

# Bunchgrass Historian

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CLASS OF SERVICE

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WESTERN UNION

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12205

SIGNS

DL = Day Letter  
NM = Night Message  
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MLY = Cable Letter  
WLT = Week-end Letter

Received at 10:12 AM

B4 SKR 122 NL CNT PCT=BEVERLY HILLS CALIF JAN 16 1933

PULLMAN HERALD=  
PULLMAN WASH=

TWO OR THREE PEOPLE BEEN SENDING ME CLIPPINGS FROM YOUR PAPER TELLING ME ABOUT SOME OLD PROFESSOR UP THERE NAMED CLAUDIUS O (SOMETHING) I DONT WONDER HE PUT THAT O AFTER CLAUDIUS WELL HE SAYS I DONT KNOW NOTHING ABOUT INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS BUT HE DOES I'LL COME UP THERE AND DEBATE HIM SOME TIME ON ANYTHING FOREIGN HE CAN THINK OF WHETHER ITS AN AFFAIR OR NOT HE SAYS HE GETS ALL HIS NEWS OUT OF A MAGAZINE CALLED FOREIGN AFFAIRS WHEN A MAGAZINE I CAN LEARN HIM FOREIGN AFFAIRS I WANT TO TANGLE WITH A GUY LIKE THAT WHY DONT THESE PROFESSORS LAY OFF ME I DONT BOTHER THEM IN FACT I DONT READ EM WHY DO THEY READ ME YOURS=

WILL ROGERS.  
535P.

THE QUICKEST, SUREST AND SAFEST WAY TO SEND MONEY IS BY TELEGRAPH OR CABLE



# ***The 50th Anniversary of the Time that Will Rogers Didn't Come to the Palouse***

by  
**Stephen E. Balzarini**

It all started on a cold, snowy evening in mid-December 1932, in the auditorium of the Pullman High School. Dr. Claudius O. Johnson, professor and chairman of the Department of History and Political Science at the State College of Washington, was scheduled to address the monthly meeting of the P.T.A. on one of his specialties, international relations. As Johnson recalled in a letter to a student, the six or seven folks in the audience who braved the wintry weather to hear the lecture declined his invitation to “forget the whole thing and go back home to their fires.” The audience wanted to hear his talk; they had courageously faced the elements and the general feeling was that they “would suffer through it [Johnson’s talk] come hell or high water—or even Christmas.”<sup>1</sup> In the course of his remarks, which were entitled “What Kind of International Education Should We Give Our Children?”, Johnson observed that many Americans relied on Will Rogers for their sole source of information on international relations. “Will Rogers knows little about international relations and folks who permit his writing to influence or shape their belief are likely to find themselves all wrong.” The local weekly, *The Pullman Herald*, reported the speech under the headline: DON’T TAKE ROGERS AS WORLD AUTHORITY.<sup>2</sup>

Three weeks later, Will Rogers wired the *Herald* that several people had clipped the story and sent it to him.<sup>3</sup> The tone of the telegram implied that Rogers thought that “some old professor” who got all of his information out of a magazine called *Foreign Affairs* would be easy pickings in a talking match. “I’ll come up there and debate him sometime on anything foreign he can think of,” Rogers quipped, “whether it’s an affair or not.” Obviously annoyed by Johnson’s remarks, Rogers concluded his wire by saying: “Why don’t these professors lay off me. I don’t bother them. In fact, I don’t read them. Why do they read me?” Johnson’s censure had struck an exposed nerve. In recent weeks, Rogers had received a lot of criticism from the academic community for his remarks concerning international financial matters, war debts, reparations, and the failure of nations to cooperate in the face of the Great Depression. Rogers had endured the reproach as long as he could; when he finally lashed out, Johnson was his unsuspecting target. With his cable to the *Herald*, Rogers had thrown down the gauntlet; the “old professor” was quick to pick it up.<sup>4</sup>



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—Will Rogers Memorial  
Claremore, Oklahoma

*Claudius O. Johnson (left), History and Political Science Professor, attracted national attention when his remarks criticizing nationally prominent humorist, Will Rogers (right), were printed in the **New York Times** and other major papers of the day.*

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On January 20, 1933, both the *Pullman Herald* and the *Washington State Evergreen* (campus newspaper) printed Rogers' challenge. The *Evergreen* went so far as to interview Johnson and publish a restatement of the views which precipitated the challenge. Will Rogers was no authority on international questions, Johnson insisted. "It is most unfortunate that the American people take him seriously for very often he is far wrong." According to Johnson, Rogers had more influence than all the history professors in the country put together and that was regrettable.

Will Rogers states that all he knows is what he reads in the paper. That is exactly true; he is not a student of international relations. He gets hunches and impressions, but they are not better than the impressions of any Tom, Dick, or Harry. We must have our humorists and for my part I like Will Rogers very much. I enjoy him, and read him every day, but we can fairly insist that even our humorists be accurate in the facts they use. That is my only quarrel with Will Rogers.<sup>5</sup>

A few days after the *Evergreen* article Johnson formally accepted Rogers' challenge. In a telegram dated January 23, 1933, he outlined what he believed to be acceptable conditions and a suitable topic for the debate. Johnson purposefully chose a topic which allowed a great deal of latitude for Rogers' acerbic wit: "Resolved that the store of knowledge assembled from newspapers and travel is insufficient to serve as a basis upon which to advise the American people on international problems." Rogers could argue the affirmative and take as much time as he needed. Johnson needed only 30 minutes for the negative. The date was to be fixed at Rogers convenience and the place was to be the Washington State College gymnasium. An admission charge of

\$1.00 was to be collected at the door and distributed to charities in California and Washington. He assured Rogers of a large and impartial audience: "It will not be packed with my fellow profs either. They don't have the price of admission." Johnson warned that he would be coached by Babe Hollingberry, who, Johnson quipped, had "never lost a contest on his home ground." If the suggested topic was unacceptable to Rogers, Johnson offered an alternative: "Resolved that the United States is a member of the League of Nations." Johnson would argue the affirmative. Johnson signed the telegram: "Yours for enlightenment on international relations," and indicated that a letter would follow immediately.<sup>6</sup>

In the letter that followed, Johnson softened his harsh remarks about Rogers' ignorance. According to Johnson, the original *Herald* article had not printed all of the nice things that he had said about Rogers, such as: "you are a great humorist, a most useful American, the country's leading Democrat, and that you and Morrow and Lindberg were the best ambassadors we've ever had." Johnson conceded that he had told his audience that Rogers "sometimes" gave the American people a "bum steer" on international matters. Johnson argued that despite Rogers' disclaimers that people should not take him seriously, the American people did take him seriously and, consequently, he influenced the way Americans thought.

Now since you are right nearly all the time, and since you are taken seriously whether you want to be or not, don't you think you ought to be very careful not to mislead us? A little misinformation on international affairs can do a lot of damage; for, as you know, it's practically impossible to manage 'em any how.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, Johnson was using his folksy rather than his professorial style.

Rogers wasted no time in replying to Johnson's telegram of January 23. If he could arrange the time, he would be pleased to debate "to old prof." Rogers indicated that the receipts from the event should go to the unemployed and suggested Seattle as a better site: "Where is Pullman anyhow; what's a town doing named after a sleeping car."<sup>8</sup> The debate was on! Both combatants seemed eager and from the exchange of telegrams and correspondence, the proposed debate would have all the trappings of a circus event designed to entertain those who would be fortunate enough to see it to benefit those suffering from the Great Depression.

By his cordial response, Rogers tacitly acknowledged Johnson's right to criticize; perhaps Johnson's reprimand even had some merit? He would not, however, be criticized for things which he had not said. The telegram of January 24, in which he agreed to the debate, took to task another on the WSC faculty: "The guy I am at war with there now is a prof of economics named Dummer."<sup>9</sup>

When the entire issue blew-up in mid-January, other members of the college faculty were eager to get into the act. Economist Dr. Edwin F. Dummier insisted in the January 20 *Evergreen* article that Rogers' pronouncements on international war debts merely clouded the issue and contributed further to the ignorance of the American public on a very sensitive and complicated problem. Dummier illustrated his charge with one of Rogers' wisecracks concerning American loans to Europe: "We loaned them the money and they never even spent a cent with us."<sup>10</sup> Using Dummier's ideas, Johnson argued in the January 23 letter that the Oklahoma cowboy's simplistic economic views could cause a great deal of harm while shaping the American public's perceptions of international affairs. Although unnamed in the Johnson letter of January 23, Dummier's views were well represented. Johnson revealed that another "old professor" at WSC—whose name Johnson wouldn't use because "it's a funny sort of name and I'm afraid you couldn't pronounce it"—argued that Rogers was half

wrong on the amount loaned and completely wrong when he asserted that the Europeans hadn't spent a cent in the United States. By getting the facts wrong, Rogers was misleading the American people. By misleading the people, Rogers was misleading the Congress and it was hard enough to get the Congress to do the right thing.<sup>11</sup>

Someone was informing Rogers about the events in Pullman. His telegram of January 24, repeated the Dummier quote from the *Evergreen* and even listed Dummier by name, although it was misspelled—intentionally, no doubt, so that it would be mispronounced. Rogers challenged “Dummer” to produce the quote: “If he can show me any paper that had that in it under my name, I will eat the whole paper even if it was in the New York telephone directory.” Conversely, if Dummier could not document his claim, Rogers demanded that Dummier “chew up the longest rope I have got.” Then Rogers concluded his telegram indignantly. “How did he get into this anyhow.”<sup>12</sup>

Despite Rogers' anger at Dummier, the debate with Johnson seemed certain. WSC President, E. O. Holland, cabled Rogers on January 29, officially inviting him to

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## Will Rogers

Although the name, Will Rogers, is familiar to most of us, we remember him in only a general way. He was the cowboy humorist who twirled his lariat and spoke to 1930's America on virtually every subject imaginable—from politics to disarmament, from surviving the Great Depression to international debts. Mostly, we remember him as a folk humorist who possessed a biting and subtle charm.

