

COLORADO GOVERNORS

Walter Walford Johnson



Scope and Content Note

The Walter Walford Johnson collection comprises approximately 13 cubic feet of record material spanning his nine month term as governor in 1950. Major record series included in the collection are ten boxes of administrative files, two boxes of Executive Records and one box of correspondence. There is one file addressing the Air Force Academy which was proposed to be located at Colorado Springs.

Biography

Walter W. Johnson was born April 16, 1904, in Pueblo, Colorado, where he attended public schools until 1919 when he graduated from Pueblo Central High School. He was the youngest son of a Colorado Fuel & Iron plant boilermaker. He worked as a newspaper carrier and night helper in the

mailing room of the Pueblo Chieftain which helped him make his way through high school. After graduation, he began working for the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company as a salesman while continuing to attend a Pueblo vocational school.

He married Neva Morrow in 1922. They built their home at 2800 Cedar, and established themselves in the poultry business which boomed during the first two years of the 1930's. The economic depression of that decade put an end to their poultry farm abruptly when, as Johnson put it, "we discovered that we were supporting the chickens instead of the chickens supporting us." The Johnsons had two children, Winnifred and Walford.

Johnson's flair for promotion inspired him next to establish the Walter W. Johnson Agency in 1930, for the purpose of developing the property around the Minnequa Heights sector of Pueblo. He designed and constructed a number of homes in the 2600, 2700 and 2800 blocks on Cedar. At the same time he started an insurance career, eventually serving as supervisor from 1932-1937 for the Penn Mutual Life Insurance Company. Johnson entered into politics as a Pueblo School Board member in 1937, and was chairman of the board from 1939 to 1943. In 1940, he was elected as a Democrat to the first of two four-year terms in the state senate where his main interest was in education. In 1946, he ran for the U.S. Congress but was defeated. Then in 1948, he was elected Lieutenant Governor.

In April of 1950, Governor W. Lee Knous resigned to become a federal district judge in Denver. Walter Johnson succeeded Knous and completed the rest of Knous' term. Johnson then ran unsuccessfully for the Office of Governor in the election of 1950. He returned to the state senate in April, 1951, to complete the term of the late Senator Curtis Ritchie. Johnson was again elected to the state senate in 1954.

During his nine month term as governor, Johnson opposed efforts to increase the state income tax as well as a severance tax on oil. He favored running the state agencies on money already brought it without any increase in taxation. Johnson also pursued a reorganization of the state highway department. There was little time to complete Johnson's agenda, however, as the legislature was out of session during most of his term. Even so, during his short span as governor, Johnson demonstrated an uncanny instinct for economy. He saved the taxpayers \$743,000 from the return of unexpended appropriations to various state institutions. He called a special session of the legislature in August and was instrumental in reducing the state income tax by twenty per cent. He was also able to help teachers obtain higher salaries and was a champion of the metal mining industry in Colorado. Within a few weeks after taking office, Governor Johnson inaugurated plans for a modern network of highways and recommended that a tunnel be constructed under Loveland Pass. Keenly aware of the lucrative tax dollars in tourist trade, he asked the next legislature to appropriate a minimum of \$250,000 annually to advertise the state tourism industry.

When he returned to private life, he returned to his old home in Pueblo. He later served on the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education; and in 1962 was appointed to the State Industrial Commission. He was reappointed to the commission in 1967. On December 31, 1969, he resigned before completing his second term and retired to Tempe, Arizona. He died there after a brief illness at the age of eighty two and is buried at Pueblo.

Bibliography of Walter W. Johnson

- Abbott, Carl; Leonard, Stephen; and McComb, David. Colorado. Colorado Associated University Press, Boulder Colorado, 1982.
- Athearn, Robert G. The Coloradans. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1976.
- Newspaper Files of Walter W. Johnson. Denver Public Library Western History Collection.
- Ubbelohde, Carl, Benson, Maxine, and Smith, Duane. Colorado History. Boulder, CO., Pruett Publishing Co., 1972.
- Rocky Mountain News, March 25, 1987, p. 147 and June 25, 1955, p. 28.

Series Descriptions

Executive Record

The Executive Record contains executive orders; appointments; legislative messages; pardons; extraditions and requisitions; honorary citations; and proclamations which were issued by Governor Johnson during his term of office in 1950-1951.

Correspondence and Administrative Files

Included in this series is correspondence between Governor Johnson and his constituents, state agencies, and other public officials.