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Article Summary: George Joslyn gained national prominence by creating a virtual monopoly in the auxiliary printing business, supplying standardized, preprinted news to more than 12,000 newspapers in the United States. He rose from modest, rural New England origins to become Nebraska's wealthiest resident by World War I and was disdained for his ruthless business practices and admired for his philanthropy. This is his story.

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Photographs / Images: George and Sarah Joslyn on horseback; Western Newspaper Union building at 1123 Howard Street, bicycle messengers and possibly George Joslyn; Metropolitan Hotel at 1124 Douglas Street, Omaha; Cook Remedy Company "magic remedy" ad for syphilis cure; A N Kellogg Company of Chicago, 1906 advertisement; Inset article on George Josly and the Bull; Portrait of Sarah Joslyn, 1941; Portrait of George Joslyn, 1932; opulent stone residence of the Joslyns, built 1902-03, Omaha

WESTERN George Joslyn America's First Media Mogul UNION

By Dennis N. Mihelich

The name Joslyn—immortalized by two of Omaha's most notable structures, George and Sarah Joslyn's opulent residence, often referred to simply as "The Castle," and the Joslyn Art Museum constructed and endowed by the Joslyn fortune—is widely known in that city and throughout Nebraska. Paradoxically, however, George Joslyn himself is not well known, and myths about his wealth, his family, and his business practices abound. He gained national prominence by creating a virtual monopoly in the auxiliary printing business, supplying standardized, preprinted news to more than 12,000 newspapers in the United States, an accomplishment that made him America's first mass-media mogul. Disdained for his ruthless business practices, but admired for his philanthropy, he rose from modest, rural New England origins to become Nebraska's wealthiest resident by World War I.

The family name, which means goose feather gatherer or supplier, has a variety of spellings—Josselyn, Joscelyn, Joscelin, Jocelyn, Joselin, Joslin, Joslyn—and the family's lineage has been traced back to an aristocrat in the court of Charlemagne. George Joslyn's family arrived in the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1635. Seven generations later, at the end of the eighteenth century, Joseph Joslin, George's grandfather, established a farm at the town of Waitsfield in the foothills of the Green Mountains astride the Mad River in north-central Vermont. He outlived three wives, and fathered thirteen children, including Calista (the

mother of George's future wife) by his second wife, and George's father, Alfred, by his third.¹

In 1847 Alfred married Esther Ann Rice, the daughter of Salmon and Lucy Joslin Rice (Alfred's cousin) and worked on his father's farm in Waitsfield. They had five children; their first was George Alfred, born June 30, 1849, in Waltham, Massachusetts (according to information George provided to the town clerk at the time of his marriage; various other publications give his birthplace as Lowell, Massachusetts, or Waitsfield, Vermont). Calista married James Selleck in 1836 and settled in the nearby town of Fayston, Vermont. She bore five children. Her youngest, Sarah Hannah, was born April 14, 1851.²

George and Sarah were half first cousins, and probably met at family functions. They were married at Berlin, Vermont, on September 24, 1872. Tradition during the nineteenth century, especially in sparsely populated rural areas, did not raise strong taboos against relatives marrying; in fact in many areas the marriage of cousins was encouraged.

George had earlier established himself in Montreal in the nearby Canadian province of Quebec, and by 1872 was working there for the Rice Brothers Collar Manufacturers, owned by his mother's younger brothers, Walter and George Rice. He listed himself as a bookkeeper on his marriage certificate.³ George and Sarah established a household, and she undertook no employment.