Born in Colagah, Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), in 1879, Rogers was part Irish and part Cherokee Indian. Educated in Missouri, he also learned to ride and rope at an early age. For a time, he worked as a wrangler on a ship transporting mules to the British forces engaged in the Boer War. While in Johannesburg, South Africa, Rogers joined a “Wild West Show,” calling himself “The Cherokee Kid.” Upon returning to the States, he twirled rope at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904, moved from there into vaudeville, and became a part of the Ziegfeld Follies of 1917.

His movie career began in 1918 with the film *Almost a Husband*. Rogers appeared in a dozen films over the next several years, but none achieved commercial success. Next Rogers tried his hand at writing and directing; *The Roping Fool*, *Fruits of Faith*, and *One Day in 365* were all disasters and he lost all his money. Returning to the Follies in 1922 and 1924, the cowboy-comedian also made several two-reel Hal Roach comedies between 1922 and 1927. Unfortunately, Rogers was a dialog comedian, his clumsy slapstick did not sell in the era of silent film. The spoken and written word were the real Rogers media and he had considerable success whenever he used them. He went on a lecture tour, began writing for the newspapers, and produced a humorous little book entitled *Rogerisms—The Cowboy Philosopher and the Peace Conference*; he did a similar work on prohibition. *The Saturday Evening Post* hired him to observe Europe for them and, while there, he appeared at the London Pavilion.

The advent of “talkies” gave Rogers a second chance in Hollywood. In 1929 he made a film entitled *They Had to See Paris* and became an “instant” success as audiences, hearing his voice, took Rogers to heart. Fox Studio gave him \$50,000 for his first “talkie” and offered him \$60,000 to do a second. In 1931 and made four pictures for the studio; the following year he produced four more films, including *Down to Earth*.

As Rogers became more popular, he was drawn to make comments about American politics. In 1932, a presidential election year, some believe that Rogers was instrumental in getting Roosevelt elected. In 1932 his name also began appearing in the film popularity polls; by 1933 he was second only to Marie Dressler—in 1934 he became “number one.” The film that he completed during the early thirties for Fox Studio were: *State Fair*, *Doctor Bull*, *Mr. Skitch*, *David Harum*, *Judge Priest*, and *Handy Andy*. By 1934 he was able to negotiate a contract for \$125,000 per film, plus 50% of the profits. In 1935, the year he died in a tragic plane crash in Alaska,

campus for the purpose of staging the contest. Holland offered the college gym and assured Rogers that it would be filled to overflowing. The gym seated six thousand and Holland indicated that another thousand could be accommodated standing. He insisted that three or four thousand students and townspeople would attend and there would be no problem drawing another three thousand from the surrounding countryside. He even indicated that a special train would be chartered to bring people from Spokane. Holland suggested that the two men debate in Pullman on one evening and repeat the confrontation in Seattle on the following evening. WSC's President suggested that Rogers fly into Spokane and then motor to Pullman and stay as the guest of the College.<sup>13</sup>

Again Rogers responded immediately. He wired Holland on January 31, that if it were at all possible, he would "make it up there, eat my words, meet Johnson and Dummeier, get some money for somebody that is hungry and maybe find out where Pullman is, which up to now I have been unable to do." The actual date of the debate was not set, however, because Rogers' wife was ill and in the hospital, "so home relations are

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Rogers made five more films; in 1935 he was also eclipsed in movie popularity polls by the future Ambassador to the United Nations. Shirley Temple. Cute was "in" homespun humor was "out."

## Claudius O. Johnson

Claudius O. Johnson, noted author and teacher, was also a humorist. Colleagues and students had little fear that he would acquit himself well if the debate with Will Rogers ever took place. As the *Evergreen* declared, it would be a case of "homely cowboy philosophy matching wits with professorial logic, and, in this case, professorial logic with some southern humor thrown in."

Johnson was born in Greenville, Virginia, January 6, 1894. He attended the University of Richmond and received his A.B. in 1917. His education was interrupted by military service during World War I; he attained the rank of first sergeant in the infantry. Johnson received his M.A. from the University of Chicago in 1921 and his doctorate from the same institution in 1927. He taught at the University of North Dakota (1921-1926) and the University of Chattanooga (1926-1928) before coming to WSC in 1928 as chairman of the newly-formed Department of History and Political Science. The college's first full-time political science professor, he served as chairman of the joint department until 1951 and retired from the faculty in 1960. A colleague described him as "one of the most stimulating people who ever entered the classroom at WSU."

While at WSC, Johnson served in a number of capacities. For example, Governor Clarence D. Martin appointed him to the state Constitutional Revision Committee (1935-1936). He was vice president of the American Political Science Association (1958) and delivered one of the first of WSC's Invited Faculty Addresses. Johnson traveled as a Fulbright lecturer at the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne in Australia (1953-1954), a visiting professor at the Universities of Minnesota, Illinois, Colorado, California at Berkeley, and as a Fulbright visiting professor at the University of Athens (1961-1962).

Claudius O. Johnson was a widely-published author. His texts have been used nationwide. *Government in the United States*, *American National Government*, and *American State Government* all have appeared in several editions. He also wrote *Carter Henry Harrison I: Political Leader* (University of Chicago Press, 1928) and *Borah of Idaho* (Longmans, Greene, 1936; University of Washington Press, 1967) and scores of scholarly articles.

In 1926, Johnson attended the peace conference in Geneva, Switzerland as a guest of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, received an honorary Doctorate of Literature from the University of Richmond in 1961, and belonged to the Lambda Chi Alpha social fraternity. Although he retired in 1960, he remained active, continuing to accept visiting teaching appointments and to publish. In 1967, WSU's eight-story Claudius O. Johnson Tower, where the Political Science Department is now located, was dedicated in his honor. Dr. Johnson died in February 1976.



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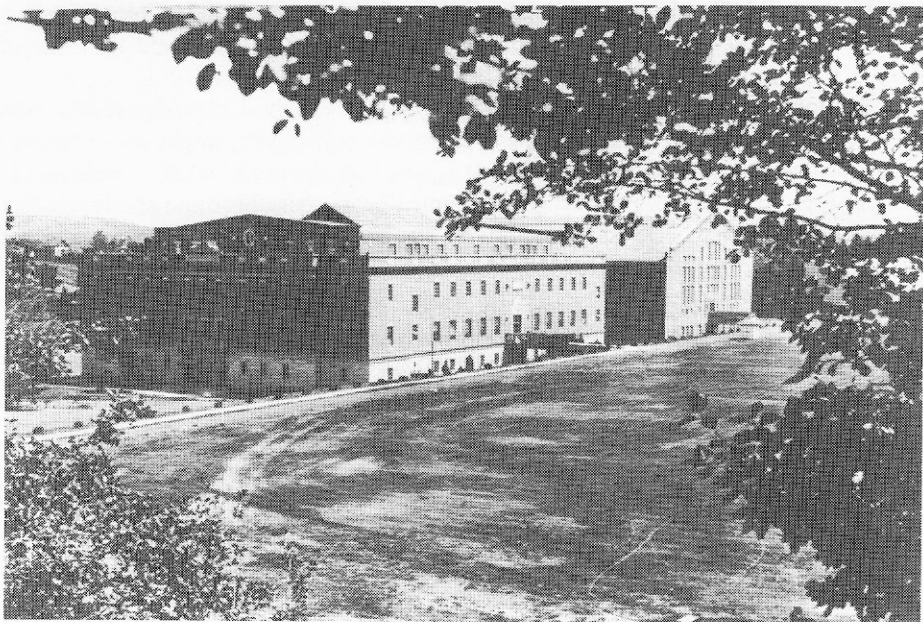
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*Washington State University President, E. O. Holland was an eager promoter of the Rogers-Johnson Debate. To the right is Edwin F. Dummier, Economist at WSU, was drawn into the debate after he, too, made disparaging remarks about Will Rogers in the syndicated national press. Rogers particularly enjoyed punning on Dummier's name, referring to him as "Prof. Dummer". Dummier was a graduate of the University of Chicago and taught at WSU from 1921 to 1946.*

more important than foreign relations right now and always were." Also, Rogers had a movie commitment which had to be fulfilled before the debate could be scheduled.<sup>14</sup> In addition to debating Johnson, Rogers would have to "eat" his words. Dummier, unwilling to eat Rogers' longest rope, spent many hours in the WSC library pouring over back issues of the *Spokesman-Review*. Confident he could produce the disputed quote, Dummier finally found it in the Sunday, April 3, 1932 issue of the Spokane paper.<sup>15</sup> Remarking that he "never did like rope anyway," the economist apologized to Will that the *Spokesman-Review* was not as large as the New York City telephone directory, but that he would be expected to dine on the Sunday issue of the Spokane paper when he showed up on campus to debate Doc. Johnson.<sup>16</sup>

The proposed debate sparked tremendous regional as well as local interest. Immediately after Rogers' challenge became public, John F. Dore, the mayor of Seattle, wired Johnson that the Seattle Civic Auditorium, with a seating capacity of 8,000, would be available if the combatants agreed to move the site of the debate. Johnson thanked the Seattle mayor but politely declined the offer. The debate, if it were to occur, would be in Pullman.<sup>17</sup> The Pullman City Council, somewhat piqued at Rogers' geographical ignorance, wired him on February 7, that Pullman was in Whitman County, 78 miles south of Spokane in the "famous Palouse country, the breadbasket of the world, the paradise of the Indians before this Northwest country was settled by white men, . . ." Pullman, the Council's note continued, was famous for its "22 artesian wells, its fine brand of football, and its ample supply of college profs, . . ." Mayor J. P. Duthie assured Rogers that the crowd would not be a problem; orders for blocks of tickets were pouring in from many distant points. Duthie expressed his surprise that





