

NEBRASKA'S WORST WINTER *ever*

Recollections pile up 70 years after
the epic winter of 1948-1949

STORY BY ALAN J. BARTELS
PHOTOS FROM NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



MEMORIES MELT OVER the course of 70 years, but the Winter of 1948-1949 looms large in the minds of those who endured it. Twenty Nebraskans and thousands of livestock animals perished. Roads that drifted shut in mid-November remained impassable for five long months. So much stifling, smothering snow fell from November to April that survivors' memories of individual storms blur into one monstrous meteorological event, the Blizzard of 1948-1949.

Nebraskans were enjoying a mild autumn when thunderstorms turned to sleet and snow near Sidney on Wednesday, Nov. 17, 1948. The weather was beautiful near Pierce, where Don and Millie Zimmer were hunting pheasant, quail, squirrels and rabbits. "I remember it being warm and sunny," Millie said. "We headed to Smokey Green's Bar for a glass of Hamm's beer. When we left for home hours later, so much snow was falling that a friend with a pickup had to take us home."

Winter reached O'Neill by 8 a.m. on Thursday. The extreme southeast corner of Nebraska received only rain, but even Lincoln and Omaha had snow by the weekend.

Willis Schlote was tending the family farm when the first flakes began falling. "Dad worked in Bloomfield and I did the chores," Schlote said. The 18-year-old walked several times that winter to meet his father halfway between the farm and town. "Dad wasn't a big man, but he carried enough groceries to fill my sled," Schlote said.

Winds estimated at 60 mph crippled

Burwell and Spalding with 8- to 12-foot drifts. Unharvested cornfields were buried until spring. Northeast Nebraska and the Sandhills bore the brunt. Albion received 20 inches of snow. Cedar County got 24 inches. Residents lost electricity for days. Six Nebraskans died in this opening salvo, but winter's worst was yet to come.

Sixteen inches of fresh snow was an unwelcome gift on Christmas Eve. A storm moving from southwest to northeast across Nebraska days later dumped another 2 feet on Bassett. Temperatures climbed into the 30s on New Year's Day, but this calm before the storm quickly evaporated.

A churning torrent spawned in Oklahoma grew hundreds of miles wide, crossed into Kansas and began grinding east. The counterclockwise-spinning storm had a hurricane-like eye of calm weather in its center. Rain poured along its southern edge, while frigid temps, wind and snow socked the north. Then the freak of Mother Nature abruptly changed direction and set its sights on Nebraska.

Communities, farms and ranches from Grand Island to O'Neill were getting hammered when the storm took another strange twist. The raging cyclone backtracked 200 miles west and sentenced Western Nebraska to a second helping. Winds clocked at 75 mph combined with 41 inches of the white stuff to leave Chadron isolated for weeks. People ventured out when winds abated and boredom settled in. Denelda Bruns-Larson remembers a treat waiting at home after exploring drifts taller than telephone



At left, with roads drifted shut for months, pilots delivered aid during the winter of 1948-1949. Top image, a 200-foot-wide drift surrounds Walter Brown's home near Oshkosh. Herman Boerger's home in Rock County, above, was nearly buried during a blizzard on March 29, 1949.



Top left image, cattle trapped in drifted canyons were dug out by hand using shovels on the Eldon Miller farm near Belmont in Dawes County. Thousands of cattle died statewide and across the Great Plains during the Winter of 1948-1949. Nebraska Gov. Val Peterson, center in top right image, took an aerial tour across the state to see the hardest hit areas for himself. A rancher from Peterson's native Antelope County sent a message saying, "My cow is hungry as hell. Please toss her a bale of hay when you go over."



poles south of Hartington. "Dad made the most of the situation by making snow ice cream," Bruns-Larson said. "We ate a lot of it that winter."

President Harry Truman issued a disaster declaration after another 36 inches of snow fell during the last week in January. With communities buried, railroads stalled, cattlemen separated from their millions of animals, and thousands of Nebraskans trapped without electricity as food and fuel dwindled, Operation Snowbound was born.

THE RECOVERY effort launched by the United States Army Corps of Engineers focused on the hardest-hit states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming and Nebraska. A command post set up in the Nebraska State Capitol basement was used to coordinate our state's war on winter.

DAD WASN'T A BIG MAN, BUT HE CARRIED ENOUGH GROCERIES TO FILL MY SLED.

— Willis Schlote

The Nebraska National Guard cleared roads and rescued stranded residents. An estimated 1.5 million Nebraska cattle

were starving. Snow was so deep in places that the animals could not dislodge themselves from icy drifts. While soldiers driving Studebaker Weasels busted drifts to reach the needy, the Air Force's Operation Haylift dropped hay to cattle herds below. Local civilians helped navigate Skytrain and Flying Boxcar cargo planes over isolated ranches.

