

# THE CARSON Effect

Nebraska son  
gave more  
than funny  
one-liners

STORY BY ALAN J. BARTELS

"The car doesn't seem to have the pick up that it had in 1943," said Carson while driving his father's 1939 Chrysler during a visit to Norfolk in 1981. "Then again, neither do I."

Courtesy Johnny Carson Foundation

Three, two, one ... da-da-da-da thunders from Doc Severinsen's band, and the applause sign flashes as Ed McMahon's "Heeere's Johnny" echoes through NBC Studio One in Burbank, California. The rainbow stage curtain parts, and a slender man steps into the spotlight. It's another episode of *The Tonight Show*, and Johnny Carson is a long way from home.

Television audiences welcomed Carson into their living rooms weeknight evenings for 30 years, beginning in 1962. His down-to-earth demeanor seemed like that of a close neighbor or friend. Before dominating television talk-show ratings for decades and ascending to "King of Late-Night TV," the man on a first-name basis with America was an aspiring magician named John, growing up in Norfolk. On camera and off, Carson credited his Nebraska upbringing for his success.

The Homer "Kit" and Ruth Carson family moved to Norfolk from Iowa in 1933. John was 8, middle child between older sister Catharine and younger brother Dick. John's fascination with broadcasting sparked as the Carsons gathered around their General Electric radio to hear comedian Jack Benny on Sunday nights.

For fun, the boys would pack peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and hike to the Elkhorn River. When the channel cats weren't biting, and even when they were, the brothers would dangle from Black Bridge as trains passed overhead. Legends and folklore attributed to Carson (whether deserved or not) circulate through Norfolk yet today.

If John's classmates chuckled at his Norfolk High School newspaper humor column, they laughed out loud at his antics. Johnny was the suspected prankster after a teacher's bicycle was hoisted up the flagpole. His mischievous reputation rose to new heights when a goat appeared on the school's roof. In another four-legged gag, Carson helped guide a cow upstairs to the chemistry lab,

where it remained overnight. And speaking of chemistry, rumors linger of the boy's role in detonating a smelly "rotten egg bomb" so potent that teachers and students got the day off.

Did John really burst onto stage in drag, wearing a mop head for a wig and pair of grapefruits in his shirt as students gathered for an assembly? The oft-recited yarn claims he escaped backstage just as principal Theodore Skillstad walked in.

#### THE GREAT CARSONI

Carson's entertainment focus narrowed after discovering *Hoffman's Book of Magic*. A mail-order magician's kit appeared, and John's family and pals were bombarded with constant requests of "pick a card, any card." John was 14 when he scored his first paid gig, a performance for the Norfolk Rotary Club, for which he earned \$3. At a banquet in nearby Plainview, Carson, who billed himself as "The Great Carsoni," performed magic tricks while roasting city officials who were guffawing along with the rest of the crowd.

Carson thrived on making people laugh. While describing a baseball game to illustrate a geometry problem, teacher Jenny Walker unintentionally presented Carson with the perfect setup. The class erupted when he raised his hand and shouted, "Which team is playing?"

Perhaps the Great Carsoni's greatest disappearing act occurred during senior year. Pearl Harbor had been bombed months earlier, and John's class jumped on the scrap-drive bandwagon, competing with other grades to see who could amass the most metal. After Carson's class of 1943 scrounged a heaping pile, farmers came looking for their plows. Carson came clean during a 1976 visit to Norfolk. "In our zeal to help the war effort, we sometimes appropriated metal and brass from people who did not know they were parting with it," Carson said.

As Carson's crew delivered its last load on a truck borrowed from Ballantyne Furniture Store, they dismantled the vehicle and tossed it on the pile, too. The fun and games ceased after graduation.

Carson enlisted in the U.S. Navy and was en route to the USS Pennsylvania battleship when the Nebraska-built Enola Gay and Bockscar B-29 bombers dropped their nuclear payloads on Japan. The Pennsylvania was torpedoed the following week, on Aug. 12, 1945. Two days later, as Carson reported for duty to supervise the removal of 20 dead sailors, Japan surrendered.



toddwilliamsfineart.com



AJ Dahm (both)

Comics visit Carson's boyhood home in Norfolk during the Great American Comedy Festival. Antics include shooting baskets where Carson did, and visiting the Carson Gallery at Elkhorn Valley Museum. At left, artist Todd Williams' *Johnny Carson - 1940*.

