

NUGGETS of HISTORY

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WILLARD ASHTON "ASH" JOHNSON, FIRST HONORARY PRESIDENT
By Hazel M. Hyde

Willard Ashton Johnson, known to his friends as Ash, prepared a paper for the 1965 annual meeting of the Rockford Historical Society. The subject was "A Duel Fought in Rockford After the Civil War". This duel was believed to have been the only duel to have been fought north of the Mason-Dixon Line as a result of the War Between the States. This newspaper man was a charter member and director in the Rockford Historical Society. He had long seen the need for such a society and had proposed such an organization in his column in the Loves Park newspaper. There had been a predecessor of the society known as the Winnebago County Historical Society. The paper he presented was typical of his salty language and a use of words that made a far away happening as real and immediate as today's news.

It was after the reading of Ash's article at the meeting in Sinnissippi Park that someone, possibly William Barrick who was then presiding, referred to Ash as Mr. Rockford History. A motion was then made, probably by Maude Stowell who was chairman of the nominating committee, that Ash Johnson be made honorary president, and the vote was unanimous in favor of the motion. Then in the midst of congratulations people were recalling his contributions to the preservation of Rockford's historical beginnings and the art he had used in making these facts known and available to the public and to children studying local history.

Ash was the creator of the official publication that became the society's printed account of Rockford and Winnebago County history. Volume I No. 1 of the Rockford Historical Society's publication was headed NUGGETS--OLD AND NEW and was dated November - December, 1963. By January-February, 1964, Volume I Number 2, it was entitled NUGGETS OF HISTORY, its present name. Its editorial office then was 2011 Guilford Road, the Johnson residence. The staff then was listed as: Ash Johnson, Editor; Herman G. Nelson, Robert Borden, Mmes. Richard Nielson and Edmund Porter, Contributing Editors. Ash was giving us a year by year summary of events in the Rockford area. Pictures were being used in greater numbers as 1965 drew to a close. Different individuals were contributing some articles. Ash felt the publication he had started was growing from its infant stage into a lusty adolescence. January-February, 1966, Volume III Number 2 issue carried an article entitled "Ash Johnson's Death a Great Loss to the Society". The opening sentence was "When W. Ashton Johnson passed away on December 11, 1965, the loss to the Rockford Historical Society was inestimable. Ash was not only Editor of NUGGETS OF HISTORY, but was almost a limitless source of ideas and encouragement for the organization." Ash's boyhood home on North Court Street was pictured in that issue. Robert Borden's name first appeared on that issue as editor. He felt a sense of dedication that the publication started by Ash should continue and that he would work to see



W. Ashton
Johnson

that it should flourish.

Ash compiled a history of Winnebago County, Illinois, which he had hoped to have published. Another use has been found for the book which had taken many hours of research and writing. It was in the January - February, 1972, issue of NUGGETS OF HISTORY that the first part of Ash Johnson's book, a very comprehensive account of Rockford and vicinity, was printed in serial form. Although six years had passed since Mr. Johnson's death, people still were speaking of him as "Mr. Rockford History". Ash's writing had a very interesting flavor that readers find unique. "Ash always felt," according to Mabel Johnson in an interview on December 12, 1972, in her home on Guilford Road, "the early settlers were not interested primarily in making money, but that they gave to the community and were interested in building a good community." She added that, "In Ash's opinion even though there were many minority groups, Rockford's inhabitants were homogeneous as a people." Column Left had these words of praise for Ash's historical articles and his book, "And no one, outside the late Charles A. Church, has done as much as he to make articulate the long story of our community."

Willard Ashton "Ash" Johnson was born August 3, 1891, in the same house he lived in until he married Mable Nelson on October 12, 1921. His paternal ancestors came from Holland and settled in North Amsterdam, New York, in 1642, and from England and Ireland to Massachusetts in 1637. His maternal ancestors came from Canterbury, Kent County, England, and settled in Charleston, Massachusetts, in 1632, and were later in Oswego County, New York.



Two-family home
at 604 Fisher
Avenue, where Ash
and Mabel Johnson
lived until moving
to their home on
Guilford Road.

Ash's parents were Carrie Ashton and Harry Melancthon Johnson, who were married in 1890 in Rockford. His maternal grandparents moved to Durand, Illinois, in 1861 and to Rockford in 1874. His grandparents were married in 1859, and Carrie, Ash's mother, was their oldest child. It is interesting that Harry, his father, was also the oldest son of his family, and Willard Ashton was their oldest child.