Gov. Peterson, who declared a state of emergency in 29 Nebraska counties, received a message from an Antelope County rancher begging for hay bombs. "My cow is hungry as hell. Please toss her a bale of hay when you go over."

Lee DeGroff was 11 when that

devastating winter reached his family's ranch 8 miles west of Swan Lake in Holt County. Airplanes delivered mail and sacks of flour, but the DeGroffs' cattle were fine, thanks to a new shed completed ahead of winter. Many of the DeGroff's neighbors weren't so lucky.

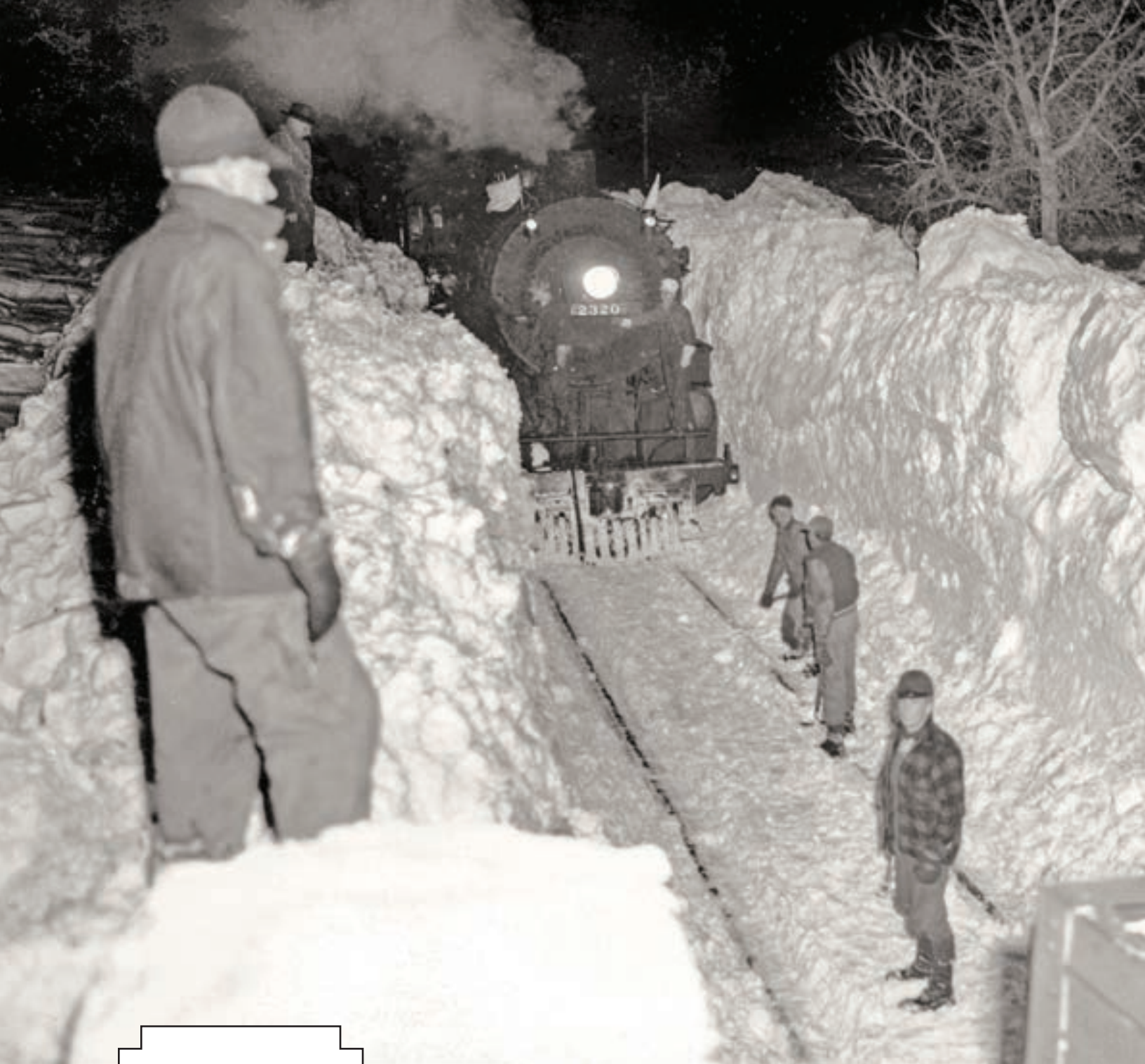
"One storm pushed 400 of the neighbor's cattle out onto a frozen lake," DeGroff said. "They started sinking under all that weight and never got out." A nearby rancher known for hightailing it out of Nebraska each autumn was caught unaware. The snowbird was in dire straits when the DeGroffs came to his aid.