In 1873 the Rice Brothers company expanded to include an associated business at a second site, and two years

later Joslyn shifted his employment to the new location and listed himself in *Lovell's Directory*, the city directory for Montreal, as a printer. He remained at that job until 1879, when, according to his close friend and business associate, the architect John McDonald, he and Sarah moved to Des Moines, Iowa, to seek his fortune with the Iowa Printing Company, owned by another relative.⁴

In the tradition of the popular late-nineteenth-century rags-to-riches stories of Horatio Alger, Joslyn's obituary declares that George and Sarah arrived at Des Moines with only their suitcases and a few dollars, and, luckily, he found instant employment unloading wagons at the Iowa Printing Company for \$1.25 per day.⁵ But Joslyn was a bookkeeper and printer, and it is unlikely that the couple had so few possessions that they could carry them in their suitcases. Probably they sent for their belongings after getting settled. Although George may well have helped to unload a wagon on his first day on the new job, it would have been highly unlikely, only a few months later, for the company to entrust the management of a new branch plant to a man hired as a common laborer. Doubtless the Iowa Printing Company chose Joslyn to open a new office in Omaha in 1880 based on his business acumen gained as a bookkeeper and on his expertise as a printer. Probably the relative alluded to by John McDonald had corresponded with Joslyn at Montreal and encouraged him to move west and help build a new business with a promising future. Thus George and Sarah were not in Des Moines long enough to list themselves in the city

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George Joslyn



George and Sarah Joslyn arrived in Omaha in 1880. By 1900, about the date of this photo, George was majority stockholder and president of the Western Newspaper Union. Historical Society of Douglas County Library/Archives Center Omaha, Nebraska

directory before moving to Omaha.

The Iowa Printing Company was an auxiliary printing company; that is, it sold a broad selection of preprinted news features to small town newspapers. Developing in halting stages through the early nineteenth century, the concept had become standardized during the labor shortages of the Civil War. By the time Joslyn entered the business in 1879, there were twenty-two auxiliary presses supplying 2,500 newspapers with ready-print (full size newspaper pages with preprinted news on one side, which could be printed on the other side with local news and inserted into the newspaper) or “boilerplate,” lightweight stereotype printing plates that could be used full size or cut apart and the individual features interspersed with local stories throughout the newspaper. Auxiliary printers provided state, regional, and national news, special features,

political news and commentary tailored to the editor’s partisan persuasions, literary supplements, and illustrated pieces. Auxiliary printers also sold advertising, which permitted them to lower the prices charged local publishers for the features. Companies maintained lists of subscribing newspapers; hence the terms “union” or “syndicate” in many names (see “The Auxiliary Printing Business,” page 37).⁶

In 1880 Joslyn opened a branch of the Iowa Printing Company in Omaha at 523 South Thirteenth Street. He and Sarah resided at the business. That year the owners of Iowa Printing, W. E. Andrews and W. H. Welch, merged the company with W. A. Bunker’s Kansas City, Missouri, printing plant and reincorporated in Iowa under the name of the Western Newspaper Union (over the years numerous newspaper articles have erroneously alluded to Joslyn’s employment

with Western Union, the telegraph company).⁷

Interestingly, the spelling of George’s surname also changed at that time, from Joslin to Joslyn. Stories purporting to explain the alteration abound. A misinformed distant relative told the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1975 that as the couple became wealthy, Sarah ordered the change because someone “conned her” into believing that the spelling with a “y” signaled a higher social standing. That story, however, clashes with Sarah’s fabled unpretentiousness, and the new spelling appeared well before they were wealthy.⁸

The 1880–81 *Omaha City Directory*, lists George A. Joslin as the manager of the Western Newspaper Union (WNU); the following year the listing read George A. Joslyn, and he continued to use that spelling for the rest of his life. Possibly the directory printers erred, George liked it, and he kept it. In those less formal days, the change was simple and required no legal consent. On the other hand, his twin granddaughters were told that the spelling error occurred on business cards, and George liked it and adopted the new spelling. Either of the latter renditions is a more plausible explanation for the revised spelling.⁹

Joslyn’s WNU branch in Omaha was strategically located to exploit the migration of ranchers, farmers, and town dwellers onto the Great Plains. In 1880 the population of Nebraska stood at 452,402; a decade later it had more than doubled to 1,058,910. That increase supported the creation of scores of newspapers during the decade. Nationally, more than 6,000 new weeklies appeared, and the number of weeklies doubled between 1880 and 1910, rising from 8,000 to a historic maximum of 16,899.¹⁰