The house in which Ash was born was given to his parents, Carrie and Harry Johnson, by his mother's parents, Andrew and Mary A. Ashton. He lived in this home until he married. For a period of four years he lived in a house that had been given to Ash and his brother, Donald Briggs Johnson, but they both left the apartment to build homes of their own. The house on Guilford Road is the only house Ash lived in after that time.

Carrie Ashton Johnson, Ash's mother, was born August 24, 1863, in Durand, Illinois, the daughter of Andrew and Mary A. Ashton. She attended school in Durand and Rockford, moving here with her parents in 1877. Her father purchased the David Wallach building at the corner of State and Main Streets and moved his dry goods business to Rockford. Carrie was married in 1891 to Harry M. Johnson and moved into the house at 728 North Court. Carrie said of her father, "My father was always a man of great force and independence of character, absolutely fearless, who dared to strike out and vote as his conscience directed ... He served two terms in the lower house in Springfield. Ash's family owned the property where Rockford Dry Good Stores, later known as Rockford Store, is located and also the land where Osco Drug is now. Carrie Ashton Johnson died in 1949 in her home at 728 North Court Street.

Ash rarely used his first name, Willard. The name Ashton came from the Ashton family who operated the Ashton Dry Goods Store. His mother Carrie Ashton Johnson was among the foremost local women to take an active part in securing women's rights. She wrote: "...I was fortunate enough to be born into a family who pulled together and were united in their belief concerning human rights for all the races, and not for one half." It was from his family that Ash first



Home of Mr. and Mrs.
W. Ashton Johnson at
2011 Guilford Road.

learned the spirit of independence and a sense of fair play and interest in people.

Newspaper work was an early interest. Ash's father, Harry M. Johnson, sold the DAILY REPUBLIC in 1929 to Ruth Hanna McCormick. Ash's father had been publisher and editor and Ash was a reporter. After graduation from Rockford High School in 1909, he had attended the University of Wisconsin, where he had been a member of SAE fraternity before he came back to Rockford to work on the newspapers until he went into the military service. Ash was vice president of the DAILY REPUBLIC company and city editor of the ROCKFORD DAILY REPUBLIC in 1928-29. He wrote historical articles for the LOVES PARK MAIL and POST for many years. "From the Days That Belong to the Ages" became a well-known column, read by Loves Park and Rockford area people. When asked to comment on his career, Ash is quoted as saying, "I have tried to be a good reporter for 56 years."

While Ash was known widely as a newspaper man, he also had a career in the closely-related field of printing. It was in 1928 that Ash Johnson purchased a half interest in the Haegg Printing Service, then at 319 Chestnut Street. He operated the Ashton Johnson Printing Service on East State Street for many years. It was rewarding to Ash to own a commercial printing company. Among other projects he published the ROCKFORD SPORTS WEEKLY.

Mr. Johnson served overseas in the army during World War I from 1917. Cpl. Ashton Johnson was among other newspaper men who made a tour of the battlefields. As a newspaper man this tour made a great impression on him. Among his souvenirs is a yellowed brochure "Facts and Figures Showing the Activities in Base Section One, St. Nazaire, France." The port of St. Nazaire was started on the arrival of the first United States Army Transport on June 25, 1917. Another brochure prepared by Captain Arthur E. Hartzell, Inf., U.S.A., is marked "Confidential" and is entitled, "Meuse-Argonne Battle--Sept. 26--Nov. 11, 1918." Upon his return to Rockford he became a charter member of the Walter R. Craig Post No. 60 American Legion. He served as publicity chairman for the Illinois Conventions of the American Legion held in Rockford in 1923 and 1937.

For 69 years, Johnson was a member of the Church of the Christian Union. Boy Scouts was an absorbing interest, and for a time he had a troop of Boy Scouts. He also served on the Rockford Public Library Board.

Ash was a charter member of the Rockford Lions Club. A resolution of the Rockford Lions Club signed by Fred S. Slick, President; Raymond C. Wilder, Secretary; Ray Alden,

Robert J. Lindsey, Carl E. Faser, Herman J. Tempon, Kenneth L. Orton, Willis L. Howe, Cecil R. Williams, Tagee S. Bengston, H. Neil Webster, Robert Langkamp, William D. Mark, Raphael E. Yalden, Dr. Burt Canfield, and Richard Blaha, sums up some of his work in this organization: "So significant was Lion Ashton W. Johnson's place in our Club's life that we shall always remember and cherish the contribution he had made to us as individuals and to Lionism in Rockford. He was a gentleman, a wise leader, a sympathetic comrade, a life wit, and a gracious co-worker. With his enthusiasms directed toward any project we knew that success would follow and many were his accomplishments..."