"Snow crushed that bachelor rancher's cattle shed, and his home was pretty much a shack, too," DeGroff said. "We hitched up a team of horses and delivered food for him and his animals every other day. He was hard up enough to scavenge feed corn from his calves and eat it."



Studebaker Weasel military vehicles were used to deliver necessities to isolated farms and ranches. Horses fared better than automobiles where drifts covered fences.





**I DON'T WORRY
ABOUT WINTER.
WE ALREADY
SURVIVED THE
WORST ONE EVER.**

*— Beverly
DeGroff*

Powerful railroad locomotives were no match against repeat blizzards in 1948 and 1949.

After months of missing school, Lee's mother packed a lunch and some clothing and pointed him toward teacher Thelma Shermer's house to catch up on his lessons. Landmarks along the 3-mile trek were obscured by snow. Only a few tall cedars poked from the drifts. "I made it, but with no phones and irregular mail, Mom didn't know for two weeks if I was even alive," said DeGroff, who now lives near Brewster with his wife, Beverly.

She remembers hay falling from the sky, and snowy horseback rides to Lone Star School through pastures in Loup County. Does she fear another winter like the one of 1948-1949?

"We've been lucky since then. Weather forecasting is much better today and we always bring the cattle home before winter," Beverly said. "I don't worry about winter. We already survived the worst one ever." 🐾

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 "Heeeere'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,



toddwilliamsfineart.com

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.

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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.



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, Wetzell 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.

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.



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.

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MODERN DAY MEMORIES AT

FORT *Atkinson*

Frontier outpost was Nebraska's first town

STORY BY ALAN J. BARTELS

Fort Atkinson, founded in 1819, was the first military post west of the Missouri River. Abandoned in 1827, the fort was reconstructed beginning in 1963 as part of Fort Atkinson State Historical Park.

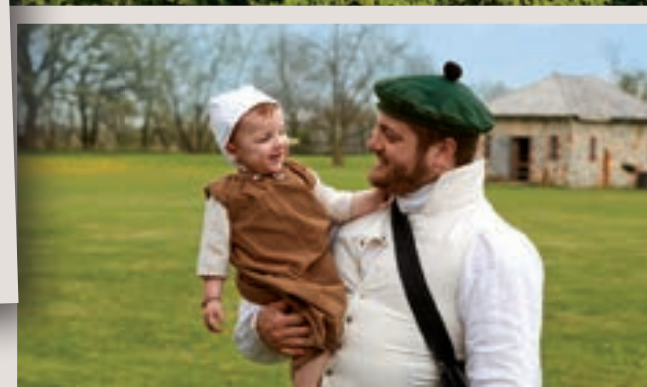
Chris Amundson



AJ Dahm (both)



Washington County Historical Society





Alan J. Bartels

At left, seamstress Mindy York and her sister Jessica Reyes, the officers' cook, leave the Sutler Store during a living history weekend at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park. Below, park blacksmith Doug Appel.

MEADOWLARKS call as a gentle breeze rustles black locust leaves and sets prairie grasses swaying in undulating waves. Cardinals and geese join the quiet chorus where the reconstructed walls of a frontier fortress stand silent atop a bluff overlooking the Missouri River Valley in Washington County. The peaceful scene is just that ... until canon fire erupts.

THE 21-STAR U.S. FLAG waving from the base of Council Bluff was a welcome sight to Missouri River keelboat captains in 1819. That star-spangled banner was the first sign of civilization they had seen since leaving St. Louis weeks earlier. With development nonexistent west of the Missouri River 200 years ago in what would become Nebraska, the collection of tents here was an oasis of relative comfort on the edge of a frontier fraught with hardship and danger.

Nearly a half-century before Nebraska statehood, the founding of Fort Atkinson brought civilization to the eastern flank of the West. Twelve hundred soldiers – a quarter of the U.S. Army's ranks at the time – were stationed here, and hundreds of civilian laborers, traders and Native American neighbors frequented the community that bustled with commerce, entertainment and culture from 1819 to 1827.

Reconstructed beginning in the early 1960s as a state historical park in the city of Fort Calhoun, Fort Atkinson is still busy. Where soldiers once marched across America's most heavily fortified fort, volunteers now portray the inhabitants of Nebraska's first town.

Lewis and Clark considered Council Bluff an ideal location for a fort. It became home to Nebraska's first town, hospital and school.