A company history written well after Joslyn’s death says he began his career as manager of the WNU earning \$18 per week. Presumably, however, as an office manager in charge of sales, he also worked on a commission basis. Thus, as he rapidly expanded the Omaha list, he



In 1883 the expanding Western Newspaper Union was relocated to 1123 Howard Street. The man wearing a coat and hat standing on the steps behind the bicycle messengers has been tentatively identified as George Joslyn. The company later moved to 511 South Twelfth Street. Both buildings still stand. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

also commenced accumulating wealth. During its first ten years, Joslyn twice relocated the Omaha plant to larger facilities: First to 1123 Howard Street in 1883, then to 511 South Twelfth Street in 1886, where it remained until the end of the century.¹¹

In the same period, through mergers, the Western Newspaper Union headquartered in Des Moines became a large, regional firm. In the 1880s it purchased newspaper unions in St. Paul; New York City; Dallas; Topeka; St. Louis; Lincoln, Nebraska; Winfield, Kansas; and Chicago (listed in order of acquisition), and opened a new plant in Denver. In 1888 the WNU also organized or purchased a subsidiary (inexplicably, the company history does not mention its origin), the Great Western Type Foundry, and opened a branch in Omaha, which Joslyn also managed. The firm cast type and distributed printing supplies—type, presses, cases, ink, paper cutters, and associated products. To finance these ventures the WNU in-

creased its capital stock from \$100,000 to \$200,000 in 1882, to \$300,000 in 1888, and to \$500,000 in 1889.¹² Undoubtedly, Joslyn used the wealth he accumulated as manager of the Omaha branches to purchase sizeable amounts of the stock as it became available. He also utilized money he accrued through the operation of two hotels.

In 1883 Joslyn became the proprietor of two residential hotels in Omaha (according to John McDonald, he leased the properties) that provided him with a second source of income. Before the widespread appearance of apartment buildings in the United States in the twentieth century, residential hotels housed a variety of tenants. At the St. Charles Hotel at 1208–10 Harney Street, according to the 1885 Nebraska census, 150 white lodgers rented rooms; most were single, male, blue-collar workers. Five families and a single, white, female domestic completed the tenant roster. George's cousin, Ferdinand R. Joslin, managed the property until 1887, when

George's brother, Frederick A. Joslin, replaced him (newspapers and city directories frequently confused the two relatives over the next few years). The following year the St. Charles ceased operation. How and why Joslyn divested the property is lost, but after 1888 the hotel was no longer listed in the *Omaha City Directory*.

The Metropolitan Hotel at 1124 Douglas Street had a more upscale clientele, including George and Sarah and several of their relatives. Cousin Ferdinand also managed the Metropolitan until George relinquished his lease in 1886. His sister Jessie and her husband, Henry Jones, who worked as a clerk at the establishment, also resided there as did eighty-one other boarders, most of whom were white, middle-class families. The hotel employed a staff of forty-six, including four male cooks (two white, two black), four male waiters (three white, one black), six female waiters, six bellboys, and a host of white female domestics.¹³

Legends also exist regarding the Joslyns and the hotels. For example, one claims that Joslyn entertained clients in the lobby and then rented them rooms. Not likely, since they were not hotels for travelers, and WNU clients did not have to visit Omaha to obtain services from the company, which solicited with a sales staff and via the mail and printed media. Other stories revolve around Sarah's management of the hotels. While the proprietor's wife obviously might have something to say to an employee on occasion, in the 1885 Nebraska census Sarah listed herself as a housewife, and George's relatives listed themselves as managers and the clerks of the establishments.¹⁴

