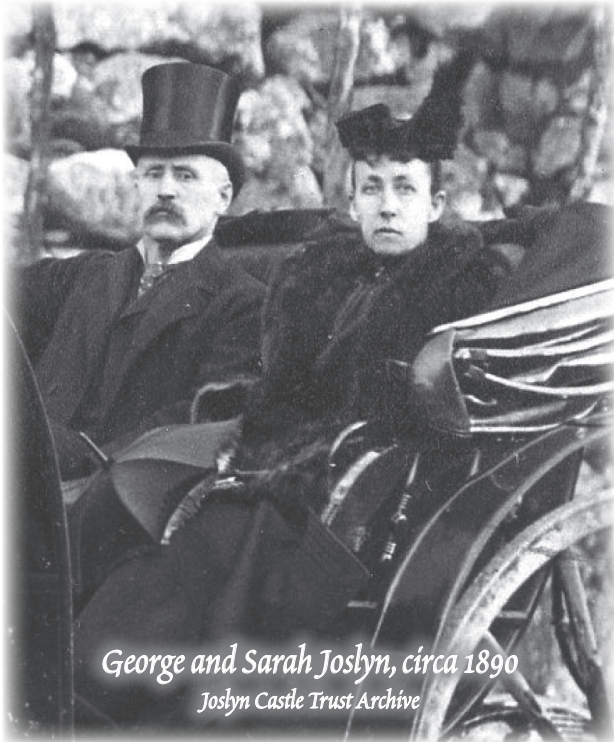

Enduring Legacy



GEORGE AND SARAH JOSLYN, THE WESTERN NEWSPAPER UNION AND OMAHA



George and Sarah Joslyn, through their far-reaching charitable endeavors, their civic involvement, and their business, The Western Newspaper Union, helped forge the fundamental character of Omaha, and the West as we know it today. The Joslyns came west during the great expansion after the Civil War and developed a business that catered to the needs of this expansion. When George Joslyn died in 1916 he left behind a 10-million-dollar legacy (more than \$228 million today). Sarah Joslyn would continue to use this immense fortune to better the world around her, in turn leaving the bulk of her estate to cultural and humane institutions in Omaha.

George Joslyn was a brilliant businessman at a moment of unique opportunity in the nation's history. In April, 1803, the Louisiana Purchase – 828,000 square miles – had more than doubled the size of the United States. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had added 500,000 square miles more. After the Civil War, this almost boundless land was settled by farmers taking advantage of the unprecedented opportunity to acquire land through the 1862 Homestead Act. This

massive dispersal of public lands was facilitated by the Pacific Railway Act of July 1862, which provided federal subsidies in land and loans for the construction of the transcontinental railroad. By 1890, more than 160,000 miles of track crisscrossed the country, carrying new immigrants, settlers, and the goods they needed to start a new life.

Though many of these hardy Americans radiated outward in waves from the East, others were new immigrants. From 1881 to 1885, more than a million Germans settled in the Middle West, and according to the 1880 census, 182,000 Norwegians, 194,000 Swedes, and almost 90,000 Bohemians had preceded them.

These new Americans brought with them the distinctive cultural practices, languages, ideas and memories of institutions from their European homelands. The Eastern settlers, in turn, though they may have moved simply from Illinois to Nebraska, brought with them mindsets often unsuitable to the new environment. Both groups, in order to survive, needed to open economic, social and governmental structures to what historian Ray Billington describes as the “transformative influences of the land.” They would need to create new structures and new attitudes to forge a new identity, which would not only allow them to survive and flourish, but unify them as Americans.

The single strongest force in this transformation was the newspaper. By 1899, there were 18,793 newspapers published in the United States, with 12,979 of them being weeklies, the paper typical of rural America. Weekly newspapers not only carried national news, but the more important local news of town meetings, the laws, and legal notices that would affect the livelihood of its citizenry. For most Americans, isolated in a rural world (in 1870 three quarters of Americans lived on farms or in small towns), the newspaper, at five cents a week, was the only source of information and entertainment they could afford. There were no libraries, no radio, no television, and few telephones. The newspaper was available to almost everyone, and like the mass media of today, it dominated cultural perceptions.



For a rural newspaper to be generally available, it needed to be feasible in terms of cost and time to its owner. "Ready-print" or "patent insides," paper preprinted with news and features on one side, was not a new idea before it was rediscovered in America. A London publisher tried the time- and cost-saving concept in the 1850s, but it didn't prosper and was soon abandoned.