AJ Dahm

THE BOOMING OF the fort's 6-pounder gun at sunrise is the official start of the day, but the Sixth Infantry's soldiers have been awake for hours, shaving, eating breakfast and readying their uniforms. Missing morning formation is an offense punishable by forfeiture of pay – and for repeat offenders, an overnight stay in the stockade.

With one of his soldiers already

confined to leg stocks and sentenced to wear a wooden placard reading "DRUNKARD" until he sobers up, Bob Baker inspects his men.

He is resplendent in a forest green coat crossed with braided aiguillettes and with golden epaulettes on each shoulder. His cylindrical shako hat features a towering green plume, and his saber glimmers as visitors line the boardwalk. Baker

instructs his soldiers to watch their language and maintain military discipline at all times.

His history with Fort Atkinson dates to 1963, the year that the Fort Atkinson Foundation and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission purchased the land to rebuild the fort and create a state park. Baker's excitement over his father's invitation to visit the fort was short-lived.

"Other than an old flagpole and pile of rocks, there was no fort," Baker said. "As an 8-year-old used to watching *Davy Crockett* on TV, I wanted to play soldier, and I left disappointed."

Long before Crockett died at the Alamo, Lewis and Clark met here with Oto and Missouri Indians on Aug. 3, 1804. They recorded the location as "Council Bluff" in their journals, and noted "the situation of it is exceedingly favorable for a fort and trading-factory." Higher-ups in Washington, D.C., agreed. Cantonment, Missouri was established in 1819.

Flooding forced soldiers to rebuild on top of the bluff. Secretary of War John Calhoun, namesake of the nearby community, renamed the camp Fort Atkinson after post commander Col. Henry Atkinson. Originally planned as the first in a series of fortifications to protect America's fur trade interests from the British, Fort Atkinson remained alone on the frontier because of budget cuts.

Provisions occasionally arrived by boat, but self-sufficiency was the best way to survive. Every tree within a 7-mile radius was felled for fuel and for constructing buildings and fortifications. Soldiers milked cows and tended hogs. While salted meat was served at eastern posts, rations at Fort Atkinson included fresh beef from cattle on Cow Island. Men who joined the Army for excitement or to escape farm life traded .69-caliber muskets for hoes to weed 500 acres of corn, wheat, millet, oats and potatoes on Nebraska's first farm. Other Nebraska firsts were the fort's creamery, ox-powered



Alan J. Bartels (all)



Tom Wood portrays Col Henry Leavenworth at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park. At right, the First Council sculpture shows Lewis and Clark meeting local Indians.



AJ Dahm (all)

flour mill, blacksmith shop, library, hospital, distillery, paved sidewalk and school.

Fort Atkinson's soldiers marched upstream to fight in the Arikara War of 1823, but activity here was mostly centered around commerce. "With all the mountain men and Indians trading here, much of the time Fort Atkinson was more like a Walmart than a fort," Baker said.

When the Army's focus shifted to protecting trade on the Santa Fe Trail in 1827, soldiers lowered Fort Atkinson's flag, by then with 24 stars, for the last time. The 15-square-mile post was abandoned. People and weather stripped away most traces of its existence. When only chimneys protruded above the prairie by 1847, Mormon farmers salvaged the bricks.

THE NEW PARK'S buildings were taking shape by the time Baker reached junior high school. When he was asked to take part in a re-enactment, "That little 8-year-old boy inside of me climbed out," Baker said.

He remembers clumsily marching in civilian clothes before being issued a castoff uniform, and he has climbed to the rank of captain since starting out as

"militia scum" a quarter-century ago. Baker's character, Capt. Riley, is a composite of military commanders from the past. Baker was never in the real military, but he takes his mission seriously. As a new volunteer reports for duty, Baker takes the opportunity to teach.

"Using history to touch people's lives is why I do this."

– Volunteer Bob Baker

"You tell stories about people who are no longer here. You research them, find out where they were from and when they died," Baker told the new private. "You become their ghost, and by doing our best, we honor them."

The friend who recruited Baker relished his role. He was known for demanding, like a good guard would, that visitors approaching the front gate state their business. Baker was manning the

gate two years later, and thinking of that friend who had since died, when a visitor approached.

"He asked if I was going to challenge him, and told me how his previous visit was special for him and his wife," Baker said, wiping away a tear. "She died sometime after leaving here, and he was revisiting places they'd been to together. Fort Atkinson is a unique community of people who teach and care and share a love of history – and using history to touch people's lives is why I do this."

WHILE BAKER'S CHARACTER never actually existed, many historical figures spent time at Fort Atkinson. Col. Henry Leavenworth, namesake of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, was stationed here. The black locust trees here and in Fort Calhoun are believed to be descendants of trees grown with seeds that Leavenworth's wife, Harriet, brought from Wisconsin.