Furthermore, tales of the public dining at the Metropolitan as if it were a contemporary hotel restaurant certainly do not fit the era of Joslyn's proprietorship. In comparison to the lodgers at the St. Charles, who had to secure their food elsewhere, the Metropolitan's boarders paid for meals along with other domestic services. They would not have tolerated competition from the

George Joslyn



In 1883 the Joslyns moved from an apartment in the Western Newspaper Union building into the Metropolitan Hotel at 1124 Douglas Street, one of two residential hotels Joslyn owned. They lived there for the next three years. Union Pacific Historical Collection, Omaha, Nebraska.

public in their "home" at mealtime. Moreover, the Metropolitan never advertised as a restaurant in the *Omaha City Directory*; the few hotel restaurants that existed did advertise.

By 1889 Joslyn had acquired substantial wealth and was poised to take control of the Western Newspaper Union. His Omaha office employed more than thirty people who ran seven presses that supplied about 250 newspapers.¹⁵ Those facts contradict, in part, one of the most persistent myths about Joslyn: That he made his money (sometimes his first million dollars) in patent medicine, but was put out of business by the Food and Drug Administration.

Joslyn did own the the Cook Remedy Company, a patent medicine firm that distributed a purported cure for all forms of syphilis, and decades after his death local researchers speculated that an advertisement in an Omaha newspaper for a venereal disease medicine sold under the label "Big G" probably stood for "Big George" and that they had discovered Joslyn's "secret" company. Without verification that hypothesis has appeared in numerous newspaper stories and was even reprinted in a recent book about the auxiliary printing business. Like the book's author, others also have used the story to debunk and denigrate Joslyn, inferring from it that he was a greedy, immoral businessman who did not deserve his wealth since he made it under "shady" circumstances.¹⁶

The myths about his patent medicine business have another twist. Like thousands of other free-spirited, rugged individualists of Western lore, Joslyn supposedly won the formula (or the company) in a poker game, but its actual origin remains a mystery. The business first listed itself in the *Omaha City Directory* in 1889, with Frederick A. Joslin, George's brother, as manager. No incorporation records for the company exist in Nebraska, although its newspaper advertisements proclaimed Omaha as its headquarters. The advertisements also offered a full refund, including rail fares and hotel bill, to patients who came

SYPHILIS!

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to cure the most obstinate cases. We challenge the world for a case we can not cure. Since the history of medicine a true specific for Syphilis has been sought for but never found until our Magic Remedy was discovered. None other genuine. Write for references.
COOK REMEDY CO., Omaha, Nebraska.

Office: Thirteenth and Farnam streets.

A twenty-year sidelight to Joslyn's primary business, the Cook Remedy Company is a somewhat mysterious enterprise that has spawned many legends. No business records exist for the company whose principal product appears to have been a patent medicine sold as a cure for syphilis. *Omaha World-Herald*, February 23, 1891.

to Omaha for treatment but were not cured. By 1889 Joslyn had already abandoned the hotel business, however, and the refund offer does not sustain the myth that Joslyn sold to clients in the lobby of his hotel and then made more money by renting them rooms.¹⁷

At first Cook Remedy was located at 10–11 U. S. National Bank Building, the next year at the WNU office, and then at 222 South Thirteenth Street. None of the locations seem suited to a large laboratory and bottling operation. Thus, the size and the exact nature of the operation also remain a mystery. Quite possibly it was a one-person sales office distributing a limited number of mail-order requests for a product that was mixed and bottled in small batches. Some family members claimed that George's product was bottled lithia water from Saratoga Springs, New York. Although the Joslyns vacationed there at times, company records of the regional bottling companies do not reveal that George ever owned an interest in any of them.¹⁸

By 1891, for reasons unknown, George and Frederick had parted ways. Aubrey C. Jones (probably a relative, as the Jones and Joslyn families of Waitsfield had several marriage connections) now managed the Cook Remedy Company and Frederick became the proprietor of his own firm, the Marvelous Magic Remedy Company, operated from his residence. The following year Frederick's operation ceased and he returned to Vermont.¹⁹

