with the loss of much of their own equipage."

September 6, 1860, describing a trip along Wood River it is said, "there was found rich, brown clusters of grapes--large, juicy and sweet, though in a state of nature. Of plums we never saw as large, or quality better, growing wild; we enjoyed them to a fullness. Trees cut by beaver and numerous paths, slides and dams are found along Wood River. The editor has received a present of the largest and finest watermelon of the season from J. E. Boyd, who has a most delightful and eligible farm seven miles above--comfortable buildings, several hundred acres fenced and near two hundred acres in crops, a pleasant and agreeable lady and a pretty baby."

On September 13 the editor again notes that buffalo are destroying his garden and says, "we could not stand it longer, but started Sam, who intercepted his progress before he had done much damage to our garden, and banging away--

" 'The well-aimed lead pursues the certain sight,
And death in thunder overtook his flight.'

"The flesh being secured our t'other half, self and the balance, have been regaling on roast, broil, fry and stew, ever since."

On November 2d: "Last week on two occasions, from our office, we witnessed the playful pranks of several antelope, and again a sprightly red fox came up near the enclosure, but cut and run when Towser came in sight. A nice race they had but Reynard made the best time. A week ago three large white wolves hove in sight, and played around on the prairie at a safe distance--the same chaps, probably, that made a tender meal from a good-sized calf of ours that had been running out. The buffalo have taken our caution and for two weeks have not troubled us or annoyed our printer." On this date the editor also says: "Yesterday Messrs. Kountze and Porter called on us whilst on their trip providing for the distribution of the balance of the telegraph poles along the route. Come on with your forked lightning! Strike for the great western ocean, the land of gold and glittering stones and ore." Reference is here had to the telegraph line being constructed from Omaha to Fort Kearney and which was completed to Wood River Center November 2d and to Fort Kearney November 4, 1860.

September 13, 1860: "The people of the Pike's Peak mining district, together with all concerned, will be pleased to learn that after being swindled, gouged, imposed upon, and literally robbed in the matter of mail facilities and service, by that arch-monopoly, Jones, Russell & Co., for nearly two years they are now provided by the department, at American rates, a mail from Omaha, by this place and Fort Kearney, once a week and back. The Western Stage Company, the most punctual, accommodating and reliable in mail service, has the contract and have already sent out one mail." This is believed to have been the first mail route established by the general Government, passing through Buffalo County. On August 11th it is related this stage company made a record trip from Fort Kearney to Omaha in thirty-three hours carrying six passengers.

In the winter of 1860-61 the editor of the *Huntsman's Echo* visited the Pawnee Indians on their reservation at Genoa in Nance County and in the February 21st issue gives the following interesting account of this visit: "The Pawnees number at present about four thousand souls and a fraction over, and when 'at home' live in a cluster of huts built with crotches and poles, covered, top and sides, with willows, then with grass and dirt, giving the appearance at a little distance of

an immense collection of 'potato hills,' all of a circular shape and oval. The entrance is through a passage walled with earth, the hole in the center at the top serving both for window and chimney, the fire being built in the center. Along the sides little apartments are divided off the main room by partitions of willow, rush or flag, some of them being neatly and tidily constructed, and altogether these lodges are quite roomy and comfortable, and each is frequently the abode of two or more families. In these villages there is no regularity of streets, walks or alleys, but each builds in a rather promiscuous manner, having no other care than to taste and convenience. The tribe is divided into five bands, each being under a special chief or leader, and the whole confederation being under one principal chief. Each band has its habitation separate and distinct from the other, three bands living in villages adjoining and all composing one village, the other two villages some little distance. There is frequently some considerable rivalry between the several bands in fighting, hunting and other sports, and not infrequently one band commits thefts upon the effects of another."

In the issue of April 25, 1861, speaking of the agricultural prospects of the Wood River Valley the editor says: "Corn, wheat, oats, rye, barley, potatoes, and all sorts of vegetables and roots grow to perfection. For melons and other vines the fruit is almost spontaneous. The timber consists of cottonwood, elm, ash, hackberry, box elder and oak. Eighteen miles below there is a sawmill, lumber \$30 per thousand. There was a one-horse grist mill at Wood River Center. The vast emigration going up the valley at that time demanded far more of the products of the region than the supply. Corn brought from \$1.25 to \$2.50 per bushel, flour \$5 to \$7 per 100 lbs., butter 25 cents per pound, eggs 25 cents per dozen, and potatoes \$2 per bushel. We have growing apples, peaches, English gooseberries, currants, raspberries, and strawberries, set last year. All stood the winter fine and look well." It is related that in the two summers' life of the *Huntsman's Echo* the far-seeing editor prophesied as to the future greatness of the Wood River Valley. In the last issue, August 11, 1861, appears the following:

"ADIEU

"Friends and patrons- -adieu. We have 'secessed,' and tomorrow, shall start westward and shall 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,-when men who may chance to differ in opinion with wild, blood-thirsty fanatics, are threatened and sometimes despoiled or murdered. * * * Should our life and abilities be spared, our friends may find our foot-marks, through the boundless West, and again hear the shrill, oracular notes of the old bugler, re-echoed from the vales of the mountains. Again, adieu."