Frontiersman Jedediah Smith would stop to trade; but trapper, trader and explorer Hugh Glass, immortalized in the 2015 film *The Revenant*, had a deadly serious reason




During living history weekends at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park, canons fire after roll call, at noon, and again in late afternoon. At top, officers quarters are furnished with period items.

Brian Weber

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for trekking to Fort Atkinson in 1824. Glass was mauled by a grizzly bear while hunting for food for Gen. William Ashley's Yellowstone expedition in what is now South Dakota. Believing he was near death, the expedition moved on, leaving Jim Bridger and John Fitzgerald to stay with Glass until he died. They dug a grave, and then stole Glass' belongings and left him barely alive and unarmed.

Glass set his own broken leg and began crawling. At the Cheyenne River, he built a crude boat and floated to Fort Kiowa. The grueling 200-mile journey took six weeks. Legend has it that Glass avoided contracting gangrene by allowing maggots to eat his infected flesh.

Glass recuperated and found Bridger, but forgave him because of his young age. When Glass heard that Fitzgerald joined the Army and was stationed at Fort Atkinson, he headed to Council Bluff with retribution in mind.

The movie sensationalized the event, with Glass brutally killing Fitzgerald. In real life, since Fitzgerald was considered property of the Army, Glass was denied his revenge. Instead, Glass received \$300 for pain and suffering, and got his rifle

back. Local lore holds that, as Glass prepared to depart Fort Atkinson, he told Fitzgerald to never leave the Army, or he would kill him.

"MY DAD HAD me reading books about Glass, Lewis, Clark and Sacajawea when I was a kid, and then I visited Fort Atkinson and learned of their history here," said Heather Blazicevich, who tends the Sutler Store with her sister, Morgan Cummings. Volunteering together gives them what the Omaha siblings call "sister time."

The store carries dishes, hats, tin cups produced in the park's whitesmith shop, and other creature comforts that frugal soldiers could afford with their \$5 monthly salaries in the 1820s.

When 500 elementary school students visited recently and bought up all the rock candy, Blazicevich shared with them a taste of what life was like on the frontier 200 years ago.

"They don't realize how easy we have it today, and they can't fathom that in the 1800s, someone on a boat would take

Volunteers of all ages depict daily life at Fort Atkinson State Historical Park in Fort Calhoun. At right, colonial currency.



AJ Dahm (both)



your order downstream and that it would be months before they would return," Blazicevich said. "I tell fifth-graders that they'd be in seventh grade before their new hat would finally arrive from Paris."

Seeing re-enactors at historical locations in Boston and Jamestown inspired Massachusetts native Sarah Lewis to join the Friends of Fort Atkinson when she moved to Gretna three years ago.

Lewis says it's easy to read about history and forget it. But Fort Atkinson brings history to life.

"We keep an eye on the Indians, fur traders and rambunctious blacksmiths who gather at the store, as they are prone to shenanigans," Lewis said, slipping into her 19th-century character.

EVERY TOWN NEEDS a blacksmith, and Dean Slader has added 11 years of iron-shaping experience to his 45-year blacksmithing career since we last wrote about him ("Fort Atkinson Comes to

Life," July/August 2008). Slader is still forging hooks, hinges and other historically accurate items in the re-created facility he helped build three decades ago on the site of the fort's original blacksmith shop. The three-year effort included an entire year spent shaping the logs.

"We get accused of having too much fun," Slader said, while igniting a small tube of gunpowder that sends a cannonball skyward without the use of a cannon. The concussion echoes across the fort, through the valley and across the community of Fort Calhoun. Families applaud and children cheer.

Still dressed as Capt. Riley, Bob Baker investigates the commotion. Children, some of them his own grandchildren, gather around.

"History is stories. It is my story and your story," Baker said. "Like the original soldiers, civilians and traders of Fort Atkinson did, I hope you make your history a good one." 🐾

The Fort Atkinson Nebraska Historical Marker installed at Fort Calhoun in 1961 was the first one in the state. There are now more than 500.