In 1893 Joslyn incorporated the Cook Remedy Company in Chicago and employed Coit L. Farnsworth, the husband of Sarah's niece, as manager. The Illinois incorporation coincided with the Joslyns' temporary relocation to Chicago, the editorial and advertising headquarters city for the WNU. They returned to Omaha in 1896 and spent the remainder of their lives there. The Cook Remedy Company continued in business until voluntarily ceasing operation in 1911. Farnsworth transferred to Omaha and became an officer of the WNU. The

archives of the FDA contain no records indicating that the agency ever contacted, investigated, or sued Joslyn or the company, nor do federal court archives, contradicting another part of the myth.²⁰

By that time, however, one might argue that Joslyn had seen "the handwriting on the wall" and had gotten out of the business while he could. That may have been true, but that interpretation also rests on evaluating the history out of context. Debunkers conjure up the familiar Hollywood image of a snake-oil salesman operating out of the back of his wagon and leaving town shortly after duping the local yokels. While many of those "con artists" existed, so did a recognized and accepted business of natural medicines. By 1889 the germ theory of disease was just becoming established in scientific circles, and untested patent (or proprietary) medicines of widely varying quality were ubiquitous. In 1900, for example, homeopathy, the medical practice of treating disease with small doses of natural medicines, was widespread, with twenty-two schools and about 15,000 practitioners in the United States, including nineteen in Omaha. Thus, in historical context, it is quite likely that Joslyn believed in the product and thought he was operating an honorable business.²¹

In the early twentieth century the practice of medicine and the chemical testing of pharmaceuticals changed rapidly and dramatically. Thus, myth-makers at midcentury could easily weave tales based on current beliefs that actually distorted the past, and Joslyn's relationship to the company remains an enigma. On the one hand, he may have been the dishonest broker of a dubious product forced by circumstance to abandon a lucrative market. On the other, he may have quit the business (the company was not sold, it ceased operation) because he became convinced that the product was not effective, or because public education whittled away the number of customers willing to purchase medicine through

newspaper advertisements.

A third possible scenario is that because he was being pursued by the United States Department of Justice concerning charges of monopoly against the Western Newspaper Union in 1911, he did not want to tempt further government action against another of his companies. Unfortunately, no records for the company have been found, and there are no sales, income, and profit statements that might shed light on his motives and actions. In the final analysis, the Cook Remedy Company was a twenty-year sidelight to Joslyn's primary business, and probably contributed to his wealth, allowing him to expand the WNU and to become its sole owner.

In 1890 Joslyn became the majority stockholder and president of the Western Newspaper Union, reincorporating the company in Illinois, with its headquarters (that is, its national advertising and editorial offices) in Chicago. It was capitalized at \$750,000, of which he contributed \$541,666. By the early twentieth century he became virtually the sole owner, with only a few friends and family members holding a few shares each. Now at the helm, Joslyn continued to enlarge and diversify the company. With the purchase of the International Press Association in 1890, the WNU acquired its first stereotype plate capabilities, greatly augmenting the variety of its products.²²

The four-year depression that followed the Panic of 1893 slowed the rapid progress of his business, as well as most others in the United States. In 1892, just before the economic bust, Joslyn closed the Galveston plant, but two years later opened a new one in Houston to service the region. That year he also consolidated the Winfield, Kansas, branch into the Wichita operation. In 1897 the WNU established a new office in Salt Lake City.²³

Joslyn culminated the decade and the return to prosperity by creating the Western Paper Company (WPC), a paper wholesaler, with its headquarters

at 1501-1505 Howard Street in Omaha. At the same time he relocated the WNU operation to 510 South Fifteenth Street, where it remained for the next fifteen years. Creation of the WPC was a simple, but adroit move in the direction of vertical integration, that is, the common practice of businesses reaching back to control companies providing them with supplies, or reaching forward to provide their own wholesale and retail outlets. For many years the largest customers of the WPC were the ready-printing plants of the WNU. Within two years the Great Western Type Foundry, a wholesaler of printing supplies, ceased existence as an independent firm, and its business was merged into the WPC.²⁴