Several factors made America the perfect laboratory for the ready-print experiment, the place that would transform it into an industry – and for five decades, the most powerful force in American journalism. The Civil War created a critical shortage of labor, and in 1861 Ansel N. Kellogg, editor of *The Baraboo Republic* in Baraboo, Wisconsin, was left in a quandary when his journeyman printer enlisted in the Union Army. Kellogg alone could not investigate local

news and politics, write, typeset, ink and run the press and distribute his product. Described as a resourceful man, he commissioned two half-sheet pages printed with war news from *The Madison Daily Journal*, and included them with his own printed material. Recognizing its labor- and money-saving potential, he subsequently began routinely ordering paper pre-printed on one side with news and features from *The Madison Daily Journal*. Soon other rural weeklies were following suit.

By 1862 *The Madison Daily Journal* was supplying 30 papers with preprinted material, but lost its business to *The Milwaukee Evening Wisconsin* when the owners of that daily paper realized they could earn more by including advertising in the preprinted sheets. The advertising, in turn, made the sheet of ready-print no more expensive than blank paper, a factor that would make the service extremely attractive to small rural papers. By 1875 more than a third of the rural weekly papers in the United States were using ready-print. By 1878 22 different services were supplying ready-print to 2,000 newspapers. All of these services vied with one another to supply product with attractive content no longer simply available as ready-print, but in forms tailored to the needs of their clientele.

In this turbulent sea of competition we see George Joslyn for the first time. A man by his own admission unsuited to life on his father's Vermont farm, he was a self-described "capitalist" and proud of it, actively seeking to better his and his wife Sarah's lot in life. After an initial move to Montreal, where he worked in his uncles' paper pattern factory, the couple moved once more, this time to Des Moines, Iowa, where George began work in the Iowa Printing Company, an auxiliary newspaper or ready-print company. Perhaps it was his familiarity with paper's potential, but for whatever reason, George Joslyn and the auxiliary newspaper business clicked. In 1879, when the Iowa Printing Company decided to open an office in Omaha, George became the manager of this new branch, initially called the Omaha Newspaper Union, but renamed the Western Newspaper Union when it was incorporated in Iowa in June of 1880.



*Employees of the Western Newspaper Union,
510 South 15th Street, Omaha, circa 1900*

Courtesy of Joslyn Art Museum

Under the management of George Joslyn, the Western Newspaper Union, with branches in Des Moines, Kansas City and Omaha, was founded to tap newspapers established in the new communities in the West facilitated by the transcontinental railroad. With Joslyn as driving visionary, the Western Newspaper Union began a program of rapid expansion, first westward, then in all directions. Soon there were offices in Saint Paul, Detroit, New York City, Denver, Dallas, Topeka, Saint Louis, Lincoln and Chicago. Joslyn rose to positions of increasingly important responsibility in the firm: director, treasurer and vice president. At the same time, this indefatigable entrepreneur was amassing capital from running hotels and a patent medicine firm that sold Lithia Water, a 19th-century cure-all, to buy company stock. By 1890 he had the power and the funds to become president, general manager and principal stockholder of the company. After incorporating in Chicago, the heart of the ready-print industry, Joslyn set out to corner the ready-print market. By 1911 the Western Newspaper Union and its 33 branches serviced 7,185 papers – 95% of the papers using ready-print services. The Sherman Antitrust Act was invoked when Joslyn tried to purchase his last rival, the American Press Association, but after a protracted battle with the Federal Government, only resolved the year after he died, that company, too, was acquired.

Joslyn knew how to consolidate power and control the resources needed for his products. He bought a paper company and a type foundry and made close friends with influential powerbrokers of the day, men who had parallel interests and were also looking westward. One such man was George Ward Holdrege, a prominent Nebraska railroad man and developer who was an original stockholder in the Lincoln Land Company. The Land Company was a subsidiary "colonizing agency" of the Burlington Railroad, and played an important part in laying out new communities and bringing in settlers. Newspapers were an essential part of these new communities' identities; they not only defined civilization, but could be crucial to a town's survival. If a town had a newspaper, it was often in the running for the county seat or state capital and the lucrative business of printing laws and official government documents. A paper could help a town grow by describing the community and the surrounding countryside in glowing terms that would attract new settlers.