(Continued in next issue)

FLOUR MANUFACTURE FLOURISHED IN ROCKFORD

By Mrs. Harold B. Hyde

David L. Bartlett and Moses H. Bartlett were early flour millers of Rockford. Albert L. Bartlett continued the business and was succeeded by his son James Agard Bartlett. That old mill and the grain elevators were located on Cedar Street.

Not only was J. A. Bartlett's paternal grandfather, David L. Bartlett, interested in flour, but his maternal grandfather, J. B. Agard, had established himself in the grain business on Cedar Street in 1856. The Rockford City Directory of 1857 gave J. B. Agard, grain dealer, address: West between Chestnut and Green Streets. He had come from New York and had been here a year at that time.

In the classified section of Rockford City Directory for 1859 - 60, listed under flour mills were: Bartlett, Harvey; Compton, L.; Derwent, T. and E.; Rodd, Joseph. Under flour and grain were listed: Hagedon, J. H.; Maynard and Wiswell. In that same directory we find: Bartlett, Harvey, proprietor Bartlett's Flour Mills, West Side of River, south of railroad, Water Power Addition. This leads to the conclusion that early settlers grew a considerable amount of wheat in this vicinity now so important as a corn-producing area. Probably a pioneer felt compelled to grow enough wheat for his own use.

The ROCKFORD MORNING STAR stated that the Bartlett mill, before and during the Civil War, was the largest in the midwest. It was credited with producing about 1,100 barrels of flour a day. Flour was shipped from the Bartlett mill in trainloads for the use of the Union Army.

Rockford was the birthplace of Albert L. Bartlett, November 28, 1855. He graduated from the West Side High School with the class of 1876. The following year he attended business college in Chicago. According to the REGISTER GAZETTE, A. L. Bartlett joined his father, David L. Bartlett in the milling and feed business in 1877. The mills were destroyed by fire and he found himself without a job. For a period of time he worked for Rockford Steam Cracker Company on the Water Power.

James B. Agard and Albert L. Bartlett entered into a

partnership and conducted the mill and flour and feed house on Cedar Street, which had been established in 1856. In the year 1883 Albert Bartlett gained control of the mills and warehouse. He also acquired a mill on the water power. This company was then called A. L. Bartlett Company.

About 1874, in June, Mr. Bartlett married Myrta Agard, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. B. Agard. Their children were: Agard, who became interested in flour milling; Lowell, Helen, Elizabeth, and Hazel. Mr. Bartlett died March 6, 1915, in his home at 727 Cherry Street.

Deeply interested in local history, James Agard Bartlett provided a link in the flour industry which had flourished in this city. He was born May 18, 1884, to Mr. & Mrs. Albert L. Bartlett. After attending Rockford public schools, he graduated from Dartmouth. He married Helen Rothchild, December 23, 1930, in Madison, South Dakota. Their children were: Mary (Mrs. David Caskey) and Myrta Bartlett.

James Agard Bartlett, known as Agard, was a civic leader, a veteran Rockford College trustee for twenty years, and treasurer of the board of trustees for eighteen years. His mother, Myrta Agard Bartlett, was a graduate of Rockford College.

The Bartlett mill engaged in the manufacture of flour in a limited way until 1924. This mill on the water power was sold that year to the Rockford Paper Company. About the same Bartlett tore down the elevators on Cedar Street and erected modern warehouses. The concern was then known as Bartlett Storage Warehouse Company, with Mr. Bartlett as president. He died in October of 1954 at his home on Spring Creek Road.

TO SERVE THEIR NEED

By Hazel M. Hyde

From Headquarters National Association of Army nurses of the Civil War, General Orders No. 2, Jefferson City, July 1, 1919, Point IX read

"Every effort was made during the last session of Congress, to obtain an increase of pension for the Civil War Nurses; and tho many promises were made, Congress adjourned without taking any action. After the opening of the present Congress, in response to an urgent appeal from our Judge Advocate, Gen. George B. Loud, Representative Fuller of Illinois, introduced the following bill, which was referred to the Committee on Pensions:

"That the rate of Pension to be hereafter paid to all Army Nurses now drawing pension, or entitled thereto, under existing law, shall be \$30 per month..."

