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E. DANA JOHNSON

June 15, 1879—December 10, 1937

THE WIDE-SPREAD consternation that greeted Dana Johnson's resignation from the *Santa Fe New Mexican* on July 1, 1937, was immediate and spontaneous. It was as if, for New Mexico, one of the major planets had dropped out of the sky, and when, through his morning column in the *Albuquerque Journal* and his weekly page in the *New Mexico Sentinel*, the planet was yanked back into place, albeit with a more comet-like freedom, it seemed as if the order of the Universe had been restored—all, alas, too briefly and too comet-like!

In the short interval between his old editorial duties and his new ones, Dana Johnson had the unexpected opportunity of realizing the love and esteem in which he was held by his contemporaries. From the letters and newspaper comments that poured in, he had a chance, which few men have while still living, to realize how much his work meant and how much it was appreciated. Many of these "fan letters" and comments, to which he laughingly referred as "obituaries," were included in his column in the *Albuquerque Journal*. Although accepted with his usual gaiety and lack of self-conceit, there can be no doubt that these tokens of appreciation served as a stimulus to new vigor and creative power. He was at the peak of the crest, and full of plans for personal literary work when unaccountably stricken.

Characteristically, when the news of his death came, and his old staff on the *Santa Fe New Mexican* struggled with numb sorrow to "get out the news," it was Dana's own semi-humorous, self-styled "obituary," written a short time before as an autobiographical note for the *Sentinel*, that served as the most moving testament of his life and spirit. Because this gives so much of his typical quality, it is here reprinted (p. 125). In the way of bare chronological facts, not much may be added to it. Much should be added by way

of comment and expansion, but a true evaluation of the man can not be written in a hurry.

The sense of his dynamic spirit, his unique quality as editor and man, exists today in the memory of his friends and foes—though it may be doubted if Dana had any real foes in a personal sense. What his loss means, although realized today, will undoubtedly be realized more in the years to come. For the present, one can only say that his place cannot be filled, not only for personal reasons, but for reasons which have to do with changing conditions in the world of journalism.

The death of Dana Johnson closed a brilliant career, as well as an epoch in New Mexican, or Southwestern, journalism. He was one of those rare editors whose personal qualities are so reflected in the papers they edit that the two are inseparable in public thought. He put a personal impress on every page of his paper and on every line he wrote. In these days of large-staffed editorial writers on metropolitan papers, standardized teletyped news, syndicated columns of individual opinion, and chain-newspapers, this type of editor is becoming increasingly rare. On the small-town or state paper, where the type might still be supposed to flourish, perhaps the one remaining exemplar of national repute is William Allen White of *The Emporia Gazette*—with whom Dana Johnson had much in common. The cause of this dearth may be traced, not only to the changing conditions noted, but to the lack of just such personal qualifications of cultural background, broad-minded liberalism, and literary brilliance as Dana Johnson possessed in high degree.

Historically, Johnson's editorial career—on the *Albuquerque Journal*, the *Albuquerque Herald*, and the *Santa Fe New Mexican*—from 1902 to 1937—spanned the late Territorial days, the struggle for a liberal constitution and statehood, and, after statehood, the struggle for good progressive government. It spanned also the successive changes in our tri-racial social scene, in which he took such keen and de-

voted interest. Coming to New Mexico from the East, with a cultural background, he viewed the scene from the outside as well as the inside—that inside part of New Mexico which he knew and learned to love so well. And it is worth noting that his residence in New Mexico was by choice, not necessity—not reasons of business, political appointment, or health which brought so many Easterners to New Mexico in Territorial days. Dana, who came to New Mexico on a visit to his cousin Douglas Johnson (then an instructor in the University of New Mexico), stayed because he liked it—and he would never willingly have lived anywhere else. If he had stayed in the East, or had returned to it, as he had advantageous offers of doing, his career might have been just as brilliant, or more so from a wordly standpoint; but it could never have counted for more than it did in the community he chose to serve.

A native New Mexican, in every sense except of having been born here, whatever concerned New Mexico concerned him—vitaly, intimately, personally. His service can't be duplicated, because of his multiple composite qualifications of mind and heart, and that is why his going closed an epoch of New Mexican journalism—meaning journalism in the best sense of the word—not news to be dished out, but news to be interpreted, correlated and integrated for understanding use and betterment of conditions. I think that was his ideal. If he failed or offended, he was sorry. He did not willingly offend, except in politics, where he meant to offend on principle, but impersonally and out of his inmost convictions as to what was right. He was recognized as a good fighter—which he was—and this was particularly so because he was a past master of witty, satiric invective—against which his opponent usually had no adequate defense. Although relentless for the sake of a Cause in the use of this rapier-like weapon, he was without personal malice, and few, if any, of his opponents bore him personal malice. He was a good adversary, and almost anyone would rather have a good adversary than a namby-pamby friend. That

is why some of his former opponents now say that with his death the "punch" has gone out of everything.