The early years of the new century brought even more success. In 1901 the WNU established a branch at Oklahoma City and, much more significantly five years later Joslyn bought his prime competitor, the A. N. Kellogg Company of Chicago. That purchase secured nine new plants and 1,827 new newspaper clients. In 1906 he reincorporated the enlarged firm and its subsidiaries as the Central West Publishing Company of Maine, a holding company. It was a legal maneuver related to taxes and government regulations; the holding company was a new form of business organization devised to avoid certain features of the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, and Maine was one of several states enforcing minimal local business regulations. Actually, the WNU never lost its identity, and a decade later Joslyn changed the name of the holding company to the Western Newspaper Union of Maine. Despite the legal maneuvering, its editorial offices remained in Chicago, and the Joslyns continued to reside in Omaha.²⁵

With the Kellogg acquisition Joslyn also obtained the skills of Wright A. Patterson as editor-in-chief, the person in charge of overseeing the purchasing, writing, editing, and distribution of all the features offered by the WNU. Patterson had just created the "service plan" and "circulating territories" concepts that established the pinnacle of

KELLOGG'S PLAN FOR COUNTRY NEWSPAPERS.

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CHICAGO, CLEVELAND, AND ST. LOUIS,

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- A Department for the Young Folks.
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The Circulation of All Papers Kept Strictly Confidential.

NEWSPAPER HEADINGS A SPECIALTY

In 1906 Joslyn bought his primary competitor, the A. N. Kellogg Company of Chicago, and within a few years the Western Newspaper Union had a virtual monopoly in the auxiliary printing business east of the Sierra Nevadas. *Kellogg's Auxiliary Hand and Day-Book*, p. 69. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska

George Joslyn and the Bull

Although George Joslyn's wealth, opulent lifestyle, and reputation for ruthless business practices were legendary, he never forgot his rural origins, and he was a literate, witty, and well-spoken man capable of modest, self-deprecating humor.

Those characteristics are apparent in a speech he delivered at the dedication of a library built for his hometown, Waitsfield, Vermont. In it he recounted leaving the family farm for Montreal, Canada, as a teenager in order to lighten his "mother's labors over the kitchen stove." However, "failing to make any deep impression there," he returned to Waitsfield "and took up again the irksome tasks that fall to a boy on a hill farm in Vermont." One of those tasks sealed his fate, sending him back to Montreal and his first job in the printing business:

After being away from home for a year and a half, I returned in the late fall, about 8 months before reaching my majority, and at a time when the winter's wood and saw-logs had to be hauled in from the forest . . . I started out one morning with an ox team made up of a Jersey bull and a Durham bull. [After

hauling a load of wood] I stepped in between the bulls to unhitch them from the sled, and after removing the clapper[,] "clucked" in the usual way. The Jersey grasped my meaning at once and jumped swiftly forward about five feet while the languid Durham was just thinking about it. The ring of the yoke, instead of slipping loose from the tongue, caught in the notch and the sled started. I was scared, and fearing I might be run over by the sled with the logs still on, I reached forward with one foot and kicked the Jersey in the nose, whereupon he countered effectively, knocking me down under the tongue in front of the sled. My situation was critical, but the enemy was satisfied and did not follow up his advantage. I managed to get up and out without serious injury, but all my good resolutions had vanished into thin air. I was humiliated; it hurt my pride to think that at the threshold of my career, I should be, not only vanquished, but indebted for my life to the clemency of a young bull. I finally unhitched the oxen from the sled, unyoked them into the barnyard, and without even stopping to feed them, went to the house, packed my trunk, and started that afternoon for Montreal.

