

Johnny Carson Facts and Anecdotes (Various Sources as noted)

Compiled Winter/Spring 2014

Susan Warneke - Great American Comedy Festival

Johnny kept a set of drums in his office, given to him by band leader Buddy Rich. "Playing the drums is good therapy," he said. "It gets all the hostilities out." (from small clipping – source unknown)

Norfolk Daily News clip July 21, 1967

Ed McMahon said:

1. Johnny played football with the Jets – suited up and scrimmaged with them.
2. There was a rumor that at age 16 Johnny did a magic act as the Great Carsoni from the back of a moving truck.
3. Johnny can fly-cast better than anyone he ever saw.

Norfolk Daily News October 17, 1988 - Carson Center Dedication

Carson reminisced: he used to look for arrowheads near the present location of Faith Regional Health Services.

From stories written by Kent Warneke, editor:

After being shown the (Carson Radiation) center's linear accelerator and hearing the explanation that the machine emits extremely high dosages of radiation, Carson responded, "I bet it makes hot waffles, too."

"...the people- their warmth, openness and frankness of the people out here," he said. "That's what the Midwest is all about. If I could do the Tonight Show from the Midwest, I'd do it from here."

He ventriloquized his voice into a cow's mouth at the county fair.

Johnny organized his high school scrap metal drive.

At age 12, he wrote away for a magic kit...and promised to make him the life of the party; ultimately he added ventriloquism to his act.

Johnny had a prodigious memory, as the result of a self-taught memory course. He knew the names of all 98 (99) contestants in a Miss Universe contest he once emceed.

When Johnny arrived in Hollywood, he hosted a "bite-sized" morning commentary television show "Carson's Cellar."

Johnny's big break in Hollywood came in 1954. Red Skelton was injured when a breakaway door didn't open. Network officials summoned Carson. He ran on stage, started talking and took the country by storm. The next day Jack Benny said, "This kid is great, just great."

Johnny attended Grant School in Norfolk. He graduated in the class of 1943 from Norfolk High School.

NEBRASKAland Magazine February 1965 by J. Greg Smith

p. 11 see photo of Johnny with dummy *did not find this photo in any other source*

"The lanky comedian went out for football at Norfolk High when he was a senior – he was all of 125 pounds then – but he gave it up after a couple of scrimmages. He could take all the pounding his teammates could dish out, but when they stepped on his fingers that was too much. He didn't want to take any chances on fouling up his slight-of-hand tricks." p. 13

"Once John took up magic, all else came second," Mrs. Carson said. "We took 'home movies' six Christmases in a row, and in every one of them, John has a deck of cards in his hand. He was constantly trying to improve his technique and would work with cards and coins by the hour."

During his Navy years, John put on his routine whenever he got the chance... Mrs. Carson recalls sending John's magic paraphernalia all over the country. While in the Navy, John decided to have a go at ventriloquism, again via the do-it-yourself route. He soon perfected the routine and included it in his act.

Re: Red Skelton injury... p. 54

...John was cleaning his garage 20 miles away from the CBS studios when the call came for him to substitute for Skelton. With only an hour to spare, the lanky comedian rushed into town and ad libbed his way through the hour-long show. John did such an impressive job that CBS signed him to a five-year contract the next day. "Pinch-hitting for Skelton was probably the biggest shot in the arm of my career," John recalls.

Norfolk Daily News November 29, 1989

Theater, rehearsal hall to bear Carson's name

A theater and rehearsal hall in the new Lied Center for Performing Arts on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus has been named for former Norfolkian Johnny Carson. ... Carson made a "very, very generous" contribution to the construction of the \$20 million center...Carson asked that his donation remain anonymous...when asked whether the Lied Center's ancillary theater could be named for him, he agreed as long as the amount of his donation was not revealed.