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*Bohler Gym, the proposed site of the encounter between Claudius O. Johnson and Will Rogers as it appeared in the early 1930s prior to the construction of the new gym.*

Rogers was not aware of Pullman's whereabouts. After all Pullmanites had long known of Will Rogers. "In fact," the Pullman mayor jokingly concluded, "we named our great athletic stadium after you 20 years ago."<sup>18</sup>

The debate seemed to be on; both participants seemed willing; the residents of the Palouse and the Pacific Northwest were excited by the prospect, and Johnson began immediately to pay the price for his new found notoriety. Friends and acquaintances from all over the country wrote to wish him well, assure him of their support, deride Rogers' abilities, offer advice on how to handle the cowboy humorist, and associate themselves with the great and near great. A friend from the University of North Dakota kiddingly informed Johnson that "I never appreciated you when you were here, although I laughed at your jokes—to be polite." Remarking that fate had blessed Johnson: "Any man who can get as much attention as you have received from Will Rogers is too big a man to stay in Pullman, Washington, to teach farm people out-of-date ideas on economics!"<sup>19</sup> A number of Johnson's former students, commenting that what they knew about foreign affairs they had learned from Johnson, expressed their confidence that the "old professor" would have little trouble besting Rogers as both a debater and as a comedian.<sup>20</sup>

What could only be called an anti-Rogers letter arrived from a man in Chicago. He had seen the news reports of the proposed debate in the *Christian Science Monitor* and felt compelled to write to Johnson. The Chicagoan indicated that he had seen Rogers on the stage 20 years earlier and enjoyed the cowboy's wit, "but since that time he has taken to giving people advice on all sorts of subjects and has appointed himself a sort of official commentator on all matters of importance. I've never yet heard or read

anything sensible that he uttered.” After further derisive remarks, the Chicagoan closed: “We hear Rogers in the papers, on the radio, and on the screen and are tiring of him. I hope you squelch him forever.”<sup>21</sup>

But Johnson did not escape criticism. An editorial in the University of Montana student newspaper, *The Kaimin*, remarked that although Rogers might not be “an international authority,” he quite often “hit the nail on the head” when criticising the follies of the American people and government. Rogers spoke his mind and for that he should be applauded. The editorial implied that although Johnson’s criticisms might be well founded, an American institution such as Will Rogers had the right and the duty to keep the American people on the track. Consequently, Johnson’s derogatory remarks concerning Rogers were not appreciated.<sup>22</sup> Many predicted, as did *The Chronicle* of The Dalles, Oregon, that Johnson would have his “hands full” when he tangled with the dean of American humorists. Rogers might not have academic training, but he had traveled widely and discussed foreign affairs with noted European statesmen. “Men more important than the Pullman professor have been bested by Rogers’ quick wit and ability to express himself in homely but forceful language.”<sup>23</sup> One individual used the Rogers-Johnson debate to vent his spleen regarding the state of higher education in America. Johnson received a derisive letter from a Dr. Aphelius Brown charging the American university system with producing nothing but “parrots” who, like cracked phonograph records, merely mimicked their “so-called” professors. Brown repeated a previously printed definition of higher education: “Education is a Normal School training given by abnormal profs to sub-normal students.”<sup>24</sup> The implication of the letter was that Rogers was the real thinker and educator and Johnson was just another of the “parrot” teachers.

While Johnson received a certain amount of criticism for his attack on Rogers, he also benefitted in the form of offers for speaking engagements. Johnson addressed the Spokane Chamber of Commerce luncheon on February 14. The flyers announcing the event billed Johnson as: “The man who made Will Rogers holler; The only man who ever smoked out the mayor of Beverly Hills.” But Johnson had to share the limelight on that occasion with Homer McDonald’s “Three Queens of Harmony” performing “rythmic, tuneful, harmonius melodies you will like.” The following evening, February 15, Johnson addressed the Colfax Chamber of Commerce; he also accepted an invitation to speak to the University of Idaho chapter of the American Association of University Women on the evening of March 14. Johnson’s fame and local demand continued on into the summer of 1933. He was featured at the Fourth of July celebration at the MJG Ranch in Wallowa Lake, Oregon, as “the man who called Will Rogers’ bluff.” At the July 4th gathering he delivered a talk entitled “Time, Tide, and Other Things.”<sup>25</sup>

Not only did Johnson receive speaking offers, but he had numerous suggestions as to how to raise and spend the expected revenues from the proposed debate. The Superintendent of the Spokane Public Schools, Orville C. Pratt, suggested to Rogers that the proceeds, which Rogers had stipulated must go to the unemployed, should be distributed in the Spokane region by the Community Chest. Pratt acknowledged that he might be biased, “possibly because I am president of the Community Chest just now,” but, he argued, because he was president, he was aware of the tremendous load “which the Chest is obligated to carry.”<sup>26</sup> Another Spokane resident reasoned that because the object of the debate—to raise money for the unemployed—was a worthy one, why not broadcast the debate over a nation-wide hookup and “let Rogers in his

own way ask everyone listening in to give a nominal sum, say \$0.25, to the station to which they are listening, proceeds to go to Charity in their own district.”<sup>27</sup>

Although letters poured in from all over the country, Rogers was strangely silent. By early March, Johnson’s patience seemed to be wearing thin. He wrote to Rogers: “I say what about the debate? If Mrs. Rogers has pretty well recovered, let’s come to an agreement.” The “old prof” also wanted to nail down the debate topic: “I’ve heard that you want to debate Ignorance v Intelligence, you representing ignorance. All right, I guess most any subject will do, but it seems like we ought to come to an understanding on some subject.” Johnson wanted Rogers to know that he was serious: “We all mean business up here. I’ll bet you a box of Currier’s (don’t know how to spell it) Tablets against three Grayco shirts that I can get at least one laugh from the audience for every two you get.” Another issue which piqued Johnson was Rogers’ constant reference to “the old prof.” Johnson resented the appellation; he wasn’t old and to prove it, he sent Rogers a recent photograph: “Here is a photograph taken just a few months ago. Please send it back as they cost me 50 cents each.”<sup>28</sup>

Rogers breathed the spark of life back into the debate issue with a telegram on March 13. He assured the Pullmanite that the debate was not forgotten; Mrs. Rogers was still ill, so much so, that Rogers had even missed President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inauguration. Rogers indicated that the movie business was slow and that he might have a lot of time on his hands to debate.<sup>29</sup> Johnson immediately telegraphed Rogers: “Some Republican told me the other day that you had no idea of debating me. Now I can tell him that he is wrong *again*.” Although pleased at the renewed prospect, Johnson returned to a persistent problem: the debate topic. He was content with the original proposal, or they could argue newspapers vs. books, or ignorance vs. intelligence. Johnson wanted to argue for either books or intelligence. He would leave the topic choice to Rogers, but the debate should take place between mid-April and mid-May. They were to meet in Pullman one night and Seattle the following. “Roosevelt hasn’t relieved all of the unemployed in this state yet and he probably hasn’t put California in shape for the next real estate boom either,” consequently the money raised was still destined for the unemployed of both states.<sup>30</sup>

The mid-March exchange was to be the last between Rogers and Johnson. Although there were feeble attempts to resurrect it, the debate was a dead issue. In April the WSC debate team traveled to Pasadena, California, for the Pacific Coast Tournament. Two of the debaters attempted to contact Rogers to remind him of the proposed contest. Unable to see the WSC men, Rogers did, however, autograph copies of the January *Pullman Herald* which initially broke the debate story with Rogers’ challenge. On one of the newspapers Rogers wrote: “I got scared of the old boy—but I think I will get up there and take him on some day.”<sup>31</sup> With that last gasp the debate became a dead issue. Johnson wrote a friend in late May: “Will is not coming up. He still remembers the controversy and refers to it from time to time in newspaper interviews or in his platform performances, but I think that is as far as we will ever get.” Johnson thought about asking Rogers to come to Pullman for the WSC-Cal. football game; they could debate either before or after the game. With that passing thought, Johnson became philosophical: “Well, it was a lot of ‘ballyhoo’ anyhow, A thing of this kind, as you know, doesn’t help me professionally. Of course, everything of this kind is grist that comes to Rogers’ mill.”<sup>32</sup>

Tragically, Johnson and Rogers would never have the chance to debate. Two years later, Rogers was killed in a plane crash just south of Point Barrow, Alaska. Ironically,



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—Will Rogers Memorial  
Claremore, Oklahoma

*Nothing so dramatically illustrated the contrasting positions of the debaters than these photographs. C. O. Johnson (left) in a suit, stylish topcoat, and fedora, contrasted sharply with the image Rogers projected of the slow-talking, quick-witted, rope-twirling spokesman for the common man. The Johnson-Rogers correspondence did prove that the Professor could match the cowboy's sarcastic jibes and calculated misstatements with his own brand of powerful humor. This may have contributed to Rogers' failure to come to Pullman for a debate.*

in an interview granted to the *Los Angeles Times* during the debate controversy, Rogers indicated that traveling was important to him and that he wanted to go to Alaska. "I guess I'm the only man that wants to go to Alaska in the dead of winter, but it's a lot safer landin' up there in winter than any other time. Those planes can land on the hard frozen ice much safer than durin' the thaw."<sup>33</sup> Rogers and Wiley Post, famed aviator and pilot, were killed when their pontoon plane crashed in a lake shortly after takeoff on August 15, 1935.