From the Joslyn Library Dedication Speech, Joslyn Manuscripts, Library of the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

business efficiency. According to an early company history:

This service plan provides for individual service to each paper, the features and departments to be selected by the editor of each paper, and with the assurance of exclusive use of the material in the circulating territory of his paper. The service provided consists of all classes and kinds of newspaper features and departments, each carefully segregated, but so arranged that any desired combinations may be put together in pages of any standard newspaper size in a few minutes time. The system, while intricate as to detail, is simple in operation and makes it possible for each editor to control the contents of the ready-print sections of his newspaper to as great an extent as he does the sections printed in his own office.

The matter of circulating territories of the newspapers has been carefully worked out for every city and town in the United States in which a newspaper is published. The various features and departments used in each territory is so recorded as to make the problem of finding the material that is open in the field of any newspaper a matter of seconds only. Any material sold to a newspaper through the medium

of ready prints will not be sold to any other newspaper circulating in the same territory, either through the medium of ready prints, of plates, of mats or of copy.²⁶

Thus, Joslyn and the WNU now occupied the top rung of the auxiliary printing business in the United States.

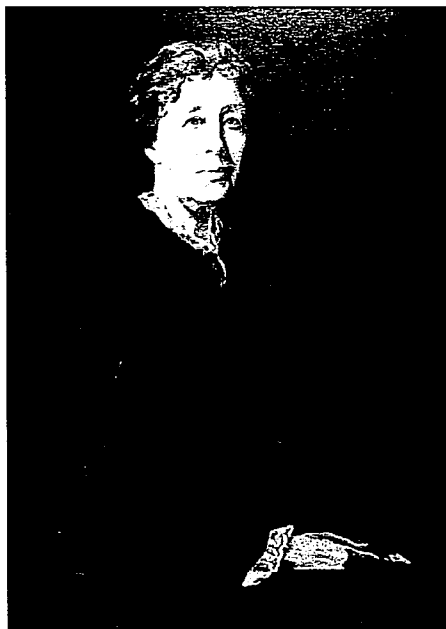
Being number one was not enough, and during the last ten years of his life Joslyn initiated a new round of acquisitions that stirred the wrath of competitors and the Department of Justice. In 1909 he acquired the Indiana Newspaper Union at Indianapolis and the Northwestern Newspaper Union at St. Paul, which also had offices in Fargo, North Dakota, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The next year he obtained Beal's New York Newspaper Union and its nine branches, the Chicago Newspaper Union with four offices, the small York, Nebraska, Newspaper Union servicing forty-seven accounts, and the ready-print operation of the *Wisconsin State Journal* at Madison with thirty-four customers. In a two-year merger mania the WNU

acquired nineteen plants servicing 2,600 newspapers and created a near monopoly east of the Sierra Nevadas; the American Press Association (APA) remained the only competitor of consequence.²⁷

Joslyn aspired to make the monopoly complete, but the Sherman Antitrust Act presented an obstinate hurdle. Attorneys for the Department of Justice claimed that following Joslyn's failed attempt to acquire the APA in 1909, "a campaign of destructive competition" soon began. They argued that since the WNU had assets of \$6.5 million and the APA only \$1.6 million, it was "quite probable that the latter [would] be the one to succumb, leaving the Western Newspaper Union in control of the entire field." Thus, the Department of Justice began negotiations with the companies to reach a "friendly settlement" that would square them with the Sherman Antitrust Act.

On August 3, 1912, United States District Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis entered an "agreed decree" that sought to end the "bitter trade war," without

George Joslyn



Portrait of Sarah Joslyn, 1941, by Leopold Seyffert. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

dissolving either company, even though the Department of Justice maintained that the WNU had acquired its competitors between 1906 and 1909 "for the purpose of monopolizing trade." The decree directed that:

The defendants are restrained from combining or continuing alleged unfair methods in competition which would result in destroying one or the other and a complete monopoly for the survivor, with all its potential power of influencing the sentiments on economic and other important questions of the readers of 16,000 small newspapers of the United States, which it is estimated are read by two-thirds of the people of the country.²⁸