When men went west to be not farmers but newspaper men, Joslyn's Western Newspaper Union was there for them. Starting up a newspaper was expensive, but it was the Western Newspaper Union representatives who provided the first-time newspaper owner/editor with the practical advice he needed to succeed and the news and features to make his paper look like it came from a flourishing community. In return for a few dollars a week, due at the local freight depot, the new editor could pick up, in whatever form he desired, the latest telegraphic news, columns on style, the household, recipes, games, history, biography and science, interviews with the rich and famous, exotic travelogs, Bible stories, moralizing sermons, and serialized fiction. These features, read aloud to the family and pasted in scrapbooks to teach children to read, all created a uniform language and culture – a “tribal similarity,” as Eugene Harter called it, among isolated people who seldom saw each other.

Wright Patterson, editor-in-chief of the Western Newspaper Union, may have described their 25 million readers as “many-sided as a falling cat!” but when he expounds upon this description, he describes a people far more homogeneous than he realized, and that homogeneity, the way these readers saw themselves and what they had built, was further defined and reinforced by what they read. Westerns and tales of westward expansion were the most popular serialized fiction. As Patterson himself stated, “They want to see themselves and their interests in what they read.” The stories they liked interpreted the life they knew and understood; they were outdoors in American settings, with characters who were “clean-living, clean-thinking, successful people, worth emulating.”

In terms of lasting influence, it could be argued that George Joslyn was far more powerful than our media tycoon of the 21st century, Rupert Murdoch. When George passed away in 1916, one obituary stated, “His keenest pleasure to the last was the thought that he had contributed substantially to the material, moral and intellectual growth of the Great West, which for nearly half a century had absorbed his interest, his energy and the great gifts with which nature had endowed him.” The Western Newspaper Union may have been a monopoly, but without it, would we be who we are today? The power of the Western Newspaper Union waned in the twentieth century and then was eclipsed altogether by the introduction of new and diverse media, but it had done its job. Through fiction and non-fiction, ready-print had provided the amplification of shared ideas and vernacular language that created a new collective identity. Westerners may have superficial differences, but at heart we see ourselves as participants in the Myth of the West: a mindset created from a collective body of “stories” that describes our world view, how we define our place in it, justify our behaviors and practices, and what we bring to America as a whole. It is this character and these values that persist to this day, a character we see in the poetry of such artists as Ted Kooser: honest, hard-working, no-nonsense, and as enduring as the land itself.



*Regional offices of the
Western Newspaper Union, 1920*



*George Joslyn
Traveling in Europe, 1909
Courtesy of the
Joslyn Magowan Birdzell family*

When his funeral took place on October 6, 1916, George’s pallbearers were the men one might expect for a captain of industry – railroad tycoons, bankers, judges, politicians, men from across the country who worked for his giant Western Newspaper Union – but there were also four physicians known for their public service. George Joslyn, because he listened, had been the “go-to man” when these men and countless others needed help. In the months following his death, the true extent of his philanthropy began to reveal itself.

George was called “one of Omaha’s most remarkable and liberal givers to charity.” Trickling in from numerous sources, now that they were no longer bound to secrecy, was the news that he had given away thousands of dollars to people who came into his office (sometimes half a dozen or more in a day) and asked for help, regardless of ethnicity, beliefs or social status. George listened to their stories and then handed them gifts of \$10 to \$50 (\$300 to \$1500 in today’s dollars), of which he never kept a record. He was the “county relief fund” on which mothers and children of men placed in the penitentiary depended, working with the court bailiff to anonymously provide money to families left without a breadwinner. He gave generously to most of the churches in the city and supplied the matching grant of \$25,000 (\$769,200 today) which was half the cost to Omaha University for its first home at 24th and Pratt.

When the local relief committee was formed for the victims of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, George Joslyn was the largest donor. When Ida Tilden, the first president of the YWCA, needed help, it was

George who gave her \$5,000 (the equivalent of \$153,840 today), and again when Mrs. Tilden came to him about old people who needed a place to go, George donated five acres for what would become the Fontenelle Old People’s Home. In 1909 George was also the major contributor to the new home of the Child Saving Institute, challenging fellow donors to triple his initial \$25,000 (\$769,200 today). In his will George gave endowment funds of 500 shares of Western Newspaper Union stock (more than \$1 million today) each to the Visiting Nurse Association, the Nebraska Humane Society, and the Fontenelle Old People’s Home. The bulk of his massive estate he left to Sarah.