Ensign Carson became the ship's communications officer and was in charge of decoding encrypted messages. He entertained shipmates with his ventriloquist routine, and once performed a magic trick for the secretary of the Navy.

Honorably discharged from the Navy following the war, Carson, part of America's "Greatest Generation," returned home to Nebraska with great ambitions.

#### JOHN BECOMES JOHNNY

Carson majored in radio and speech at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln after he returned home from the war. His thesis was a 45-minute reel-to-reel recording titled *How to Write Comedy for Radio*. After graduating in 1949, Carson earned \$47.50 per week as a disc jockey at WOW Radio in Omaha.

Television was growing in popularity, and the antics and gags on his *The Squirrel Nest* show entertained viewers of WOW-TV, Nebraska's first television station. When officials failed at evicting the pigeons roosting atop the Douglas County Courthouse, Carson got on the roof for an interview - with the birds.

Carson was moonlighting as a magician when he met another future Nebraska comedy star at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Lincoln.

"Johnny threw a filthy look when me and a couple buddies interrupted him setting up backstage," said future friend, colleague and talk-show competitor Dick Cavett. "His face changed



## Carson's **comedic legacy** lives on through Norfolk festival

If laughter is the best medicine, people attending the Great American Comedy Festival in Norfolk each June will live forever. The event, founded in 2008 to honor Nebraskan entertainment legend Johnny Carson, has visitors in stitches, and there is a new laughter lineup for 2019.

Nobody was laughing when interest in Norfolk's LaVitsef event (festival, spelled backwards) was waning in 2006. *Norfolk Daily News* Editor Kent Warneke took the opportunity to write an editorial suggesting the community known as hometown of Johnny Carson create a comedy festival to honor him. Warneke even suggested the mayor rename Norfolk "Carson City" during the event.

"I thought that any self-respecting community should have a festival, and many towns yearn for a celebrity connection like we have here," Warneke said. "Johnny gave so much to Norfolk, this would be a way for us to say thank you."

The idea gained traction and volunteers and sponsors jumped on board. The Great American Comedy Festival first took center stage in Norfolk in 2008. Because of Carson's love of magic, a family comedy-magic show takes place at Norfolk High School's Johnny Carson Theatre during the three-day festival. Other events include a Saturday evening gala, presentation of the Carson Comedy Legend Award and stand-up comedy.

The up-and-coming comics have big shoes to fill. Entertainment giants Paula Poundstone, Drew Carey, Martin Short and Dick Cavett have rocked audiences here at past events. Dave Coulier from TV's *Full House*, and actor Paul Reiser, are the big names in Norfolk's small-town spotlight for this year's festival.

Warneke interviewed Carson in 1988, and later sent a letter suggesting the idea of a Carson Comedy Festival. "Carson replied, 'Not now, and we respected his wishes,'" said Warneke, a member of the GACF executive board for its first 10 years. After mourning Carson's 2005 death, Norfolk was ready to laugh it up with the Great American Comedy Festival three years later. "Sure would have been nice to have Johnny at the first one," Warneke said.

In the lively laughs, giggling guffaws and chuckling chortles of comedy fans in Norfolk, Carson's comedic legacy lives on.

The 2019 Great American Comedy Festival will take place June 13-15 in Norfolk. [greatamericancomedyfestival.com](http://greatamericancomedyfestival.com).



Courtesy of Lynne Geiger

AJ Dahm

Above, comic Martin Short entertains during the Great American Comedy Festival in Norfolk. The event began in 2008 to honor Carson. At left, Lynne Geiger rode with Carson during the filming of *Johnny Goes Home* in 1981.

When Skelton was injured while rehearsing for *The Red Skelton Show*, his fractured femur became Carson's big break. CBS execs were so impressed with Carson's stand-in performance that they offered him his own program. They only asked that he change his name to something more personable. John became Johnny when *The Johnny Carson Show* debuted June 30, 1955.

Carson topped the list of possible replacements when Jack Paar retired as host of *The Tonight Show* in 1962. He initially declined, but accepted after Groucho Marx and Jackie Gleason refused the job. Nine million viewers watched Carson's first episode. From the top of the world, the Nebraskan was thinking about his brother.