For all that, politics was not his primary and essential interest. He was always glad when a campaign was over, and he could go back to writing about the things he cared for—particularly every phase of life in New Mexico, its landscape, highways and byways, small Spanish villages, natives and Indians, Saints and Santos, old archives and pioneer narratives, burros and road-runners, and all the traditional customs, folk-lore and folk-song, fiestas, and architecture that make up composite New Mexico. (If Dana were here, he would mention a lot of things left out!) There was scarcely any phase of civic or cultural activity in which he did not have a hand.

One remembers countless instances in which it was his pen that carried the day—as for instance the saving of the Sanctuario at Chimayó. Gustave Baumann phoned a friend one day to say that he had discovered that the beautiful old church and its furnishings were being sold piece-meal; the small Santiago on horseback was in the hands of one curio-dealer, and the historic carved doors were being bargained for by another. What could be done about it? The answer was, of course, "Tell Dana Johnson," and Dana came out with a spread that carried to the Atlantic coast, where Mary Austin, lecturing at Yale, with Dana's article in hand, interested the anonymous donor who bought and restored the building to the Catholic Church. Similarly, he supported every cause and movement that tended to keep New Mexico, and Santa Fé its ancient capital, a symbol of the races that made it—to preserve its essential character and integrity. Not to keep it different in the sense of just being different, as a sales point, but to be itself; as it is, and was, and as he wanted it to remain. For the Santa Fé plaza and the road along the river-bed, and shade-trees menaced by thoughtless, unnecessary destruction he waged many a fight.

He "tied in" and was one of all the civic and social groups—merchants, archaeologists, artists and writers. His

participation in The Poets' Round-Up was always one of the highlights of that summer event—where he invariably captured the audience with a piece of effective, sparkling light verse—written that morning, or the day before! Briefly, he was interested in life; and the essential gaiety of his spirit, united with an underlying deep seriousness of purpose, was an inspiring stimulus to any group and any cause.

In his office he was never too busy for a visit or a phone call and he always "clicked" immediately in response to any worthwhile suggestion, whether light or serious. Locally, his editorship made his paper not only a medium for town gossip and news, but an open forum for discussion in which everyone shared. As a record of keen delight in day-in and day-out companionship with the man, and a vivid impression of his personality, the tributes written by members of his staff, published in the editorial columns of the *Santa Fe New Mexican* the day after his death, cannot be surpassed.

Other newspaper articles and editorials in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, *Albuquerque Journal*, and papers throughout the state, cover the highlights of his political career, which it is not necessary to repeat here. His close friendship with the late Senator Bronson Cutting and continuous editorial support of his liberal policies are well known; as is also the celebrated case in which he was sentenced (but never went) to jail, winning instead a court decision heralded as a new victory for the freedom of the press. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that he was a liberal before his connection with Bronson Cutting, and it was doubtless for that reason, as well as for his brilliant literary ability, that Cutting chose him as editor of his paper in 1913.

It may be that Dana Johnson's literary and all-round ability was perhaps not accidental, but a result of heredity. He came of a distinguished early-American ancestry. He was a direct descendant of John Dwight, who founded Dedham, Massachusetts; of Edward Dale, who settled in Lancaster County, Virginia, prior to 1655; and of Captain William Dana, the first settler of Belpre, Ohio, in the West-

ern Reserve territory. In direct line and in collateral branches, there is a noteworthy preponderance of professional vocations—ministers, lawyers, doctors, scientists, historians, and three presidents of Yale. Dana gives an inkling of this background in his autobiography, but seems to have taken most delight in the remote ancestor on his father's side who was a sheriff of Nottingham—wishfully, according to Dana's fancy, the doughty sheriff of Robin Hood fame! His father, David Dye Johnson, a lawyer, came of that early pioneer stock which migrated from Virginia to the Ohio valley.

Dana Johnson was first married in 1908 to Grace Nichol of Albuquerque, who died in 1931; and in 1932 to Mary Eckles of Silver City, New Mexico, who survives him. He is also survived by two brothers, Dr. Dale Johnson of Morgantown, West Virginia, and Dr. Theodore Johnson of Raleigh, North Carolina, and a sister, Miss Frances Johnson of Parkersburg, West Virginia.

ALICE CORBIN HENDERSON.

OBITUARY AS WRITTEN BY MR. JOHNSON

(Written by E. Dana Johnson when he began editing the Plaza Page in the New Mexico Sentinel.)

I am much flattered at what is practically the first request ever received for my obituary. I trust the photo will be returned, as they are scarce and valuable. I assume this series is a re-incarnation of Men of the Hour in New Mexico, made famous by the late Max Frost.