A dream come true (editorial)

Norfolk Daily News September 12, 1987

It is evident that without Johnny Carson's generosity, there would have been a long delay and perhaps the assumption of some debt on the part of the Lutheran Community Hospital for the new radiation treatment facility to be built this fall as planned. But he has chosen to match the community's contribution with a \$650,000 gift, thereby assuring success in reaching the campaign's original goal of \$1.3 million. ...An individual contribution of such magnitude reflects Johnny Carson's love and deep respect for his parents, in whose honor the gift was given, and a very special regard for the community where he grew up.

Norfolk Daily News October 15, 1988

Carson to return for center's dedication

... "We are extremely delighted that he could find time to come back and participate in the ceremony, said Daryl Mackender, hospital administrator. "He deserves much of the credit for making this center a reality."

Norfolk Daily News January 15, 1991

Magnificent gift (editorial)

Once more, Johnny Carson has provided a magnificent gift to his home town. This time it is one which will benefit young people most of all. Told of the problems that had arisen with the Norfolk Senior High theater/auditorium project because of cost escalations after it was first conceived, he sent a check for \$600,00. That sum will make it possible to proceed as first planned... It can now be done right the first time, thanks to this widely-known entertainer.

(in same editorial)

Recently, on hearing of the struggle to finance a primate center at Royal, he gave \$50,000. Noting that it would be something to interest young people especially. ...he is remembered for a quick wit, an engaging manner, a unique ability to entertain and converse with people of all ages. He is recognized for that here, too, but much more for generosity in even greater proportion than the fame which he has won.

Omaha World-Herald (AP) August 29, 1981

'Heeere's Johnny,' but Where?

Plans by NBC to film a "Johnny Comes Home" special featuring the Tonight show host has two Nebraska high schools fussing over where they'll play a football game scheduled during Carson's visit.

The brouhaha began several weeks ago when Norfolk Public Schools Superintendent Gene Lavender asked Columbus Schools Superintendent Fred Bellum to switch the site of the two schools' Oct. 23 football game from Columbus to Norfolk.

Lavender told Bellum he wanted to bring the game to Norfolk to accommodate plans to NBC to film the prime-time special on Carson's return to Norfolk High School.

Note: Is a spelling discrepancy between sources for name "Levander" or "Lavendar" SW

At first agreeable to Lavender's request, Bellum later decided against it. Caught in the middle of a grown controversy, the Columbus football squad voted to a man to keep the game in Columbus because only three other home games are scheduled.

Band Director Bill Bailey told Bellum he wanted the game to remain in Columbus because the halftime show will be the last the band will perform before the prestigious Pershing Competition.

But perhaps most important to the Columbus students, their homecoming is scheduled for Oct. 23.

Columbus officials were more than happy to help Norfolk out during the visit of its most famous former resident.

City of Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce officials dashed off letters to Bellum pledging their support and help in handling throngs of Carson fans during the gala event – at Columbus.

Chamber officials even went so far as to say the special could help put Columbus on the map.

The Columbus Board of Education has refused to move the game. Bellum said he wasn't sure NBC could change the proposed location of the filming to Columbus. He has vowed to prevent the Columbus homecoming from becoming a televised circus, to retain the atmosphere of high school sports and to not steal the show from Norfolk officials. Stay tuned for further details.

Viewpoint Northeast Technical Community College October 29, 1981 by Janet Blide

Carson Explains Escapades

Johnny Carson's recent visit to Norfolk has kept the town abuzz with "I saw Johnny" stories.

Johnny, who hasn't been back to his hometown since 1976, jokingly said the biggest change her was "the weather!" He mentioned only that the size of the town and the appearance of the downtown area had changed, while the atmosphere remains unchanged.

His best memories focused on his high school days. On one occasion he made a smelly chemistry concoction in the boiler room of the school. Everyone got the whole day off so the building could air out. He want' caught, but he was suspected of the prank.

One of his zaniest escaped was at the Douglas County Courthouse. The community (of Omaha) has done everything they could think of to rid the courthouse of pigeons, yet the birds remained. Johnny felt the controversy was very one-sided and the pigeons were being treated unjustly, so he interviewed then atop the courthouse to bring their views on the matter to light.