"I was trying to get on my feet when Johnny called to say Paar was leaving and he got offered the job," Dick Carson said. "Then he told me, 'Dick, I want you to come work with me doing anything you want.'" Bolstered by his brother's boost, the younger Carson's career as a television show director took him to *The Merv Griffin Show*, *Wheel of Fortune* and more Emmy awards than Johnny.

The brothers shared a strong physical resemblance, but the similarities didn't end there. In a recent hour-long interview with *Nebraska Life*, Dick Carson's voice was amazingly similar to that of his older brother. He also shares Johnny's laugh.

"He was so generous. I have a picture showing John with his arm around me," Carson said. "He was 9 or 10, and I was 4 or 5, and on the back he wrote, 'Dick, I'll always be there for you, John.' And he always was."

### GOING HOME

While at the peak of his entertainment reign, Carson brought his production crew to Nebraska. For a week in 1981, they filmed at Carson childhood hangouts like the Granada Theatre, Wetzel and Truex Jewelers where he once bought a Valentine's

when we told him we were magicians, too."

Carson's celebrity was growing over Nebraska airwaves, and Cavett, Carson's junior by 11 years, already saw him as a star. Carson took the church basement stage, and introduced Cavett and friends as special guests before his first trick. "I felt like we were on *The Ed Sullivan Show* or something," Cavett said.

Carson developed a monologue style at WOW-TV that became his trademark. Richard Petrashek worked there with Carson, and sharing the same first name with three co-workers set the stage for a comedic event that affects the Omaha resident to this day.

"I was having coffee with Johnny and other fellows when someone said 'Hey, Dick,' and we all turned around," Petrashek said. "Johnny got this funny look on his face and said, 'There are too many damned Dicks in this place. Petrashek, from now on, you're Pete.' I've gone by Pete ever since."

Carson returned to Omaha after a California job-hunting trip in 1951 initially came up empty, but moved to Los Angeles when KNXT-TV called. Opportunity knocked while he was hosting the station's national program *Carson's Cellar*. When he joked that comic Red Skelton had just walked by, Carson didn't know the legend was tuned in. Skelton soon appeared on the show for real, along with comedians Fred Allen, Milton Berle and Jerry Lewis.

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At left, Carson poses with University of Nebraska-Lincoln cheerleaders at halftime of the 1971 Nebraska-Kansas football game. Below, when Johnny Carson became host of *The Tonight Show*, he invited his brother, Dick Carson, to come work for him.



Alamy Stock

Schukei saw Carson melt as the production crew presented the comedian with his father's 1939 Chrysler. The car became a character in the show, and Johnny expressed heartfelt appreciation with a toast, "Here's to good friends, good health and going home." And that is exactly what Johnny did next.

GRINDING GEARS WHILE driving the car he took to prom, Carson steered to his boyhood home. Viewers were treated to a tour and watched as Carson shot a few baskets. Rumor has it that he paid to recarpet the home as a thank-you to the family living there.

People moved in and out over the years, and the home fell into disrepair. A wayward SUV once knocked off the front porch. Investors hoping to capitalize on Carson's fame sold pieces of the house online before flipping the structure for a loss. Norfolk resident Jim McKenzie hoped someone would fix it up. When a "for sale" sign appeared where the "Boyhood Home of Johnny Carson" sign now stands, McKenzie became that someone.

The sagging house was taken down to the studs, jacked up and stiffened with steel beams. Plaster came down, drywall went up, and paint was stripped from the brick fireplace Johnny's dad had installed. Vintage-style lights honor the patriarch who worked downtown at Iowa-Nebraska Light & Power. A likeness of Johnny is etched into the pantry door.

"Johnny had strong feelings for Norfolk and Nebraska, even though he liked to make fun of it on TV," McKenzie said. "It stuck with me when Johnny said how much he loved this house, I heard it in his voice. That inspired me to save it."

The home's original stair tread now tops the basement bar where McKenzie and friends share laughs and Carson stories. "I'm looking forward to finishing the house and toasting a job well done. And to Johnny."

Rumors abound of the Carson boys' names written on rafters

in the garage. McKenzie's flashlight search reveals Dick's is still there. Johnny's has faded, if it was ever there at all.