Although the two antagonists did not debate in the Spring of 1933 they did, however, part with a mutual admiration which comes from two professionals, albeit different professions, exchanging good-natured jibes. When recalling the incident, Johnson remarked, "it was all on a very pleasant basis after Will's first telegram." Johnson respected Rogers as a humorist and spokesman for the American way of life. In a short eulogy, Johnson lauded the very traits which had spawned his original criticism.

Will Rogers was a humorist, not a reformer. His humor was as popular as the vernacular from which it was fashioned, as satisfying as the prejudices to which it catered, as soothing as the ignorance it left undistributed, and, therefore, as dated as the Hoover stock market boom in which it flourished. Will Rogers was American—American in his overreliance upon newspapers and common sense, in his middle class virtues of thrift and good fellowship, in his abounding faith in his country, and in his affectionate regard for all men everywhere.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, Rogers respected the academic world and the people who had earned the right to live in it. Shortly before the debate incident, Rogers refused an honorary university degree that members of the Oklahoma Chamber of Commerce were trying to get for him. He wrote to Chamber officials:

Whats all this mess over some degree. What are you trying to do, make a joke out of college degrees? They are in bad enough repute as it is, without handing em around to comedians. The whole honorary degree thing is the 'hooley.' I got too much respect for people that work and earn em, to see em handed around to every notorius character. I will let Oklaga Kindergarden [sic] give me a D.A. (Doctor of Applesauce).<sup>35</sup>

The debate never did take place. Rogers never visited Pullman. Johnson and Rogers never met. The "great debate" has passed quietly into the oblivion which history accords events that "almost" happen. To draw significant conclusions from this story would be somewhat presumptuous; there is no earthshaking lesson to be learned. But the debate did draw national attention to Pullman, the State College of Washington, and to Claudius O. Johnson. And for one brief shining moment, Pullmanites could revel in the knowledge that one of their own had bested America's greatest humorist at his own game. □

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Claudius O. Johnson Papers, letter from Johnson to Mrs. George Matson, April 13, 1964, Washington State University Libraries, Manuscripts, Archives and Special Collections (hereinafter cited as Johnson Papers). All correspondence and telegrams cited in this article are contained in the Johnson Papers, WSU Libraries.

<sup>2</sup>*The Pullman Herald*, December 23, 1932.

<sup>3</sup>According to the *Spokesman-Review*, January 28, 1933, p. 8, col. 1, Clinton E. Snyder, Wenatchee resident and former Pullmanite, sent the clipping to Rogers.

<sup>4</sup>Telegram from Rogers to *Pullman Herald*, January 16, 1933.

<sup>5</sup>*Washington State Evergreen*, January 20, 1933, pp. 1 and 3. Hereinafter cited as *Evergreen*.

<sup>6</sup>Telegram from Johnson to Rogers, January 23, 1933.

<sup>7</sup>Letter from Johnson to Rogers, January 23, 1933.

<sup>8</sup>Telegram from Rogers to Johnson, January 24, 1933.

<sup>9</sup>Telegram from Rogers to *Herald*, January 24, 1933.

<sup>10</sup>*Evergreen*, January 20, 1933, p. 3, col. 2.

<sup>11</sup>Letter from Johnson to Rogers, January 23, 1933.

<sup>12</sup>*Pullman Herald*, January 27, 1933, p. 1, cols. 5-7, telegram from Rogers to *Pullman Herald*, January 24, 1933.

<sup>13</sup>Telegram from Holland to Rogers, January 29, 1933.

<sup>14</sup>*Pullman Herald*, February 3, 1933, p. 1, cols. 3-4.

<sup>15</sup>*Evergreen*, February 10, 1933, p. 1, col. 6.

<sup>16</sup>*Pullman Herald*, February 3, 1933, p. 8, col. 2, telegram from *Pullman Herald* to Rogers, February 1933.

<sup>17</sup>Telegram from Dore to Johnson, January 22, 1933; telegram from Johnson to Dore, January 23, 1933.

<sup>18</sup>*Evergreen*, February 10, 1933, p. 1, col. 7, telegram from Duthie to Rogers, February 7, 1933. Duthie, in his reference to the football stadium was referring to Rogers Stadium, now Rogers Field, named after Governor John F. Rogers.

<sup>19</sup>Letter from Albert H. Yoder (Director of Extension at the University of North Dakota) to Johnson, March 28, 1933.

<sup>20</sup>Letter from Vernon Towne, an attorney in Rosalia to Johnson, January 23, 1933.

<sup>21</sup>Letter from Thomas P. Adams to Johnson, April 14, 1933.

<sup>22</sup>University of Montana student newspaper *The Kaimin*, January 24, 1933, editorial.

<sup>23</sup>*The Dalles, Oregon Chronicle*, January 30, 1933, editorial.

<sup>24</sup>Letter from Dr. Aphelios Brown to Johnson, January 22, 1933.

<sup>25</sup>Johnson's Papers, letters and handbills.

<sup>26</sup>Letter from Pratt to Johnson, March 31, 1933.

<sup>27</sup>Letter from A. H. Patterson to Johnson, February 2, 1933.

<sup>28</sup>Letter from Johnson to Rogers, March 1, 1933.

<sup>29</sup>Telegram from Rogers to Johnson, March 13, 1933.

<sup>30</sup>Telegram from Johnson to Rogers, March 14, 1933.

<sup>31</sup>Johnson Papers, autographed copy of the *Pullman Herald*, January 27, 1933.

<sup>32</sup>Letter from Johnson to K. Brooke Anderson, May 25, 1933.

<sup>33</sup>*Evergreen*, February 17, 1933, p. 1, col. 7.

<sup>34</sup>Johnson Papers, Rogers eulogy.

<sup>35</sup>Bryan B. Sterling, ed., *The Will Rogers Scrapbook* (New York: Grossett and Dunlap, 1976), p. 44.

# The Town That Jonathan Johnson Built

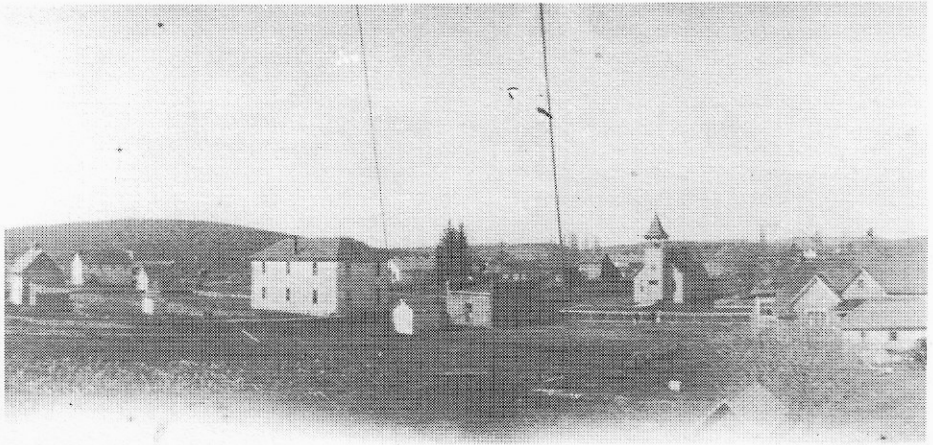
by  
Carol L. C. McCaulley

If you ask residents of Whitman County where Johnson, Washington is, you will be doing well to get an answer out of half of them. Johnson is a small community located about nine miles southeast of Pullman and five miles northwest of Colton. The total population is approximately sixty-five. There are no stores, no post office, school or gas station. A drive through the heart of Johnson on its main road reveals a large grain elevator, an old school building which serves as a community center, about eight houses, two old warehouses and some ammonia tanks. Bald Butte Road has the only other remnants of the old town, a rural fire station next to a small empty bank building and about six homes. The other three streets in town have the remaining fifteen houses and an assortment of pastures which contain horses, cattle and sheep. A look at the town today gives little indication that it was once a promising village.

Johnson began as a small community of homesteaders called Pleasant Flat. This settlement went through three stages which made it what it is today. First, it was developed into a town. This phase in the town's history was marked by rapid growth but was relatively short in duration. What followed was a period of first rapid and then slow decline leading to the third phase, the community as it exists today.

During the 1870's, homesteaders poured into Whitman County. It was in this movement that Johnson (Pleasant Flat) found its beginnings. The homestead act of 1862 allowed public land to be given away in lots of 160 acres for a small fee as long as the land was occupied and cultivated for five years. Settlers who came to Pleasant Flat found a land covered with thick bunch grass and Indian trails. Many homesteaders started a timber culture which allowed them an additional 160 acres of land. Orchards of fifteen to twenty trees were planted by most of the early settlers. These orchards did quite well until the water table dropped too low to support them (none of these orchards are left in Johnson today). Mail was received at Leitchville, a combination hotel, store and post office and stop on the Colfax stage coach line. A tunnel is said to have connected it to a fort. Leitchville was located about three miles southwest of Pleasant Flat.

William N. Hooper was one of the first settlers. He was followed closely by his son Miles. William grew up in Edwardsport, Indiana where his family raised corn. On his twentieth birthday he married Sarah Elizabeth Azbell. Miles was one of their ten children. William and Sarah raised their family in Edwardsport. Miles married Mary Elizabeth Bartlett and some years later moved with his family to Oregon where both he and Mary taught school. William heard stories about the area called Whitman County. These prompted him and Sarah to move to the area in 1877. Miles and his wife followed in 1879. William homesteaded land half a mile south of Pleasant Flat, while Miles settled half a mile west of the community. The William Hoopers orchard contained ap-



—Alfred Druffel

*An early photograph showing the major buildings of downtown Johnson.*

ple, cherry and plum trees. They also grew current, gooseberry and raspberry bushes and vegetables. Their wheat crops flourished. These crops had to be hauled by wagon to Alмота for shipping. The Indians from Bald Butte would often stop to water their horses at a spring in front of William's homestead.