Among the persons to whom Tryphena Pettis Wilcox wrote was General George B. Loud. In October, 1919, he enclosed a picture of himself, an article from the "Bugle Call; and a notice of a GAR meeting in New York. These may be called

"The Dear Comrade Letters". Quoting from one of his printed articles "Milestone On the Way", are these words, "It is the full significance of our word 'Comrade--that gentle salutation of the human heart that lives in all languages of man that winds and turns and runs through all the joys and sorrows of the soldier's heart. The things we enjoyed or suffered together, the laughter and tears, the joy of conquest or the perils of defeat, these were our experiences in common and we recall them as one, for they have been forged into a chain about us, unbreakable, inflexible, imperishable through life.

In the October 16, 1919 letter he wrote with pencil in a very heavy large handwriting, from his address 1338 Franklin Avenue, New York City, on paper of the New York State Soldiers' and Sailors' Home (for which he was on the board of trustees): "Dear Comrade Tryphena, Yours here. God bless you, dear. A letter from Washington tells me the Republicans having a majority in both houses are trying to push that bill thru before election has its effect ... Let me predice success within 40 days from Oct. 14 for our pension. Write me then Nov. 25..."

Who was this man? George B. Loud was born in Maine: His great Grandfather Jacob Loud and five sons served in the Revolutionary War -- the only instance of six from one family here recorded. Enrolled when 16 in the Civil War, a commissioned officer at 18, was 21 when mustered out. He was editor of several newspapers and chairman of Grand Army of the Republic of New York City for 10 years prior to 1941. Major General Daniel Sickles said of him in the NATIONAL TRIBUNE: "Gen. Loud is regarded as the most determined and successful fighter in the entire country for the rights under the law, of War Veterans in public positions, saving from removal and distress in countless homes, winning out 95 per cent in more than 500 cases by his vigorous work, fearlessness and determination."

Jan. 9, 1920, General Loud wrote, "Dear Comrade. Yours rec'd. I have but a moment. Just starting for the Soldiers Home... It will probably pass Senate this month... as 40 of the 122 living out of 1200 nurses are starving. Loyally, Geo. B. Loud."

The reference to Miss Pettis' service at City Point recalls the advance on Petersburg. In 1864 it was part of Grant's plan that Gen. B. F. Butler with the Army of the James should march against Richmond and Petersburg in Virginia. He embarked on transports at Fort Monroe and steamed up the James. May 6th, the troops were landed at City Point, at the junction of the James and Appomattox. City point was a federal supply station.

Another place where Tryphena served was point of Rocks Hospital. General Butler was active in that area. Continuing his drive for Petersburg, he had been driven back by General Beauregard. At the point where the curves of the

James and the Appomattox bring these two streams within less than three miles of each other, Butler threw up a line of intrenchments, with his right on the James at Dutch Gap, and with his left on the Appomattox at Point of Rocks. This position was very strong. It also provided a protection for City Point as a landing place for supplies.

Eight time-stained booklets are Rosters from 1914 to 1922-23 (1917 missing and a roster sometimes served for two years) of the National Association of Army Nurses of the Civil War 1861-1865. This group was organized in Washington, D. C., in 1892 and reorganized at Louisville, Ky., in 1895, by Mrs. Emily E. Woodley. Approximately seventy-five nurses were listed in 1923. The addresses given for Mrs. A. Tryphena Wilcox are interesting, being: in 1914, 565 Allison Street, Ashland, Ore.; in 1915, Box 683, Rialto, Cal., and in Rockford from 1916 on being; in 1916 the 1235 South Main address, in 1918 she resided 511 Loomis Street, in 1918 she was again listed at 1235 South Main Street and from 1920 - 1923 she lived at 210 Oakley Ave. A tour of these Rockford addresses will lead the history-minded person into some of the areas that are packed with early Rockford life and activity.

On the back of an envelope addressed to Mrs. Maude Cormack, her daughter, 210 North Avon Street, there is this notation:

Services at Memorial Hall

Flag at half mast

Flag over coffin

Sons of veterans auxiliary

Where she worked: City Point, Point of Rocks, Smallpox hospital and diet kitchen

The letter inside was from Helen Brainard Cole, National Secretary of National Association Army Nurses of the Civil War 1861-1865, dated January 21, 1924. In part it said: "My dear Mrs. Cormack,

The letter bearing intelligence of your Dear Mother's passing" received above date. You have my profound sympathy.

As you suggest, you will send me more details, which I will appreciate to have for our memorial services in Boston 1924 (August) when the National Encampment Grand Army of the Republic have their date for Convention...

Thank you for your thought in communicating to me the "Crossing of the Bar" of your Dear Mother, our Dear Army Nurse Sister.

Truly there is no tie just like this of our Army Nurses Comradship:

Again assuring your of my tender though of you and realizing when these experiences come, only The Sustaining Infinite can minister to every need."

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