Alan J. Bartels



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FORT ATKINSON
From 1820 to 1827, the nation's largest westerly military post occupied this earlier scene of Lewis and Clark's Campaign. In late 1819, troops under Colonel Henry established Cantonment Missouri along near here. In 1820, a permanent post was on the bluffs and named Fort Atkinson. population of over 1000 included military of the elite Rifle Regiment and Sixth some of their families, and other civilian Sixth U.S. Infantry occupied Fort Atkinson. It was abandoned in 1827.
The fortification consisted of a re-arrangement of one-story barracks facing horizontal logs. The structures faced inward an enclosed parade ground with loopholes exterior walls. Four entrances were located the center of the four walls. Cannons were in the bastions at the northwest and corners. A massively-built powder magazine the center of the enclosed area.
Outside the fortification were located council house for negotiating with the Indians, a gristmill, a schoolhouse, sawmill and other. A brick kiln produced thousands of bricks. Fort Atkinson represents an important early opening the West.
Fort Atkinson Foundation Nebraska State Historical Society



POP CULTURE

North Loup's Zangger family headed
right direction with popcorn

STORY BY ALAN J. BARTELS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AJ DAHM AND ALAN J. BARTELS

ROARING combines devouring fields of gold are a common sight across the Cornhusker State in autumn. The fertile North Loup River Valley in Central Nebraska is no exception. Here, one family of Valley County popcorn growers finds its harvests are taking root worldwide.



The Zangger family grows popcorn hybrids on their Valley County farm near North Loup, previous page. Above, they gave up hand-harvesting of experimental varieties only four years ago. Combines are great, but patriarch Chuck Zangger, below, still likes to get hands-on with his crops.

TO THE UNTRAINED eye, popcorn farmer Chuck Zangger's plants look just like other popcorn plants. A closer look reveals several inches of dark red at the base of each stalk. Even after decades of crossbreeding, the hue originating from the rare Indian flint corn he crossed with popcorn in the 1980s persists – and it is recognized in the popcorn industry as Zangger's unofficial trademark. Long before Zangger's ancestors sowed seeds near the North Loup River's nurturing soil, flint corn was grown widely here by the Pawnee, the valley's first farmers.

The same abundant water and fertile soil attracted Seventh Day Baptist farmers from Wisconsin to settle in the lush valley in 1872. Years of timely rain and bumper crops ended when a six-year drought began in 1890. Farmers heartbroken over withering stalks of field corn year after agonizing year began experimenting with alternative crops. Winter wheat and alfalfa fared well, but bountiful harvests of popcorn were cause for celebration. The community of North Loup celebrated its first Popcorn Days festival in 1901, a tradition known today as the longest continually running community celebration in Nebraska.

Every day is popcorn day for Chuck Zangger. The Zangger Popcorn Hybrids

business he founded in 1983 grew out of the family farm that his father and grandfather worked before him. Whereas other hardworking farmers in the valley grow popcorn destined to be popped at home by consumers or doused in butter at movie theaters, Zangger and his family develop specialty hybrids for popcorn farmers around the world.

Zangger believes the silt loam soil, Ogallala Aquifer water and weather conditions here create a unique microclimate allowing popcorn plants to convert more sugar to long chain starch than popcorn grown elsewhere.

"Our hot summer days and cool August nights with low humidity are similar to that of the south of France, like the Bordeaux region where they make the world's best wines," said Zangger, who is typically bearded, bespectacled and wearing suspenders. "That's why popcorn farmers in the North Loup River Valley grow the world's best popcorn, and why Nebraska is often the nation's top popcorn-producing state."

Before Nebraskans began growing the thoroughbred of popped corn kernel goodness, Iowan land speculator William Burris in 1876 took a stagecoach from Columbus to Scotia, where he hoped to rent a horse.

The only equine at the livery stable was a scruffy white mule. He rode that pale rider atop the ridge overlooking the North Loup River and gazed down into the valley. He continued to North Dakota and down to Texas before returning to Nebraska, where he bought his North Loup River land from the Union Pacific Railroad for \$2.50 an acre.

Accustomed to gas lights and other comforts at their Iowa home, Burris'



wife divorced him rather than move to Nebraska. Burris built a sod house from the very Nebraska ground his descendants now make a living from. In 1954 his grandson, Wilbert Oscar Zangger, and Wilbert's son, Charles, began breeding Hereford cattle while growing popcorn like their neighbors.

Chuck took over from his father, Charles, in the 1970s and began growing popcorn with characteristics suited to Nebraska's climate and weather.

Still farming with his father, Chuck's 1982 popcorn crop, 600 acres' worth, was looking good until an early frost hit the valley. "The popcorn was close to maturity and the yield was good, but it wouldn't pop," Zangger said. "Popcorn that doesn't pop is good for nothing."

Chuck contacted Idaho popcorn breeder Bill Crookham, seeking a variety that would mature earlier. Crookham suggested Zangger cross existing popcorn lines with flint corn native to the North Loup River Valley. Zangger could recall fields of flint corn growing near North Loup when he was a child, but dent corn had replaced it entirely decades earlier.