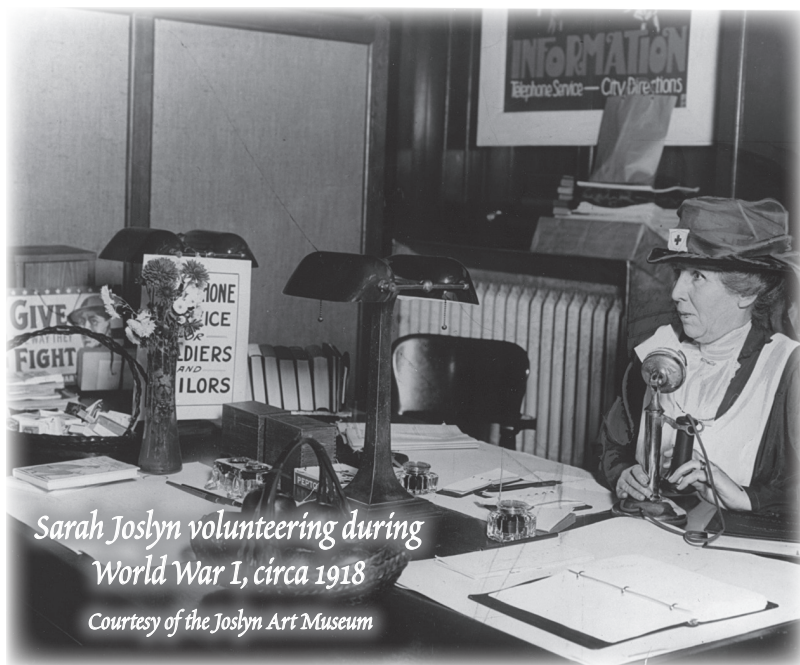
George’s trust in his “beloved wife” was not misplaced. Sarah Joslyn declared “the possession of great wealth is a great trust and obligation,” but she was unobtrusive in her unstinting donation of time, financial support, material goods and the power of her name when she thought it could help. Like George, Sarah swore most of her beneficiaries to secrecy. Her idea of good meant good for all. She believed in making the world a better place for all living creatures. Sarah looked at her community on a daily basis and asked: are they treated well, do they have a place to live, clothes on their backs, shoes on their feet? Do they have schools, food to eat, and what do they have to feed their spirit?



*Sarah Joslyn, circa 1909
Joslyn Castle Trust Archive*

Particularly concerned with child welfare, Sarah donated heavily of her time and resources, and was on the board of the Child Saving Institute and involved with the Hattie B. Munroe Home (for handicapped children), whether they needed cash or someone to rock the babies. Sarah was also on the board of the Omaha Association for the Protection of Boys and Girls. She loved to have children around her; they were routinely invited to the Castle for all sorts of events.

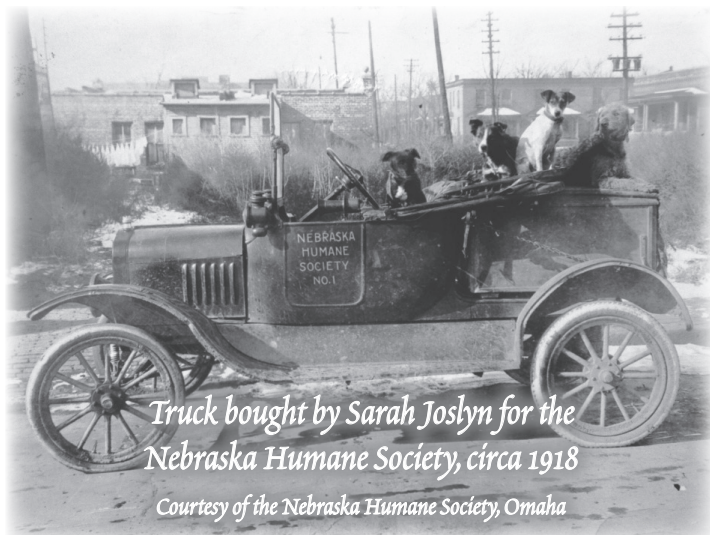
Deeply concerned with the availability of education for men and women, for many years Sarah was a trustee of the University, among other things donating property at 13th and Farnam from which they could obtain the rents. When she died, Sarah left UNO \$50,000 (more than \$1 million in today's dollars) in her will. She was a patron of the Piney Woods School in Braxton, Mississippi, a boarding school that taught black youth, which she also remembered in her will.