Born, yes; June 15, 1879 (the year of the Big Burn on Santa Fe Baldy) at Parkersburg, West Virginia. Son of David Dye Johnson, lawyer, and Julia Dale Johnson. Descendant of John Dwight of Dedham, Mass., and other stern and rock-bound New Englanders, on mother's side; a forebear was Captain William Dana, first settler at Belpre, Ohio, in Western Reserve territory, west of the Ohio River. On father's side one ancestor is reliably alleged to have been

a sheriff of Nottingham; whether it was the county politico with whom Robin Hood had such a merry time cannot be stated. Grandfather Johnson was a Virginia farmer, migrated across the mountains to the Ohio Valley. Believe it or not, roster of father's family was as follows:

Enoch and Oke and Ike and Ben, Dave and Bob and Sis and Sam, Bill and Josh (and Dad and Mam) John and Kit and Abraham, Tom and Jerry, the last of the clan.

Educated, if any, at Parkersburg High School, and Marietta College, Ohio; graduated *magna cum laude* in some branches, *mirabile dictu* in others. Phi Beta Kappa and member of N. M. Phi Beta Kappa Association. In bright college years, publisher and editor of college paper, which turned out later to have been a grave mistake, in view of what it led to. Canned after brief employment in tomato factory. Reporter on *Parkersburg Daily State Journal*; migrated to New Mexico in 1902. Rode horseback and covered wagon on camping and trapping trips in various parts of the territory with (now doctor) Douglas W. Johnson, since become crack physiographist of the United States at Columbia; got a job on the *Journal-Democrat* from the late George F. Albright, manager. Under the expert tutelage of the late Charles W. G. Ward and H. B. Hening, inventor of Solos by the Second Fiddle, gradually rose in a spectacular manner to be editor of the *Journal*; later editor of the *Evening Herald*, conducted by remote control from the Palace Hotel in Santa Fe by H. B. Hening and James S. Black, props. Dan MacPherson, *Journal*, early claimed that Johnson could say less in more words than any other reporter known.

Hired out as editor *New Mexican* in 1913 for the late Bronson Cutting but resigned from this temporary post in 1937 upon change of ownership. The job, however, was active while it lasted and afforded the incumbent some diversion. Doubtless the readers of the *Sentinel* could hardly be bothered with the details at this time.

Have laboriously compiled following distinguished career items:

Interlude in 1930—acting mayor of Big Bug, Arizona, and burro-puncher for Alto Gold Mining Company; research into burro psychology when loaded with tram rails or giant powder.

Associate editor *N. M. Historical Review*; president and charter member Santa Fe Kiwanis Club; member of an anti-publicity department for Santa Fe Fiesta Council for some eight years; member and ex-vice-president N. M. Association on Indian affairs for many years; eminent recognition as poet—tolerated as participant in Santa Fe Poets Roundup for several years past. Co-author with H. B. H. of celebrated Albuquerque Boosting Booklets; by the way, aided the late Pete McCanna, W. T. McCreight, Maynard Gunsul, J. H. O'Reilly *et al* in ballyhooing Territorial Fair when it was greatest Show on Earth. Permanently amateur golfer, enthusiastic but unsuccessful fisherman and hunter; married; junior warden Episcopal Church of Holy Faith; Old Santa Fe nut; hobby is old Spanish customs, architecture, folklore, songs; member of Gene Rhodes cult, and of his memorial commission. Occasional short stories and articles have accidentally gotten into magazines . . . *requiescat in pace* . . .

P. S. No joiner, but was once inveigled by the late Bill McGugin of Albuquerque into joining the Order of Owls.

Santa Fe New Mexican,
December 10, 1937.

In the *Abuquerque Morning Journal* of Dec. 11, 1937, William A. Keleher told the following incident:

“Johnson was a master of English. He had no peer in the Southwest when it came to the flow of adverbs and adjectives.

“His wit and humor were a bit grim, and he was inclined to be satirical and a bit of a sharpshooter at people

and things at times, but he never intended to be malicious or to leave a sting.

"Dana Johnson had plenty of courage and always personally stood behind the editorial pronoun "we." He always preferred to do his talking from the editorial column and it was almost impossible to get him to make a speech in public.

"Johnson, however, stepped out of his editorial writing role in Albuquerque on Feb. 26, 1928, at a mass meeting in the Armory, when James A. Reed, then United States senator from Missouri, criticized Dana's boss, Bronson Cutting, owner of *The Santa Fe New Mexican*, who had only recently been appointed to the Senate by Gov. Richard Dillon.

"Johnson, standing in the back of the Armory, challenged the statements and the two engaged in a brief sally."

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