ZANGGER'S LOVE OF growing plants came to light at age 6 when he entered a flower arrangement at Popcorn Days and won a red ribbon. "When they handed out the awards, I noticed I was the only boy, so that was my last floral arrangement," he said.

Years later, he was driving home from that Idaho trip when he remembered the flint corn he grew in a corner of his mother's garden in North Loup at age 9. He had sold his red-husked corn locally as an ornamental variety, growing it from seeds a neighbor gave him that had been passed down by the valley's indigenous Pawnee. Zangger nearly swerved off the road when he remembered the peanut butter jar of seeds he'd left in his mother's garden shed 30 years earlier. Could it still be there, or had his mother tossed it out like a forgotten box of baseball cards?

Zangger drove nonstop to North Loup and began rummaging through the shed. Behind the mowers, watering pails, hoes and rakes, the jar was right where he had left it. Inside were 150 precious seeds of



Indian corn kernels lost for decades provide critical genetics for Zangger Popcorn Hybrids.

a once-common native flint corn variety adapted to the valley's growing conditions, a morph at the time believed to be extinct.

He planted the seeds. If he could get them to grow, he might be able to cross them with popcorn to produce hardier plants that mature earlier, require less irrigation, and are tolerant of drought and Nebraska's extreme weather. He was skeptical but hopeful. "After 30 years of hot-cold, hot-cold, none of those seeds should have germinated," Zangger said.

He anxiously waited for green to appear in the valley's rich, black earth, unsure if any spark of life remained in the ancient seeds. Twenty spindly stalks sprouted 10 days later, but most of them were weak. Zangger carefully tended the rare plants. Six survived.

"I crossed them with genetic lines of popcorn from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and ended up with 450 usable seeds," Zangger said. "Those six seedlings are the foundation of what we do here today."



FIVE OF THE HALF-DOZEN or so companies worldwide that breed popcorn seriously are in the United States. “We all meet at least once a year, and the integrity level of the entire industry goes up when everybody knows everybody,” Zangger said. Producers from around the world toured his family farm in August 2019.

He lives a corn cob’s throw away from his grandfather’s 1925 barn and the processing plant where he works with his wife, Carrie,

and their 20 full-time employees. Chuck focuses on plant breeding, while sons Luke and Josh run the business.

Luke joined the Marines and went into law enforcement after graduating from Ord High School, and Josh became a commercial airline pilot and flight instructor. He would fly three or four days and then come home to work on the farm. The North Loup River Valley finally lured him home full time, and brother Luke, who tired of a

10-mile commute that took an hour while living in California, moved home, too.

“I loved riding with Dad in the combine when I was a kid, and now my children ride with me,” Luke said. “The machines fascinated me at that age, and they still do, and the hard work of taking care of plants, animals and soil is very rewarding.”

After lunch at Happy Jack’s Tavern in Scotia, where Josh received a promising call for a large order destined for Asia, Luke

Luke Zangger has never lost his childhood fascination with farm machinery.



Nick and Brittany Hoffman inspect new hybrids. Promising strains will be propagated.

hops into a Case 2388 combine to harvest a field east of the North Loup River. The combine engulfs the entire plant, stalk and all, serving as a cushion as kernels pass through the machine. The six-row John Deere row crop head mounted to the front of the machine ensures no metal-to-kernel contact that could damage the seed and prevent germination.

His thoughts wander while picking the half-mile-long rows: reports of large cat-like paw prints on nearby farms, and memories of farm dogs of his youth – one adept at avoiding the churning combine head while chasing rabbits during harvest, and another that wasn't. The best memories are of growing up here and working alongside family.

"Dad is a hard worker and true pioneer," Luke said. "He worked for 20 years to develop an inbred that was worthwhile. It's because of Dad that my brother and I are working and living here."

"When working with family, when it works, it works, and when it doesn't work, it doesn't work at all," Chuck said. "There are lots of family businesses around here and all go through hard times. If not, they probably didn't innovate, and my family has always innovated."

While Chuck was serving in Vietnam, Chuck's mother, Margurite, sent packages of fudge, cookies – and one time a Christmas tree – all in boxes packed in popped popcorn.

Zangger and his fellow Marines ate the popcorn, and his mother's innovative idea came in handy when an engineer in France asked Chuck to develop a kernel that when popped would form a flake suitable as packing material. Although that engineer ultimately opted for another biodegradable shipping option, the round "mushroom" popcorn flakes Chuck bred have become a staple for caramel popcorn suppliers. Movie theaters typically prefer the less uniform "butterfly" flakes.