Many names appear near the stairwell leading to the sleeping porch the brothers shared. Comedians in Norfolk for the Great American Comedy Festival gather here to honor Johnny. Year after year, they sign the wall below a framed portrait of their comedic inspiration.

**GIVING BACK**

While giving the commencement speech at Norfolk High School in 1976, Carson credited several of the school's teachers for influencing his life. Carson came home again in 1996 to visit his former penmanship teacher, Fay Gordon, on her 100th birthday. Friends and family feasted on fried chicken and fried tomatoes, and Carson donated \$1 million to Northeast Community College's Lifelong Learning Center in her name. He charmed millions of viewers while quietly giving away millions of dollars. Carson's penchant for philanthropy wasn't limited to his favorite teacher.

Though he claimed Norfolk as home, Carson supported civic improvements in Corning, Iowa, where he was born in 1925. He was particularly generous to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with donations to the Lied Center for Performing Arts and the expansion of the Temple Building where he studied radio. After one large donation,

Carson said, "I am indebted to the University and to the people of Nebraska." The Johnny Carson Foundation, which provides grants nationwide each year, gave \$20 million in 2015 to fund UNL's Johnny Carson School of Theatre & Film.

Hometown gifts have benefited the Norfolk Arts Center, Norfolk High School, Elkhorn Valley Museum, Norfolk Senior Center, and the Norfolk Public Library, where he read about magic. In 1988, the Carson Regional Radiological Center was dedicated in honor of Carson's parents after Johnny donated \$600,000 to the project.

"I could tell that Johnny was really happy to be home in Norfolk."

— Lynne Geiger



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## Norfolk's star exhibit due for face-lift

JoBeth Cox is too young to remember Johnny Carson hosting the most popular late-night talk show in television history. "My earliest memories of *The Tonight Show* are hearing Jay Leno's voice coming from my mother's bedroom late at night," Cox said.

Her youth aside, Cox has grown close to Norfolk's famous son since becoming executive director of the Elkhorn Valley Museum in 2018. Part of that comes from the highlight reel continuously playing in the museum's Johnny Carson Gallery. "I've heard it so much that I hear it in my sleep," Cox said.

A financial boost from Carson helped the Elkhorn Valley Museum build a new facility in 1997. Soon after, Carson received a letter asking if he'd like to donate anything for display. He showed the letter to his nephew, Jeff Sotzing.

"I suggested a few things the museum might like," Sotzing said. "Then he turned to me and said 'Let's send everything.'"

"What do you mean, everything? Like your Emmys and Presidential Medal of Freedom?" Sotzing joked.

"Yes, everything," Carson said.

Boxes arrived, and curators sifted through the trove of entertainment history. Treasures included hand-written letters, photos and a script from the 1982 documentary *Johnny Goes Home*. The Johnny Carson Gallery opened in 2002 to house the one-of-a-kind collection. Carson's

Rolodex of celebrity guests is on display, flipped to screen legend Elizabeth Taylor's card. A replica NBC stage and Carson cardboard cutout are other highlights for visitors to enjoy.

Sotzing and Cox intend to raise \$500,000 by the end of 2019 for an exhibit face-lift. The amount is a drop in the philanthropic bucket considering the millions Carson and his foundation have given and continue giving to causes in Norfolk, Nebraska and the nation.

Plans for the interactive experience include a 1960s living room where patrons cozy up on the couch to watch *The Tonight Show* in retro style. After the curtain call, they can read cue cards onstage like Carson did for 30 years. If funds are raised in time, Carson's foundation will gift the plaid coat and hunting cap of character Floyd R. Turbo, Art Fern's gaudy red blazer and other items to the museum.

"Because Johnny did so much for the community and state, we hope residents of Norfolk and Nebraska will step up and help this dream become a reality," Cox said. "We owe this to him, and this is how younger generations will get to know Johnny."

Donations for the new Johnny Carson Gallery can be sent to the Elkhorn Valley Museum at 515 Queen City Blvd., Norfolk, NE 68701. (402) 371-3886.

Staffers JoBeth Cox, left, and Ashley Brown, right, ham it up on the replica NBC stage at Elkhorn Valley Museum in Norfolk.