About Magic

From story by Dorothy Fryer

By the age of 12, he had started steps toward his glittering future—he had answered a magazine ad that promised to make him a magician and was learning card tricks. By the time he was 14, he was doing magic shows for organizations and clubs, and soon was billed as "The Great Carsoni."

He continued through high school here and graduated with the 1943 class of 141 members. Although he had enlisted in the Navy, he did not leave for the service until October and spent the summer following high school in California. There he was hired by Orson Welles to be his assistant for a magic show and at 17, he held Rita Hayworth's foot while Welles sawed her in half.

From Rolling Stone Magazine March 22, 1979
p. 41

At twelve, Johnny came upon an inspirational text called *Hoffman's Book of Magic* and quickly became immersed in the art of illusion. He sent away to various Chicago mail-order houses for additional manuals and tricks, and shortly thereafter received a black velvet-covered magician's table from his parents for Christmas. Armed with these tools, "The Great Carson" first appeared at the age of fourteen before the local Rotary Club, his prodigious feats of prestidigitation rewarded with a purse of three dollars. His interest in dramatics and magic grew as he entered high school, and he shunned sports in favor of school plays and presentations of magic for Norfolk 4-H picnics.

Navy and Magic

He has since said a highlight of his Navy experiences followed a night when he spent hours decoding a message and at 7 a.m. went to the admiral's quarters to deliver it. Visiting with the admiral was Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, who asked Johnny what he was going to do after the war.

Carson said that actually he hadn't really thought about it, but apparently mentioned his magic act, after which he entertained the admiral and Forrestal with some of his tricks.

WOW TV Rolling Stone Magazine March 22, 1979 p. 41

In time, Johnny got his own show, *The Squirrel's Nest*, on Omaha's WOW-TV. He also served as a disc jockey on WOW radio, often butchering the commercials for such local advertisers as the Friendly Savings Bank. "Drop in anytime. At two or three in the morning is fine. Help yourself. Just leave a note."

1962

From Rolling Stone Magazine March 22, 1979 p. 41

On October 1, 1962, at 11:15 p.m., Groucho Marx introduced Johnny Carson as the moderator of *The Tonight Show*, and a new era in television, and comedy, was born.

The *New York Times* bestowed a favorable review, the writer noting that, "at the onset he (Carson) said he was not going to describe every guest as an old and dear friend, an indication of a refreshing attitude against prevalent show business hokum." In summation, the *Times* ruled that his "healthy independence" could "wear very well."

1976 Return to Norfolk / Some of Johnny's school escapades

Norfolk High School Commencement – May 1976

Excerpts from Norfolk Daily News- May 24, 1976 by Fred Stafford

Television's late-night comedy host returned to his alma mater – Norfolk High School – and left the 286 graduates of 1976 with several of his keys to the doors of success in the world, the primary one of which was "learn to laugh at yourself."

Introduced by Superintendent Gene Levander as "the most widely-known, best recognized graduate (class of 1943) of the Norfolk Public School System," Carson pointed out to the seniors, "It is important to keep a perspective on how you want to view yourself, so that your ego doesn't become inflated. He added, "I could also have been Norfolk High's most famous graduate if I had gone to the electric chair.

Saying that both he and his wife were honestly touched by the invitation to be commencement speaker – a first for him –Carson said he came back to Norfolk for three reasons:

1. To rekindle old memories and meet former friends.
2. Find out what the seniors had on their minds.
3. See if the movies at the Granada Theater change any more often than they did when he was here.

Carson urged the graduates ... to retain a "certain child-like attitude of curiosity and sense of discovery of how everything works. When you stop wondering, you might as well put your rocker on the front porch and call it a day." ... "Stay loose to keep from going bananas. Don't become rigid in your ideas or close the door from learning anything news. It is better to have doubts and go ahead."

Carson refrained from giving advice on marriage, saying that was "like asking the captain of the Titanic for navigation lessons," but he did encourage the students compromise. But he urged them not to compromise on happiness, rather decide early what would make them happy through the seeking of meaning and a purpose in their lives.

Carson revamped the time-worn customs of commencement addresses by opening the last part of his time to questions by the graduates.