William Amos was the next settler to homestead in the area, arriving in 1877. The family names of some of the other early settlers included: Rookes, Lewis, Johnson, Gibson, Gray, Davis, Wiggins, Wolfe, Huggins, Cole, Heallys, Boatwright, Maynards, Ferguson, Hackney, Lane, King and Gratham.

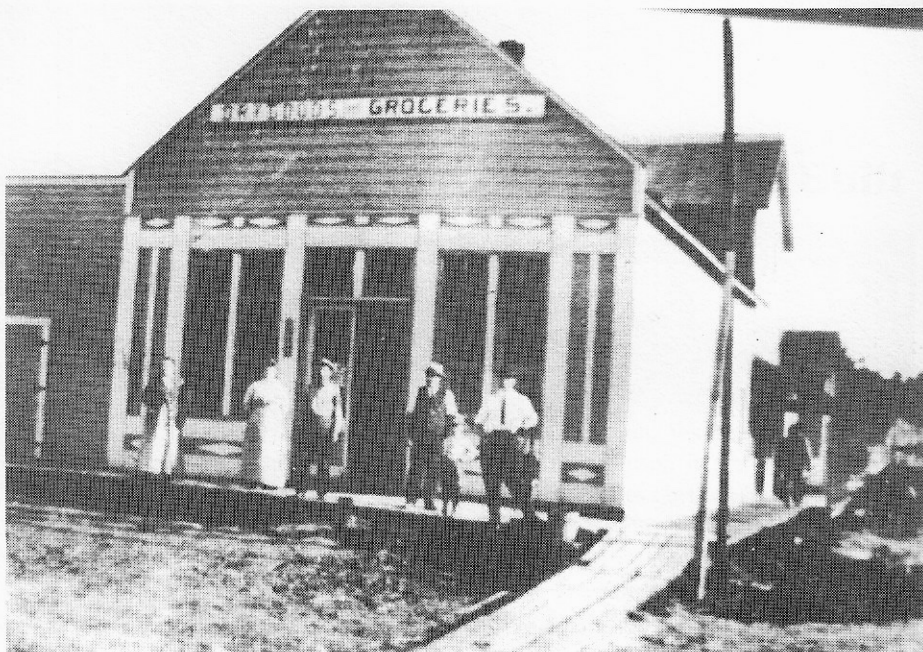
The Pleasant Flat School, which was also known as the Harper School, was built in 1886 on a hill east of Pleasant Flat. Mrs. Miles Hooper was the first teacher. Another early teacher was Mrs. Charlie Gray. Mrs. Gray had moved to Pleasant Flat from Uniontown, where she taught school and her husband was a barber.

Jonathan Johnson was responsible for the creation of the town. He was born and raised in Cadiz, Ohio. At the age of 20 he moved to Missouri, and then to Kansas. He did not meet with financial success in either of these states. As a result, in 1877 he migrated to the area known as Pleasant Flat. In this community his luck began to change. Jonathan married Margaret Ellen Lewis, daughter of another early settler, Jesse Lewis (a Mexican war vet). Farming was hard at first for there was no market and no easy way to transport his crop but these conditions gradually began to improve.

The 1880s was a time for slow steady growth in Pleasant Flat. Mrs. William Hooper started the first post office in her home. A grain elevator was built and Bert Ellsworth opened a general store to meet the needs of a growing farming community.

The Palouse branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad began construction through town in 1887. The community helped to grade the bed for the tracks. Heavy snow halted construction during the winter but the track was completed in 1888. Although the track was not yet firmly fastened to the ground, the first train arrived on July 1, 1888 at 5:45 p.m. A holiday was declared in honor of the event and crowds came from all around to celebrate.

The construction of the railroad was a tremendous aid to the farmers who now had a better way to ship their grain. Jonathan Johnson built a side track for the railroad



—Alfred Druffel

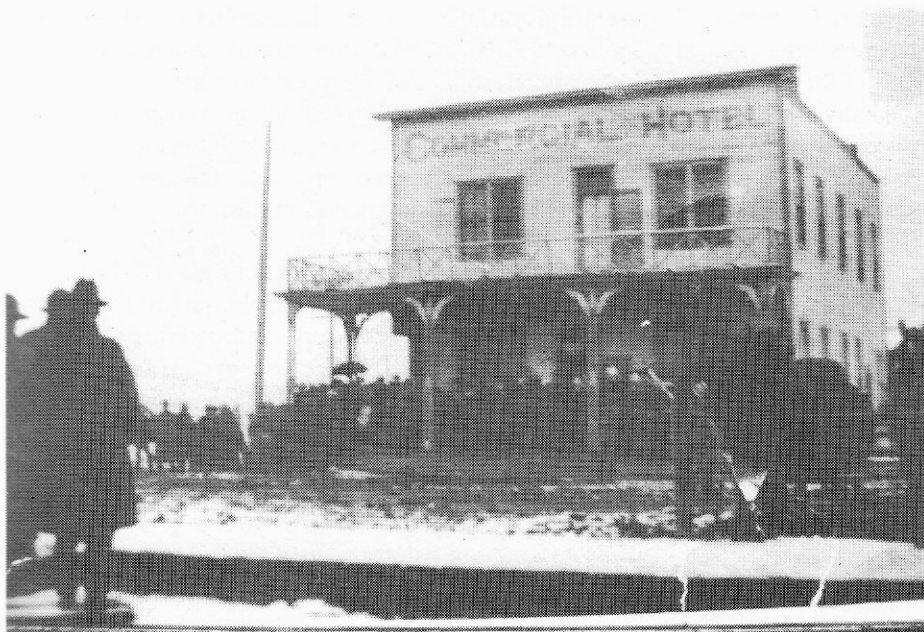
*The Commercial Hotel in downtown Johnson. The “Army Boys” are all assembled for a photo session and big send-off to World War I. The photo was taken in 1918.*

which became known as Johnson siding; Mr. Johnson began to prosper. He decided that the rapid growth in the area warranted a town. He wasted no time in going to work on the project. Johnson had some of his land platted to sell for the new town. Jake Davis, another early settler who came from Tennessee in 1885, helped him break land for \$2.75 an acre. This land was then sold for \$15.00 an acre. Mr. Johnson and his wife presented the plat map, to be filed, at the county courthouse on July 28, 1890. Johnson then took out notices announcing the new town and property in Spokane papers. Within a few months a town existed. A new two story wood frame schoolhouse was built. Two churches, one Presbyterian and the other Church of Christ were established. Many businesses also sprang up, including: two general merchandise store, a hotel, a lumberyard, two grain warehouses, a drug store, a furniture store, a livery stable, two blacksmiths, a chop mill, a harness shop, a hardware store, a grocery, a printing office, a tinner, a barber and a meat market. This was a temperance town. The most popular vice in town was the “Hickey Dive.” This was a card room where one could win wooden chips which could then be traded for merchandise. Many of the residents today remember going to the Hickey Dive as children to seek their fathers. It seems that many of the male residents spent a great deal of time in this establishment.

The town became known as Johnson (most likely because the train stop was referred to as Johnson siding, and the fact that Johnathan had started the whole venture). By 1891 it had its first newspaper, the *Johnson News*. This paper was edited by H. M. Brainerd and was published until 1892. It was succeeded by the *Johnson Optic* which was published between 1894 and 1896 by J. J. Murray who was also editor.

Johnson’s business community continued to grow. By 1895, according to the *Optic*, the Ellsworths ran the White Star Store, which sold dry goods, clothing, shoes,





—Alfred Druffel

*The "Johnson Boys" congregated in front of the Commercial Hotel in the spring of 1917 before going off to World War I.*

groceries, etc. George Libby ran a hardware store and the Boatwrights owned the J. W. Boatright & Co. Grocery store. The Commercial Hotel, a two story structure, was owned by F. S. Libby. Later, around 1900, Mrs. George Kite, a former school teacher, kept the hotel and served ten to fifteen dinners on Saturdays and Sundays for forty cents each. The town even had a barber, J. E. Woodard, who set up business in the hotel every sabbath evening and Sunday morning. The bank in town, Farmers & Traders Bank, was organized in 1892 by Langly and Crockers; it was capitalized at \$10,000.00 and had a par stock value of \$100.00. Even Jonathan Johnson went into business as an insurance agent (some sources list him as a banker as well).

## Johnson Social Life

Many social activities kept the town busy. The woodsmen of the World and the Women of Woodcraft maintained a two story lodge building. The lodge was said to be one of the finest buildings in town. The main floor was an auditorium and the upper level the lodge. In later years, after the lodge closed, this building was called the opera house. The school also provided many social outlets. One issue of the *Johnson Optic* mentioned a basket social, a sleigh ride, a dance and a play, all occurring during a two week period.

The town of Johnson never had a real form of any government. There was an attempt to incorporate about 1915; it failed because the population had dropped to five less than was required by the state to form a town.

The phase of rapid growth in Johnson's history did not last long. Although many of the businesses lasted beyond this period, there simply never was a strong enough economic base to support the little village. The residents were, for the most part, farmers. The 1900 census showed that, out of a total population of 503, 63.82% were

involved in farming. Of these 42.55% owned or operated a farm and 21.28% were farm laborers. The railroad employed 5.6% and 6.38% listed themselves as day laborers. Out of the remaining 24.11%, 11.35% were merchants. Of those between the ages of 20 and 40, 17.76% experienced periods of unemployment for an average of 5.96 months out of the year. Over half of these, unemployed, were heads of households. Almost half (48.45%) of the residents rented their homes or farms. Of those considered residents of Johnson, about half (45.63%) lived in houses in town while the other half (54.37%) lived on farms.