AJ Dahm



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Norfolk resident Sheila Schukei with the Carson billboard. AJ Dahm

## Heere's where to see JOHNNY IN NORFOLK

Norfolk is proud of famous hometown son Johnny Carson. The community pays tribute with a Johnny Carson Tour. Here are a few of the highlights:

- ★ Johnny Carson Mural. This large mural depicts Carson's life from his days as a teenage magician through his final goodbye on *The Tonight Show*. A fundraising effort is underway to place a statue of Carson nearby. Third Street and Norfolk Avenue. (402) 371-2932.
- ★ Johnny Carson's Boyhood Home. The Carson family lived in two other Norfolk houses before moving here. Privately owned and not open to the public, the location is marked by a sign where selfies are often taken. See it at 306 S. 13th St., also known as Johnny Carson Boulevard.
- ★ Carson Billboard. South of Norfolk on Highway 81, a colorful billboard proclaiming the community as "Proud Hometown of Johnny Carson" stands not far from the Elkhorn River where Johnny Carson played as a child. North of the river bridge and west of Ta-Ha-Zouka Park.
- ★ Johnny Carson Theatre. This live-performance venue at Norfolk Senior High School, Johnny Carson's alma mater, is home of the annual Great American Comedy Festival, and also the Nebraska State One-Act Championship. 801 Riverside Blvd. (402) 644-2529.
- ★ Elkhorn Valley Museum. The gift shop near the entrance sells Carson memorabilia, including Christmas ornaments, magic props and videos, but the best Johnny Carson treasures are deeper inside. A replica NBC stage from *The Tonight Show*, including a realistic mannequin likeness of the comedian, is the most popular draw, along with a desk and Carson cardboard cutout perfect for photo ops. 515 Queen City Blvd. (402) 371-3886.

To book your own Johnny Carson Tour in Norfolk, which includes lodging and meal options, contact the Norfolk Area Visitors Bureau at (402) 371-2932.

While touring the facility and being shown a medical device that emits radiation, Carson joked, "I bet it makes hot waffles, too." Laughter turned to tears for Carson at the sight of his parents' faces on the center's memorial wall. Dr. Mohammed Zahra has been with the center since its founding and remembers Carson's passion for helping people.

"He told me that he wanted every cancer patient from the community to be able to receive treatment at his center," Zahra said.

Three decades later, more than 7,000 patients have received care and hope in the facility known today as the Carson Cancer Center. An endowment from his foundation ensures Johnny's gift will continue healing the people he loved.

MORE THAN 24,000 GUESTS crossed Carson's stage during 30 years and 4,531 episodes of *The Tonight Show*. He helped launch the comedic careers of stars including Jerry Seinfeld, Roseanne Barr and the current host of *The Tonight Show*, Jimmy Fallon. Carson's final broadcast attracted 50 million viewers on Oct. 1, 1992. He died in 2005 at age 79 of complications from emphysema.

Visitors at the Elkhorn Valley Museum gaze at Carson's Emmys, size up costumes from characters Floyd Turbo and Art Fern, and take selfies with a Carson cardboard cutout. "This place wouldn't exist without Johnny, and we can go a block in every direction and see his continuing impact on Norfolk," said Executive Director JoBeth Cox. "At the end of the day when locking up, we always say, 'Goodnight, Johnny.'"

Turning out the last of the lights, she trips a sensor near the replica NBC stage with its rainbow curtain and a mannequin likeness of Carson. Da-da-da-da-da begins playing.



The Carson Cancer Center, above, was built thanks to a large donation from Carson. His foundation continues to support the facility. At right, Carson with Madonna on *The Tonight Show* set. Above: AJ Dahm Opposite page: Alamy Stock



## READERS' REWARDS JOHNNY CARSON TOUR IN NORFOLK

Johnny Carson loved Norfolk, and you will, too. *Nebraska Life*, the Elkhorn Valley Museum, and Norfolk Area Visitors Bureau invite readers to visit Carson's hometown for guided VIP tours on May 17 and 24. Tours run from noon to 3 p.m., and proceeds benefit renovation of the Elkhorn Valley Museum's Carson Gallery. Reserve your spots by calling (800) 777-6159 or emailing [cthompson@nebraskalife.com](mailto:cthompson@nebraskalife.com).

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