J. Carson Tells Visit on Show

Norfolk Daily News Wednesday, May 26, 1976 page 33

Johnny Carson had some pleasant things to say about Norfolk and his Sunday visit here on the "Tonight" TV Show Tuesday.

In a conversation with Ed McMahon, he told about coming back to give the Norfolk Senior High commencement address and related the fine reception given him.

He laughed that when he saw his former teachers in a group and heard them call him "John," he almost felt as if he were back in the principal's office again.

Carson's Teachers Reminisce on Show

Norfolk Daily News – July 2, 1965 by Gene Gaddie p. 1 and 12

Television viewers of the Johnny Carson Show Thursday night received the impression that he was quite a character in his Norfolk school days. At the opening of his show, Carson introduced “a couple of teachers of mine who put up with me for quite a few years when I was growing up.” He introduced Miss Fay Gordon and Theodore P. Skillstad.

Mr. Skillstad relayed greetings from Jennie Walker, Carson's geometry teacher, who shared what she called “Johnny's peculiarities.” Both recalled the geometry lesson when Miss Walker was using a baseball game as an example of a problem. Carson interrupted the instruction by raising his hand and asking “Which team is playing?”

Carson went through the ritual Miss Gordon had taught him in penmanship class. He flailed his hand to loosen up his fingers and demonstrated the proper way to hold a pen “so you can roll the little orange into the house,” formed by the fingers.

“I have trunks full of ovals and push-pulls at home that I haven't the slightest idea what to do with,” Carson said.

****Johnny's note to Fay – his comments about penmanship at the bottom,**

From Coronet Magazine – December 1967 Interview by Nora Ephron

Johnny dumped a hayrick in the high school parking lot.

Viewpoint Northeast Technical Community College October 29, 1981 by Janet Blide

His best memories focused on his high school days. On one occasion he made a smelly chemistry concoction in the boiler room of the school. Everyone got the whole day off so the building could air out. He want' caught, but he was suspected of the prank.

The Great Carsoni

NEBRAKSAland Magazine February 1965, p. 13

“The boys loved to hike,” Mrs. Carson said, “John and Dick would head out in most any direction to hunt or fish or just explore. I could have paved a highway with the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches I made for them. They had a special hangout called “Black Bridge” which I didn't learn about till years later. They used to go down to the railroad trestle and swing on the timbers while trains passes by overhead.”

Segue to **People Magazine** December 7, 1981 cover photo Johnny on bridge

Johnny can go home again by Bill Shaw 1981

Norfolk, Neb. – One day last week Johnny Carson was strolling across the Black Bridge over the Elkhorn River, tossing rocks into the water and balancing himself on the railroad tracks as a kid might do.

Yes, it was THE Johnny Carson. His stroll was being filmed for a television special about his return to this boyhood home here in the hill country of northeastern Nebraska. The show will probably be called “Johnny Comes Home.”

While the cameras rolled, several Carson associates watched from the bridge, hoping nothing would go wrong. Nothing did. Next, Carson announced he was going to hang from beneath the railroad trestle while a 26-car Union Pacific freight train passed overhead. He did it while a kid and it would be great fun to try again.

(train story con't.)

Well, you guessed it. "Tonight Show" host Johnny Carson fell right into the Elkhorn River. The train was too long and Carson's 56-year-old fingers gave out.

Mad scramble down the riverbank to fetch Johnny. He was soaked, but Johnny was laughing. It would make great film for the television special.

Johnny on being on stage; young comedians;

Excerpts from Rolling Stone March 22, 1979 Interview by Timothy White

...But to me, the fascination of getting up and putting on a costume or makeup, even in high school, to be in a play where you're actually putting makeup on your face – it made you different. I mean the kids knew, hey, you were a professional, *you're putting makeup on*. You were *different* from other people. You were up on the stage and they were sitting down here, and there's a certain, I don't know if you want to call it...power, but it makes you different. That's why a lot of performers sometimes are good in front of audience and not particularly good on a one-to-on relationship.

Young Comedians...