An issue of *Northwest Magazine* indicated that both Mr. Johnson and the Railroad expected the orchards in the area to flourish. They felt that Johnson (the town) would become a major shipping point for fruit crops. The railroad predicted that 100 carloads of fruit would be shipped from Johnson in 1892. This never happened. The orchards, as already mentioned, could not be supported by the water table. The crops grown along the Snake river never became a major shipping factor for Johnson.

Heavy rains in 1893 had a devastating effect on many of the farmers, including William Hooper. Wheat sprouted before it could be threshed. Many of the farmers, like William, had notes that had to be paid and no crop to do it with. Jesse Lewis eventually lost his farm due to this disaster and William Hooper retired and moved into town. Many of those who were younger had to move on.

What became of Jonathan Johnson seems to be a mystery. With the exception of an article about the the town which appeared in *Northwest Magazine* in 1892, nothing is recorded about him. It is clear that he was no longer living in the town by the time the 1900 census was conducted. He is said to have moved to Oregon but none of the older residents of the town have any memory of anything being said about him by their parents or anyone else. One might speculate, based on the time frame in which he appears to have left the town, that he was ruined in the rains of 1893 along with so many others. It is also possible that he simply found it difficult to settle in one place.

During the First World War, many of the young men of Johnson enlisted in the navy. Most of those who went overseas returned. When the war ended the flag was raised in the town and a celebration held.

A new school was built around 1914. This two story wood framed building was complete with a belfry. The upper grades were taught on the second floor and the lower grades on the first.

Basketball was an important community event. Perry Thompson started the first team. Before there was a gym the team played in the original schoolhouse which had been converted into a hay barn on Jake Ailor's property. The school rented this barn for twenty-five dollars a year and would use it not only for basketball but to hold socials. The basketball team of 1916 almost won the county championship but lost to Pullman by one point. The new school's gym had its own unique features. It served as both a gym and an auditorium. The roof was low and flat which resulted in baskets having to be made just right. A wood stove set very close to the playing area at one end. Being used to these hazards gave the Johnson team a slight advantage when playing at home.

The school was the one thing that kept the town together during its declining years. It became the real social center of the town. By 1925 a new building was needed. The old building was torn down the day after school let out and the new one completed in time for the next school year. Many of those in the lower grades were very disappointed that they never made it to that second floor of the old wood framed building.



—Alfred Druffel

*The 1914 girls' basketball team assembled in front of the old Johnson school building.*

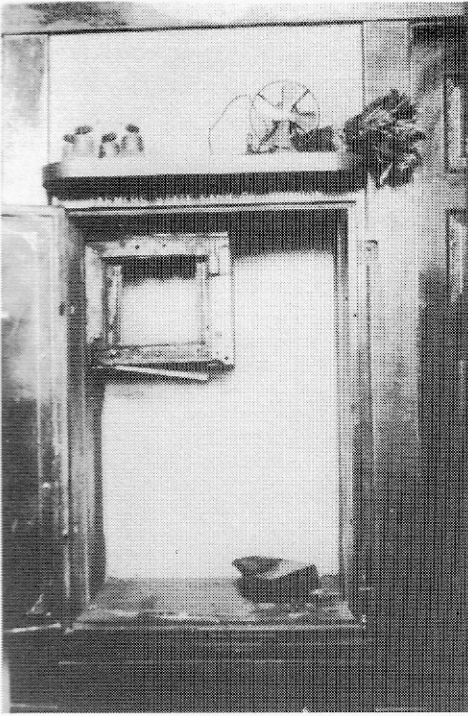
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Brick from the Uniontown brickyard was used to construct the new building. It was a well equipped school for its day.

During the depression the teachers started a tradition by putting on a play for the community. At the end of the play they announced who would put on the next play. It became a regular event, with the cast of each show announcing the cast for the next play at the close of the performance. These plays went on for some time and were very popular.

On November 10, 1923, the Farmers State Bank was robbed. The robbers parked their car in the cemetery (on the outskirts of town) and cut the phone lines. They walked into town from there and used four charges of nitroglycerin to blow the safe. The explosion awakened Jake Steiner, who lived across the street. He got his rifle and started shooting at the bank. The robbers had soaped the vault but fled with the \$1,400 dollars they had. The police felt that they were the same group that had stolen gas in Pullman that same night. The robbers were never caught. Some residents felt the robbers must have known that the bank had more money in it than usual at that time. It was also speculated that it was done by the same gang that robbed the Cottonwood and Rosalia banks. For a town that did not experience crime this was a very big event.

Johnson was hit with a flood in 1927. It was caused by a sudden severe rainfall which came pouring off the butte. This flood brought down remnants from the slaughter house on the butte. It also caused more serious damage. The Johnson Booster Club was formed to aid the flood victims. The Booster club was and is made up of the women of the community and has continued to help provide for the needs of the town. One of the club's contributions was the construction of concrete sidewalks along the main street. Up until then there had been a board walk.



—Alfred Druffel

*“On November 10, 1923, the Farmers State Bank was robbed. The robbers parked their car in the cemetery and cut the phone lines. They walked into town from there and used four charges of nitroglycerin to blow the safe.”*

## Outgrowing Its Dreams

The increasing popularity of the automobile made it easier to do ones shopping in neighboring towns which could offer more variety. The old main road between Pullman and Colton went through Johnson. When the highway was built in 1936 it bypassed Johnson by one mile. With the new highway, Johnson was no longer visible to travelers and salespeople. This did nothing to stay the decline of the business community of the town. The population had dropped to about 200 or less.

In 1941, after considerable debate, the school was closed. Residents had the choice of sending their children to either Pullman or Colton. The Pullman School District, which took over ownership of the building, let the community use it as a community building (and still does.) The closing of the school set the seal on the towns demise.

By the late 1950's the post office was closed and residents began to receive their mail through Pullman (Star Route). Later, Colton took over delivery of the majority of the community. The town today remains divided. Some of the children go to school in Pullman, others in Colton. Most receive their mail from Colton but some through Pullman.

One thing that has remained and continues to grow is the Johnson Union Warehouse. It was established in 1909 for the storage of grain. It was capitalized at \$2,500, and had a capacity of 50,000 bushels. The warehouse was managed until 1947 by Fred Hooper (son of Miles Hooper.) In 1936 it almost sold out to the Pullman Grain Growers, but instead reorganized as a farm cooperative. Walt Nelson became the next manager. In 1948 Johnson Union began buying other facilities and has continued to expand. The Johnson Union Warehouse is presently managed by Mitchell Payne. It



—Alfred Druffel

*Residents of Johnson gathered on the morning of November 11 to assess the damage to their bank. The previous evening, the thieves made their get-away down the Lewiston grade and were never apprehended.*

now has a capacity of 1.65 million bushels and its assets at the close of 1982 were \$1.7 million.

Johnson was a town that grew out of dreams. Having just come through hard times it seemed that prosperity was finally shining. Anything was possible. The land was fertile and surely could support a thriving village. When Jonathan Johnson imagined the town he saw it as a community of prospering farmers needing a handy place to buy supplies and do business. The railroad made it a good shipping point from which large wheat and fruit crops could be transported. What Jonathan did not foresee were the wet years that would ruin many, or the automobile which made a drive to Pullman a simple matter. The town of Johnson did not grow in a gradual fashion or as a response to actual need. It was created with the expectation that the need for its existence would be shortcoming. It was not a realistic expectation. The population simply could not support a town of its size. This led to its fast decline, beginning in the late 1890's and becoming more rapid around 1915. The few stores that remained into the thirties were sufficient to take care of the needs of the community. With the close of the school and the bypass by the highway, even these few businesses could no longer be supported. One might have suspected that Johnson would disappear altogether as other towns have.

The community of Johnson still exists. Not as a business center but as home of a group of people. The people of Johnson remain a distinct community. They care about the "town." There is a true community spirit that refuses to die. Many who left Johnson in their younger years have returned to retire in the place they love. The Booster club still meets monthly to help provide for the needs both social and economic of the community. The Rural Fire station and its volunteers feel a commitment to protect the community. Every Fourth of July the town puts on one of the best little parades in existence. This parade, that was started by the Alfred Druffel children

around 1968 as a family project, has become not just a Johnson affair but a county event. People come from all around to participate in this unorganized festivity. Perhaps Johnson is not all that Jonathan Johnson once dreamed it would be, but after 90 years it is still a true community and perhaps is even better than what he had in mind. □

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—Whitman County Historical Society

*An 1887 photograph showing Mr. Perkins and his son, as well as other members of the family.*

## ***The Perkins House*** **compiled from information** **collected by** **Tom Fryxell**

Sometime in either 1884 or 1886 James Perkins built a two-story house in Colfax with gingerbread scrollwork and four balconies to accommodate his growing family. Just when the house was built is uncertain, although there are two different explanations. The first contends the house was completed in 1884, taking note of an article from the *Colfax Gazette* on October 19, 1884. This account quoted a Mrs. Simon Dreifuss who resided in the town at that time. In a letter, she stated the large house was “real new” on November 25, 1884, Sumner’s birthday, and that he was born there. Support for this argument is an archway in the house between the living and dining rooms where a large hook was put to hang a jumper for the baby. The hook has since been removed.



—Whitman County Historical Society

*Typical scene outside the Perkins home on a summer's evening. At the right of the picture notice Mr. Perkins reading the **Colfax Gazette**.*



The second school of thought asserts that the house was not built in 1884, but two years later in 1886. On August 20 of that year the *Palouse (Colfax) Gazette* noted:

The foundation for J. A. Perkins' spacious residence was laid out this week.

It occupies the site immediately in front of his present dwelling.

This is substantiated by yet another article which appeared eleven months later in the same paper. In July 29, 1887 the *Gazette* announced that, "J. A. Perkins' elegant residence is receiving a pretty coat of paint," which could indicate the final touches were being applied to the house. The family may have moved in before the painting was completed.