As an independent woman, Sarah was involved with women's suffrage and supported pro-suffrage political candidates for local and national office, and in particular, candidates who advocated higher wages, shorter hours and better working conditions for women. At the 1888 convention of Nebraska Women's Suffrage, she was appointed to a committee to frame resolutions. Sarah was concerned that women were treated fairly, and she would show up in court with friends to lend moral support to a woman she felt needed it. She assisted people in need through generous donations of time and funds to the Visiting Nurses Association, the Red Cross, the Omaha Social Settlement, which assisted immigrants, The Salvation Army, and the YWCA. She was one of

the founders in 1887 of the Board of Charities for the city of Omaha. Sarah advocated for treatment facilities for drug addicts and the mentally ill and better conditions for prisoners. Her support of the Temperance movement may have been a result of seeing the damage alcohol did among the poor.

During the First World War, Sarah not only volunteered for the Red Cross but supported the troops, making sure young enlisted men in Omaha had places to go. She opened the Castle game rooms to them, provided them with transportation and organized her friends to provide entertainment. She was a member of the Nebraska chapter of the National League of Women's Services, a patriotic group furthering the war effort, and oversaw the Third Annual Liberty Loan Drive in Omaha. Sarah served on the executive committee for the March 1918 relief campaign for Armenia, donated generously to European aid, and after the war, donated to disabled veterans.



*Truck bought by Sarah Joslyn for the
Nebraska Humane Society, circa 1918*

Courtesy of the Nebraska Humane Society, Omaha

In recognition of Sarah's love of animals both wild and domestic, the Omaha police chief made her a sworn humane officer, badge no. 1. She took her appointment seriously, investigating the treatment of work animals around the city. She was instrumental in designating Forest Lawn Cemetery as a wildlife sanctuary, and was one of the first supporters of Fontenelle Forest, giving them a donation of 100 acres. Sarah was honorary vice president of the National Humane Society, a delegate to national conventions, and loaned the Nebraska Humane Society the money to construct its Omaha facilities – then wrote off the \$50,000 debt (the equivalent of more than \$1 million today) in her will.

Sarah Joslyn truly believed the arts fed the human spirit. She awarded a \$20 prize – the equivalent of a man's weekly wages (more than \$400 today) – for the best Nebraska sonnet to a young Loren Eiseley, a Nebraska-born anthropologist and writer. She supported Omaha's fledgling theater community from the 1890's. In 1927 she "sold" property to the Omaha Community Playhouse for \$15,000 (below market value), and took out a mortgage which was still unpaid fourteen years later at her death, when the \$65,000 total (more than \$1.3 million in today's dollars) was forgiven in her will. She sold season tickets and was a table host, attending fundraisers and events into her late 80's. She was a great donor to the Friends of Music, and sponsored organ concerts in her home for charitable causes, for health workers, and for the elderly and infirm.

The greatest cultural gift Sarah gave to the community was the Joslyn Art Museum, or as it was originally called, the Joslyn Memorial, in memory of George. Begun in 1928, the structure opened in 1931, when Sarah waited in line like everyone else and refused to take a seat on the stage with the dignitaries. Including Sarah's final bequest, she left a total of \$7 million dollars (around \$146 million in today's dollars) to an edifice she intended to serve the spiritual needs of the people of Omaha as much as any church. She said it was her hope that "men in overalls shall feel the same right and privilege as the socially elite," and made sure the museum charged no fee so they were free to do so.

*John McDonald, architect, and Sarah Joslyn at the
groundbreaking for the Joslyn Memorial, October 3, 1928*

Courtesy of the Douglas County Historical Society





George and Sarah Joslyn were a remarkable couple who left a lasting legacy not only to Omaha and Nebraska, but to the nation as a whole. The Western Newspaper Union, by providing news and entertainment to rural papers – at one time the only medium readily available in western homes – unified a diverse new population and shaped the ethos of more than 60 million Americans and their descendants. As individuals, George and Sarah provided the means to found, or to make a substantial force of, most of the charitable organizations in Omaha. They listened to public health workers, physicians, educators and artists, and gave unstintingly of their time and resources. They took the time to look around them and ask what needed to be done. If Nebraskans are looking for role models in this difficult 21st century, they need look no further than this couple, who may have been the wealthiest in the region, but gave far more than that fortune back to their community.

The Joslyn Castle is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and its grounds are designated as an affiliate site of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum. The Joslyn Castle Trust is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization overseen by a volunteer board of directors that is charged with preserving the legacy of George and Sarah Joslyn through stewardship of their historic home and by offering diverse, cultural programming that informs and inspires the community.

For more information on the Joslyn Castle & Gardens, or to learn how you can help preserve the legacy of George and Sarah Joslyn, contact us at 402.595.2199 or at info@joslyncastle.com.

JOSLYN CASTLE
&
GARDENS

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