The "Tonight Show" has always been a major vehicle for new comedians. In that respect, there's nothing else like it on the air.

(Carson) Because I realize that is the hardest type of entertaining to do – to stand by yourself and make people laugh. And anybody who says anything different is crazy. You can ask George Burns, you can ask any of the people who "stand." That's a lonely type of existence to get out here, one on one, and you don't have any instruments, and you're not dancing, and you're not singing the latest hits. That is a tough way to make a dollar. It's lonely; you've only got yourself.

Why do you think that you're such a staunch supporter of these new comedians and no one else really does it?

Well, because it's a hard commodity to find, first of all. There's thousands of singers who can come out and sing a song. There are, however, not many young comedians who can come out and do six, seven, eight minutes. And it's fun to see it when they do come on and hit and go on to other things...It's fun to watch that happen.

Do you offer advice or counsel to these people before or afterward?

If they ask. If I feel they will take it well, because I don't want to be patronizing. But most of them know. They appreciate it. I mean, if somebody came to me when I was starting and said, "Hey, this would work for you," I'd appreciate that.

...I've wondered if there was a certain point in your life, a certain moment of self-esteem and self-worth upon which you built every other experience.

There comes a time or a moment, I don't know whether you can say it precisely, when you know in which direction you're going to go. Even when you're young. But you don't know *why* exactly. I know it happened to me when I was quite young.

You go through those phases – "I'll be a doctor, or I'll be..." – the standard things. But I think it's when you find out, at least for me, that you can get in front of an audience and be in control. I think that probably happened in grade school, fifth or sixth grade, where I could get attention by being different, by getting up in front of an audience or even a group of kids and calling the attention to myself by what I did or said or how I acted. And I said, "Hey, I like that feeling."

When I was a kid, I was shy. And I think I did that because it was a device to get attention. And to get that reaction is a strange feeling, it is a high that I don't think you can get from anything else. The mind starts to do things that you didn't even realize it could do. It's hard to explain.

And you walk off and you're just, everything is such a high, and it's a great feeling, and that's why performers have very big highs and very big lows. People don't understand that. They put you down as being standoffish or cool or so forth. It's *not* that.

I suppose it's manipulation, I suppose it's the sense of power, the center of attention and the me-ism. And performers have to have that. You see, that's one of the things that goes against the grain of being brought up; you should be modest, you should be humble, you shouldn't draw attention to yourself. Well, to be an entertainer, you *must*.

You gotta be a little gutsy, a little egotistical, so you have to pull back sometimes when people say, "Well, he's stuck-up." Stuck-up is only another word for self-conscious. You aren't stuck-up. You are aloof, because you aren't very comfortable so you put up this barrier.

Do you remember the specific moment – a spelling bee or class recitation or a play or something – when you crossed over that barrier?

I think it was a play. A Christmas play, as a matter of fact – Dickens *A Christmas Carol*. My classmate Dorothy Ward played the Ghost of Christmas Present. I played the little boy who went to fetch the turkey, and this man, Scrooge, gave me a shilling to do it. And I realized that I was the center of attention. I realized that people were saying, "Hey, look, he's in a play." That makes you different right off, you see. You're stepping out of *here*, and you're stepping into a make-believe world, and all of a sudden people are looking at you. You like that, but at the same time, you find that you have an ambivalent feeling.

Johnny Carson's Philanthropy in Nebraska

Honoring Johnny Editorial dated 9-6-85 Norfolk Daily News

...We would rather future recognition of Johnny Carson's ties to Norfolk, and that of his family, take some other form than renaming a street. Somehow it seems less than adequate, though certainly an honor. Doing him honor is in order. Doing it in a fully appropriate way is important. It would not hurt to "think on it" a little more.

We have! The Great American Comedy Festival is, indeed, more than renaming a street. (SW comment)

Carson Give \$100,000 for NU Scholarships excerpts from the Norfolk Daily News (?) December 23, 1977

LINCOLN - The University of Nebraska Foundation announced today that Johnny Carson, television's successful late-night entertainer, has made a gift of \$100,000 to support four endowed merit scholarships at the University.