Based on these newspaper accounts, it appears probable that the home was built in 1886. They are contemporary accounts, not recollections looking back over half a century. The first article, in 1886, talks about laying the foundation; the second article confirms the first, indicating the home was finished about eleven months after the construction began. The earlier date given by Mrs. Dreifuss seems, then, to be invalid, as it is impossible to put in a foundation two years after a house was built.

As for Sumner's age in relation to the house, this also favors the latter date. Jeanette Saboe, the eldest of Mr. Perkins' grandchildren, was told by her relatives that the family moved in *when* Sumner was a baby. This means that he was born in the cabin. Children of one or two years of age are many times referred to as a "baby" and can use jumpers. Thus, the newspaper articles and Sumner's age in regard to the house both establish that 1886 is the accurate construction date of the house.

## Social Activities at the House

The house not only provided more living space for the Perkins family but in addition served as an excellent setting for their numerous social functions. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, entertaining was a very important event and the family held a wide variety of social activities at their home. On such occasions personal dress was a top priority. For these events women had one very special outfit. The next year they bought another and last years dress became second best.

One of the most popular types of entertainment was the lawn party. Croquet, ping-pong, and other games were played. Those who preferred to visit often sat in the large wooden swing the Perkins had on the lawn. Many times guests were treated to a buffet, which was usually held at noon. Sometimes when the parties were held later in the day, Chinese lanterns hung from the porch providing a soft glow when evening arrived. Towards the end of the afternoon, guests often took part in a poetic contest where they would write a verse on a certain theme. A winner was chosen and refreshments served, signaling the end of the party. In addition to hosting the parties, it appears that it was also the duty of the hosts to report the activities of the evening and who attended to the local paper. The Colfax tabloids often contained such information.

After James Perkins died, Minnie, Myrtle and Sumner discussed their mother's future. They were concerned as Sarah, now sixty-five, had hurt her hip. It was decided that Sumner and his family, who lived in the south end of Colfax, should move into the house. With Sumner and Ethel were their two children, four year old James Allen II or "Jim" as he was called, and one month old Louis. The boys were later joined by two siblings with the arrival of Donald in 1922 and the Perkins' only daughter, Catherine, in 1925. With four children under the roof, the Perkins' house was again filled with the rambunctious activity of youth as it had been a generation earlier.

Sarah Perkins, although slowed physically by advancing age, wrote a history of the Plymouth Congregational Church in honor of the 56th anniversary of its founding. As the last surviving charter member, Mrs. Perkins had observed the changes her church went through, growing from a handful of people to an established religious body playing an important role in the life of the town. This project was in a way the crowning achievement of her life. Not long after completing the biography, Sarah Perkins died quietly in her sleep at the family home on May 7, 1935, completing a life that saw the valley change from an empty glen with only a trail or two, to a bustling town with paved streets.

In 1959, Sumner suffered a heart attack and died several days later. Always interested in school activities and sports, a fund drive was started to purchase an electric scoreboard for the new high school as a memorial to him. Such an honor was fitting as it reflected his enjoyment of athletics and the role it played within the context of education's purpose of preparing the city's children for a useful life.

Ethel continued to live in the house until the late 1960's. The house, huge even by modern standards, was still heated by stoves in each room and lacked modern insulation which caused it to be quite cold in the winter. Ethel moved to a nursing home in the south end of town and lived quietly the last few years of her life. She died on the morning of July 11, 1970, the last representative of the Perkins family in Colfax.



—Whitman County Historical Society

*The Perkins House during restoration. Notice the first floor and a portion of the second floor have been repainted.*



—Whitman County Historical Society

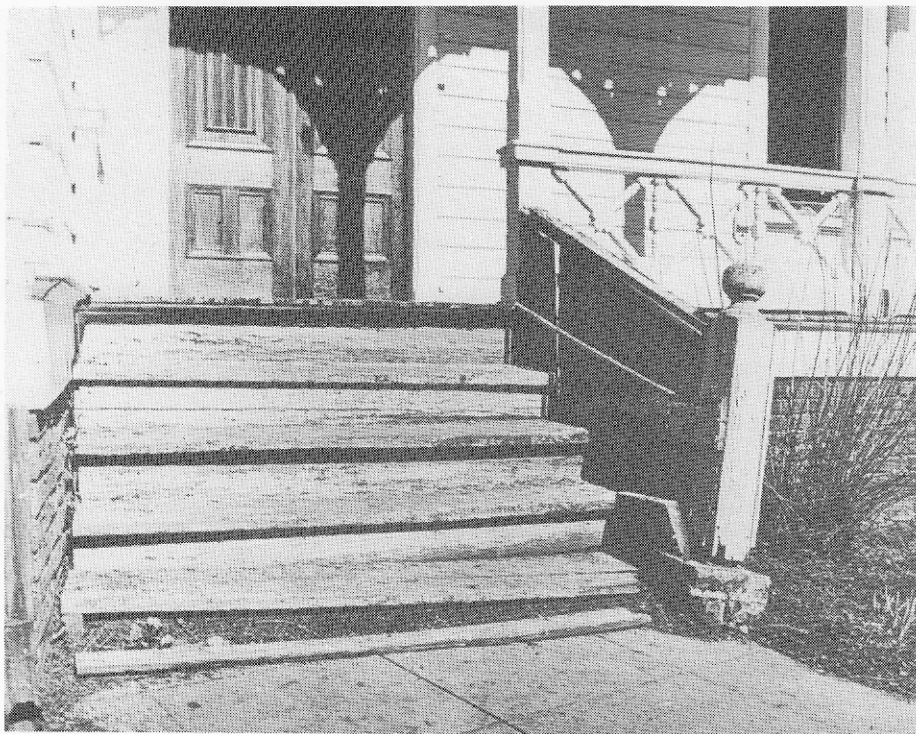
*Restoration of the outside complete. This view of the house is the one which the visitor first sees when approaching the property.*

## The Perkins House Restoration

The Perkins house was purchased from Dr. and Mrs. John Bodley in 1973 by the then newly-formed Whitman County Historical Society for \$13,900. In order to meet this financial obligation, the organization embarked upon an extensive fund drive; within a year, more than \$20,000 had been raised. This energetic beginning encouraged a friend, George Gannon, to give the fledgling historical society a \$13,000 no-interest loan, repayable in ten years. Events then transpired rapidly. Through the help and cooperation of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a series of grants were obtained to begin the expensive and extensive restoration project.

When work actually began in 1973, the Perkins House Restoration was one of the few grant-in-aid projects in the state not connected with an urban center; it was the only one in Whitman County. The structure, built in 1886 when the family had outgrown their log cabin (still standing behind the main house) was badly in need of repair. The first priority of the restoration committee was to stop this deterioration and launch a program to place the house in a restored condition. Fortunately there were sufficient examples of wood trim features of both exterior and interior features to eliminate the necessity of speculating about original design elements. Thus, almost without exception contractors who completed the work were given actual patterns for duplication. An 1887 photo, taken a year after the house was completed, enabled architects to adhere to the original building design.

Many things were done to save the building. In addition to modern wiring, an ADEMCO fire alarm and an intruder detection device were installed. These latter systems were connected with the Colfax city fire and police departments. The major carpentry work on the Perkins house included the complete removal and rebuilding of the porch floors and steps. In addition an enclosure around the west porch was removed—this had been a comparatively recent addition. Many of the turned balusters, railings, trim, moulding, sash, siding, corner quoins had to be reconstructed



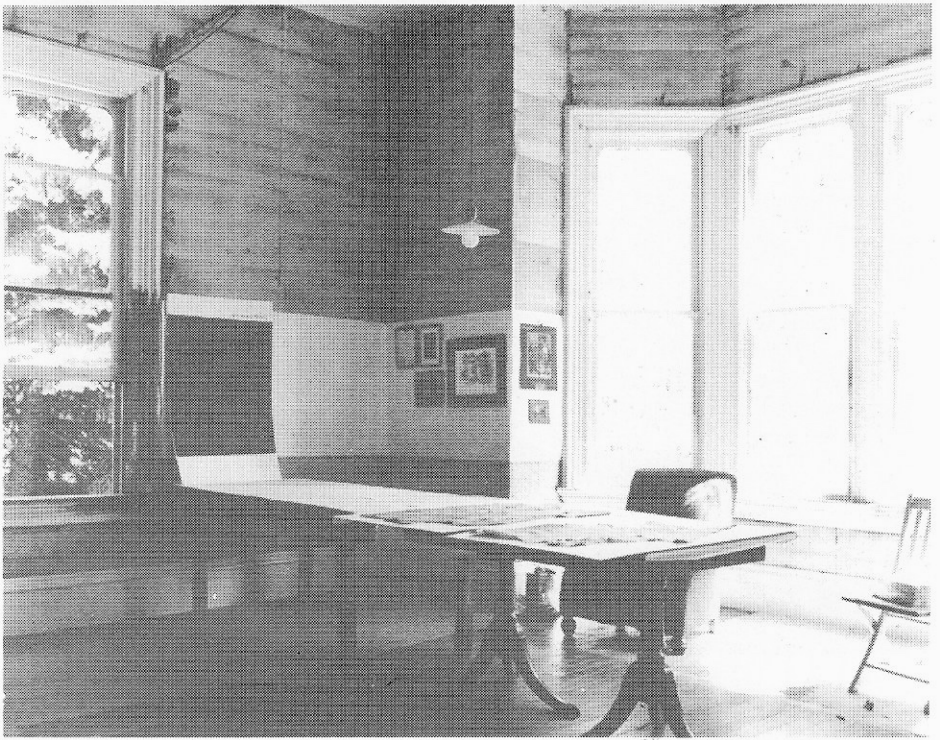
—Whitman County Historical Society

and replaced. The foundation was inspected and pointed; the house's three chimneys were taken down to the roof-line and rebuilt in accordance with the 1887 photograph. Then the house was levelled and plumbed.