Mr. E. Oliver, now a resident of Shelton, and who was employed by Mr. Johnson to work in his garden, states that Mr. Johnson took great pride and pleasure in tilling the soil, not only raising quantities of vegetables, but was also a lover of flowers and small fruits to which he gave much attention. The store and printing office was in a building fourteen feet square, built of hewn logs, and was located on the bank of Wood River, east of the main street. In front of this store was the Overland Trail; across the trail, to the south, was the house in which Mr. Johnson lived, and his garden extended to the south as far as the present railroad tracks. This garden was enclosed with a fence built of poles. After the removal of Mr. Johnson to Utah, the store building was used as a residence by the families of E. Oliver and A. Meyer.

As the *Huntsman's Echo* mentions migrating grasshoppers as destroying crops in 1860 it might be of interest to mention that a rainfall record had been kept at Fort Kearney from 1850 to and including 1861, and that the rainfall for the years 1859-60-61 was the least for any years during that period, being 16.10 inches in 1859, 16.85 inches in 1860, and 19-34 inches in 1861. This is the least rainfall, for a period of three years, as appears in the rainfall record kept at Fort

Kearney and Ravenna between the years 1850 and 1914. The least rainfall record in any one year in this time, 1850 to 1914, being 15.67 inches in 1894.

THE FIRST POST OFFICE

The first post office established in Buffalo County was at Wood River Center in 1860.... Previous to the breaking out of the Civil war Missouri was a hotbed of secession and the home of border ruffians and more and more emigration to the Pacific Coast followed the trail north of the Platte River. In the latter '50s the Western Stage Company of Iowa extended its route to Fort Kearney, following the military road established by the general Government in 1858, from Bellevue and Florence via Fremont, Columbus, Nebraska Center to Fort Kearney. In August, 1860, the Western Stage Company were awarded a contract by the general Government to carry mail over this route as far west as Fort Kearney. Previous to this date it seems that the mail between Omaha and Fort Kearney up the valley of the Platte was carried and charged for the same as freight or express, the rates of course being high. These extortionate rates for carrying mail doubtless [sic] account for the rather violent language used towards Jones, Russell & Co. in the *Huntsman's Echo* of September 13, 1860.

Through the kindness of Senator Norris Brown it is learned that the records of the Post office Department show that the post office at Wood River Center was established August 20, 1860, and discontinued May 28, 1864. The postmasters at Wood River Center were as follows: Joseph E. Johnson, August 20, 1860, to September 30, 1862; Henry Peck, September 30, 1862, to July 18, 1863; Edward Huff, July 18, 1863, to May 28, 1864. Thus it seems that Joseph E. Johnson was the first editor of a newspaper for Nebraska Territory, the *Omaha Arrow*, July 28, 1854; the editor and publisher of the first paper printed in Buffalo County, and the first postmaster in Buffalo County.

Joseph E. Johnson

April 28, 1817 - born Pomfret, New York - one of 16 children.

Parents became Mormons

1823 – age 16 - moved with his parents to Kirtland, Ohio.

At Nauvoo, Illinois, married Harriet Snyder

followed the Mormons through various moves west to Council Bluffs, Iowa.
known as 'Miller's Hollow,'
Postmaster, changed name to 'Kanesville.'

He established and published the *Council Bluffs Bugle* in 1852.

First editor of a newspaper for Nebraska Territory, the *Omaha Arrow*

1859 - arrived at Wood River Center - two wives and numerous children

Editor and publisher of the first paper printed in Buffalo County, *The Huntsman's Echo* at Wood River Center (now Shelton) from April, 1860, to August 1, 1861

First postmaster in Buffalo County. established in 1860, Aug. 20, 1860, to September 30, 1862;

Store - newspaper - blacksmith shop - repair shop for wagons
repair shops more profitable as a business.

Raised vegetables, flowers, small fruit

1861 – Sold store to Ed Oliver who had been working for him working in his garden

moved to Utah, bringing a long train of teams loaded with all manner of goods and chattels

November 6, 1882 – pneumonia - died December 17, 1882.