D.B. Varner, Foundation chairman, said the gift is in response to the Foundation's \$25 million capital gift campaign.

In making the gift, the 1949 Nebraska graduate from Norfolk said, "I am indebted to the University and to the people of Nebraska, and in a small way I hope that these scholarships will be partial repayment by helping other Nebraskans build a productive life."

The recipients will be selected annually from the best academically qualified graduates of Nebraska high schools, Varner said.

Donation from Carson keeps chimp in area zoo Excerpts from the Norfolk Daily News Aug. 1, 1990

By Kent Warneke News Managing Editor

A donation from former Norfolkian Johnny Carson has ensured the success of a fund drive to provide a larger, stronger home for Reuben the chimp – the star attraction of the Northeast Nebraska Zoo in Royal.

Carson, star of NBC's "Tonight" television show, recently sent the zoo's board of directors a check for more than \$50,000 to build an "ape-proof" enclosure, with end walls of steel-reinforced concrete. Reuben, a 7-year-old chimp on loan from the St. Louis Zoo, has outgrown his current quarters in the back of a trailer house.

The board of directors of the Northeast Nebraska Zoo, formerly the Midwest Primate Center, embarked on the fund-raising effort earlier this year in hopes of keeping Reuben in Royal. Dick Haskins, executive director of the zoo, had said Reuben would have to return to the St. Louis Zoo if a new, larger shelter was not up by fall.

Carson reportedly telephoned zoo officials two times to visit about the fund-raising drive and pledged enough money to ensure success of the effort.

Area zoo board honors Carson for generosity Excerpts from the Norfolk Daily News May 21, 1991

By Greg Wees News Regional Editor

The board of directors of the Northeast Nebraska Zoo at has a new honorary member – entertainer Johnny Carson.

"We voted Johnny an honorary lifetime member of the board since he gave us the money for the building for Reuben," said John Gradwohl, board secretary from Laurel. "And we did it because this is his last week, and we got to thinking, we should do something for him."

Carson donated \$55,000 two years ago to build the enclosure for Reuben, the zoo's chimpanzee and star attraction. Friday will be Carson's last "The Tonight Show" after 30 years of hosting the show.

Zoo supporters also have their fingers crossed that Carson will stop by the zoo for a visit in the fall. Carson has indicated he may attend the dedication of the new theatre under construction at Norfolk High School and may take a side trip to Royal.

Carson pledges \$100,000 to fund Excerpts from the Norfolk Daily News July 28, 1993

DES MOINES - Organizers of Thursday night's telethon for Midwest flood victims report a \$100,000 pledge from former Tonight Show host Johnny Carson for the appeal scheduled Thursday night on more than 240 stations. John Sloan, president and general manager of KWQC-TV in Davenport, said Tuesday that Carson called with a pledge of \$100,000 after reading about the telethon in trade journals. "Mr. Carson called to tell me that he just wanted to help out," said Sloan. Carson is a native of the southern Iowa community of Corning and grew up in Norfolk, Neb.

Theater, rehearsal hall to bear Carson's name Excerpts from the Norfolk Daily News November 29, 1989

A theater and rehearsal hall in the new Lied Center for Performing Arts on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus has been named for former Norfolkian Johnny Carson.

Carson, host of MBC's "Tonight" show, made a "very, very generous" contribution to the construction of the \$20 million center.

Carson, who grew up in Norfolk, studied radio and speech at the University of Nebraska, graduating in 1949. He most recently returned to Norfolk in October 1988 to participate in the dedication ceremonies of the Carson Regional Radiation Center at the Lutheran Community Hospital. While in Nebraska on that trip, he also toured the Lied Center.

At the time that Carson made his donation and the funding campaign ended in 1986, Carson asked that his donation remain anonymous. But... he was recently asked whether the Lied Center's ancillary theater could be named for him. He agreed as long as the amount of his donation was not revealed.

The Johnny Carson theater is to the west of the Lied Center's principal hall.

3.30.14 SW