CHUCK EATS POPCORN every day, even while traveling with staff to his five Nebraska farms; to Zangger fields in Indiana, Missouri and Illinois; and to Chile and Argentina, where his company produces seed during Nebraska's winter months. The balmy job is a nice change from Nebraska blizzards, and jet-setting to foreign fields has allowed him to pick up what he calls "scientific Spanish" to bridge the language gap with workers.

At home, he deals with the same crop-eating pests as other Nebraska farmers. After hearing strange sounds coming from a field years ago, Zangger tracked down some four-legged popcorn thieves. "I was picking popcorn and all of the sudden I heard tassel sacks tearing," he said. "I sneaked over there and found 20 of a neighbor's 100-pound hogs. They were taking down the stalks and squealing with delight each time they tore off one of those sacks."

Popcorn farming in the tropics is a different animal altogether. "We were hand-harvesting a nursery in Puerto Rico, and all of the sudden there was this big iguana," said Brittany Hoffman, whose husband, Nick, is a plant breeder for Zangger.

"He stood his ground, and it had to be 10-foot-long," Nick said, as Brittany chimed in that the reptile was actually "half that size."

"Popcorn that doesn't pop is good for nothing."

– Chuck Zangger

"It started whipping its tail back and forth and would have got us if we hadn't seen it first. After that, we avoided that spot because we were afraid we might see him," Nick said.

Nick first laid eyes on Brittany in an O'Neill restaurant. After learning that she worked for a local eye clinic, Nick stopped by one of the town's two optometry offices, even though he didn't need contact lenses. "They offered to help me, but I didn't see her there," Nick said. "So I went to the other eye place and made an appointment. She checked my eyes."



Experimental hybrids and inbreds are harvested with a two-row specialty combine.



Nowadays, Nick and Brittany see their way into the cramped cab of a two-row specialty combine at harvest time. Instead of mowing down the entire field, this harvest is a detailed, tedious and fast-paced process. This is research, not mass production.

Twenty- and 40-foot plots separated by 3-foot-wide alleys make for a lot of stop-and-go action. Nick monitors computer readings as he pilots the combine that measures pounds and moisture while shooting popcorn samples into the cab. Brittany has 30 seconds between plots to catch the sample in a mesh bag, place the correct label inside and tie the bag shut before the combine lurches toward the next plot. She'll perform the task more than 12,000 times during the farm's two- to three-week harvest.

"I get tired of hitting my head on the corn funnel and hearing the whine of the combine, I hear it in my sleep," Brittany said. "The noise and dust, and corn chaff sticking to your eyes, it's maddening. But I

like seeing the smile on Nick's face as readings come in."

"Harvest is an expression of our work," Nick said. "Getting to the end of a plot and ending up with a 25-pound sample is exciting. Kinda like fishing, you never know what you're going to get."

While workers ready seed shipments destined for farmers in South Africa and India, the aroma and sound of popcorn popping is a constant in the lab. The popper pops 8-10 hours a day, 120 batches in a good day, until 5,000 batches have been tested for popping expansion, eatability and appearance. Research assistant Chris Blaha sorts the flakes according to shape, all part of the Zangger family's quest for creating varieties that meet customers' needs.

"I like popcorn and we eat all we want. Some employees get tired of it by the time we are done testing," Blaha said. "All the extra popped popcorn goes to the cattle, and when they see the truck, those animals come running. They love popcorn, too."



When conditions are right, popcorn harvest lasts well into the night.

CHUCK MET THE LOVE of his life, Carrie, on a blind date to a 1968 Kansas State football game. "I was a lowly freshman and Chuck was a desperate senior when we met," Carrie said. She grew up on a wheat, milo and hog farm, where her father popped popcorn most evenings in a cast-iron kettle because it was a cheap snack for his six children.

Carrie married her own popcorn farmer in 1970. "She drove almost every piece of equipment we had," Chuck said. "I think that is the case for most Nebraska farm couples. You pitch in and work together."

These days, Carrie volunteers at the Second Hand Rose thrift shop in Ord when not answering phones and doing paperwork in the farm's office. She is thankful for Chuck's determination to provide for his family while creating a successful business.

"The early days were not easy," Carrie said. "Chuck had a vision of what this company could be after that popcorn got frosted, more of a vision than I ever did."

The Zanggers are appreciative of the land, family, and their crew of hardworking employees, including 60-70 Ord, Scotia, North Loup, Burwell, Comstock and Arcadia high school students who help pollinate popcorn in July.

"When my sons were growing up and wanted to play baseball in the summertime, they played. I always told them there would be plenty of time for work," Chuck said.

"I've got 10 grandchildren now and there is plenty of work to be done. I am sure at least one of them will be interested in running our popcorn farm one day." 🌽

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