Finally, the loose paint was scraped and wire-brushed from the house exterior. Cracks were filled; loose boards were secured and damaged members were replaced. After stripping bare the interior, work began on trying to discover the patterns of the original wall coverings in the house. During this process, workers found that the Perkins family frequently changed their wallpaper patterns and, in some cases, painted over many layers of covering. Early on in the restoration process, the board of the historical society made the decision not necessarily to "recreate" the home as the Perkins family had lived in it, but to furnish the home as it might have been done by an eastern Washington family of similar social and economic background. Further, the board of directors definitely did not wish to create a museum. Instead, they chose to have this fine old building become an accurate historical environment in which social events could take place.

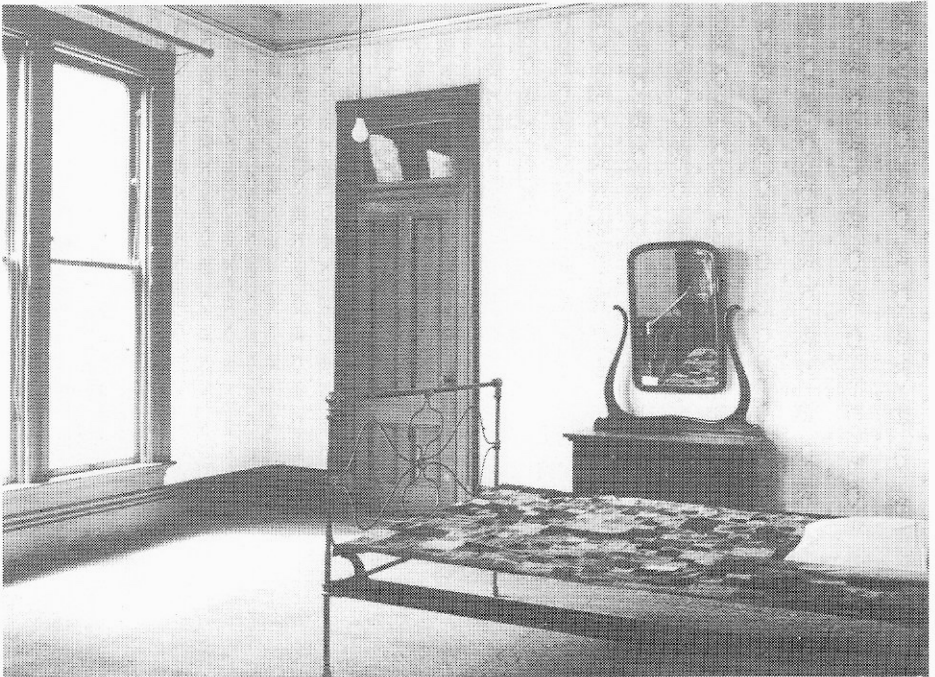
Since the grants received for the restoration of the Perkins House (as well as the Perkins Cabin), have been successfully completed, the Whitman County Historical society has continued to maintain and upgrade their investment. The wallpapering of the interior of the building is now virtually completed. Now work has begun refinishing and refurbishing the many beautiful antiques that are to be found in the rooms.

The purchase and restoration of this fine facility is a project of which the society is proud. The Perkins House has become a visible symbol of Whitman County's rich historical heritage, a symbol that is displayed and open to all, a part of our living legacy.

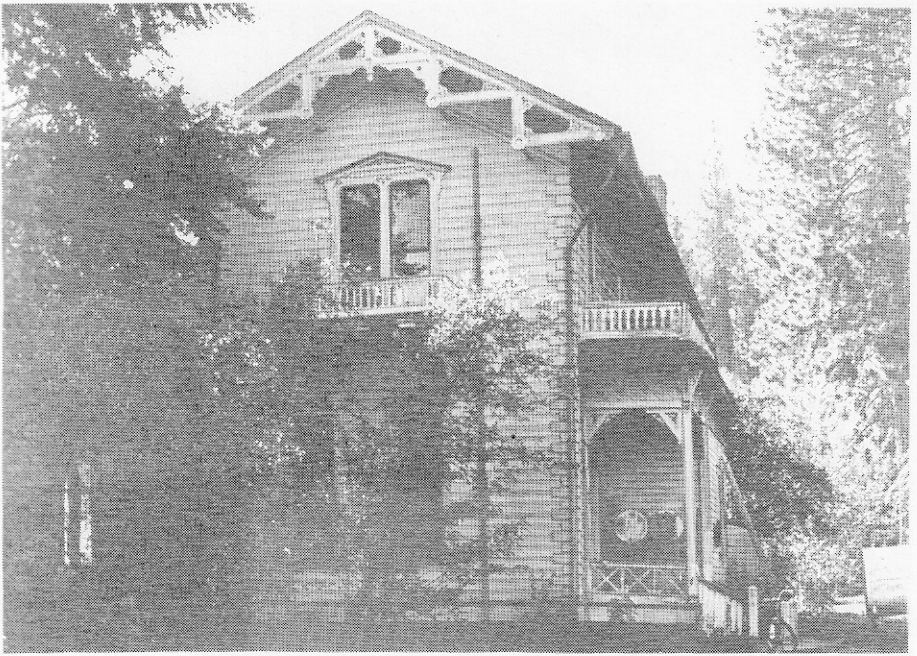


—Whitman County Historical Society

*The condition of the main steps of the south porch leading to the front door show the extent of the deterioration (facing page). The front parlor during early stages of restoration (above). The upstairs master bedroom before restoration began (below).*



—Whitman County Historical Society



—Whitman County Historical Society

*The original porch was not enclosed as shown above. The enclosure was removed and the porch was reconstructed as it was first built. New railings, steps, and deck were installed.*



—Whitman County Historical Society



—Whitman County Historical Society

*James and Sarah Perkins circa 1920. The photograph shows the stone wall and iron gate in place.*

## Fair Land, Fair Land

by A. B. Guthrie, Jr.

Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982, 262 pp., \$14.95

*Fair Land, Fair Land* completes A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s great saga of the settlement of the Northwest which began in 1947 with the publication of *The Big Sky*, now widely acknowledged as a landmark novel of the frontier experience. Guthrie, a long-time resident of Teton County, Montana, opens *The Big Sky* in 1830 when Boone Caudill, thinking he has killed his father, runs away from his Kentucky home to join Jim Deakins, soon to become his close friend, and Dick Summers, a stalwart and resourceful frontiersman. Later Boone and Jim set off on their own when Summers forsakes the life of the mountain man, marries, and settles down as a Missouri farmer. Boone takes the Blackfoot Indian girl Teal Eye as his mate and, until tragedy strikes, he and Jim live a wild and free existence as trappers and scouts on the banks of the Teton River, a northern tributary of the Missouri.

*The Big Sky* was both a critical and commercial success that brought its author well-deserved fame. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1948 and was made into a popular film by Howard Hawks in 1952. In his excellent introduction to the current paperback edition novelist and critic Wallace Stegner praises the novel as a crowning example of mature frontier fiction that reaches mythic proportions.

Guthrie followed *The Big Sky* with two sequels. In *The Way West* (1950) Dick Summers, his wife now dead, returns west in the mid-1840s and leads a wagon train of several families, among them Lije and Rebecca Evans, to Oregon. *These Thousand Hills* (1956) continues the tale of the Evans family in the late 19th Century as they leave Oregon to become cattle ranchers in Montana. Guthrie's series is one of the treasures of Northwest literature and *Fair Land, Fair Land* fills in the years 1845 to 1870. Until now Guthrie's readers were left with several unanswered questions. What became of Boone after he killed his best friend? Where did Summers go after his tenure as a wagon train scout? And what happened to Teal Eye and her blind son Nocanseer after Boone's disappearance? *Fair Land, Fair Land*, the story of Dick Summers final years, answers many of these questions and concludes by posing a few more.

All along Summers has been one of Guthrie's most endearing characters. In many ways he is the archetypal frontiersman. A man of sublime contradictions, he is Cooper's Leatherstocking made real by Guthrie's fine eye for historic detail. Summers is tall, lean, grey-eyed and tough as nails. He has a kind smile and enjoys a good joke, but beneath his easy-going exterior he is deeply concerned with the moral issues implicit in the settlement of the frontier. He has an unstoppable urge to "set things straight" and he is torn between loyalties to white pioneers and his Indian friends. He despises hunting for sport, but he himself is one of the best hunters in the West. He lives among the pagans and by temperament bows to the impersonal God of Nature, but he also performs the work of Christ. He laments the passing of the frontier, yet as scout and hunter par excellence he is one of the major instruments of its demise. Summers story is a poignant quest for justice and values. We witness with sympathy and a touch of sadness his marriage of Teal Eye, his ominous encounter with Boone, and his valiant but futile efforts to preserve a dying way of life. Summer's dreams are our dreams—the American Dream for family, a peaceful and free homeland, and spiritual fulfillment—and thus we share his losses.

One of the great joys of Guthrie's prose is his ear for authentic western language. Unlike some of our more clever modern writers, who discovered the West through Iowa's pervasive Writer's Workshop, he deliberately avoids extended metaphors, strained similes, and a clutter of meaning-laden adjectives. Instead we are refreshed by the spare, precise, down-to-earth descriptions of literary naturalism, the perfect vehicle for straightforward western characters, and the spice of period slang. Buffalo are "buffler" and panthers "painters." People are noted for their "gump-tion" and "spizerinctum." And when Guthrie's Indians lament the fact that they are in danger of being "rubbed out" we know without being told that the phrase has been with us for more than a century.

*Fair Land, Fair Land* will not disappoint fans of Guthrie's earlier novels. It is a significant addition to the work of a major Northwest writer. □

—William Wilbert