The Department of Justice had argued that "the circulation from week to week of information and of articles dealing with questions of public importance is of itself inter-State commerce and for one concern to acquire the power to distribute all such information and to deceive the public by its perversion is itself a serious and substantial restraint upon and a monopoly of inter-State trade and commerce."²⁹

Eventually, in 1917, shortly after



Portrait of George Joslyn, 1932, by Paul Trebicock. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

Joslyn's death, the WNU did purchase the boilerplate, mat, and photographic operations of the APA and in the process assumed control of its offices in Philadelphia, Buffalo, Columbus (Ohio), and San Francisco. The photographic and mat operations loomed especially significant, because the WNU had just inaugurated a service of providing daily picture mats to big-city daily newspapers. Thus, the clientele of the WNU now included newspapers of every size and frequency of publication in virtually every town and city of consequence in the United States.³⁰

The American Press Association, however, had not given in without a struggle; it used the fear of the power "to deceive the public by its perversion" to attack its rival. In 1914 Courtland Smith, president and general manager of the APA, told a Senate subcommittee that the WNU had enriched itself by \$250,000 per year by surreptitiously selling as simple news stories advertisements paid for by the Canadian government to lure migrants to its Great Plains provinces from the United States. Appalled, the

subcommittee invited Joslyn to answer the charges.³¹

George had a brief conversation with the subcommittee members, but he maintained that "for the past two or three years" he had "given very little attention to the details of the business." Therefore, he wished to have Alfred Washington, advertising manager of the WNU, testify in his behalf. Washington explained WNU policies and procedures allowing an editor to purchase ready-print with or without advertising, pointing out that because of the far lower cost of ready-print with advertising, 97 percent of the accounts purchased it in that form. The WNU sold the advertising, and the profits allowed it to charge less for the ready-print. Editors also could choose to buy individual stories and features, or receive individual advertisements in boilerplate form, and they always were sent printed copies of the material before purchase. All advertisements, according to law, were marked as such in print.³²

Thus, the Canadian advertisement, an interview with a former Iowan who had migrated to Canada and succeeded as a farmer, was printed and offered to WNU customers. If they ordered it, a plate was sent to them for printing. Over a twelve-year period the Canadian government paid the WNU an average of \$42,000 per annum (one-sixth the amount claimed by the APA president) to offer the material to its customers. Subcommittee members, who had begun the questioning in a hostile frame of mind, had softened their tone by the end of Washington's testimony, although Senator Albert B. Cummins (Republican, Iowa) remained annoyed by the reference to Iowa in the Canadian advertisement. No further hearings were held, but a *Collier's* magazine editorial worried about the effect of what it called "paid propaganda" and said "it would be interesting to know something about the other 'persons, corporations, associations, or firms' who exploit themselves through the Western Newspaper Union."³³

Similarly, Eugene C. Harter, a former

small-town editor, wrote a castigating account of country journalism and the ready-print business. He claimed the Western Newspaper Union flourished because publishers and editors lacked integrity and writing skills, and he portrayed the entire ready-print industry as a diabolical cultural conspiracy to defraud the public. Furthermore, he incorrectly portrayed the 1912 Department of Justice suit as having been aimed solely at the WNU, he distorted the policies and procedures of the WNU, and he misrepresented the testimony given at the 1914 Senate subcommittee hearing to make it appear that Joslyn and the company purposefully bamboozled its clients and their readers. Finally, Harter maligned Joslyn through unfounded and uncited innuendo, implying that he resorted to criminal activity to gain power and wealth.

Harter also misinterpreted the Department of Justice suit against the WNU as a recurring “Red Scare” episode; that is, that the federal government feared that the WNU forcibly disseminated socialist propaganda. It is highly unlikely, however, that Joslyn, who listed his occupation in the 1900 United States census as “capitalist,” was engaged in the clandestine distribution of radical literature. In fact, earlier in his account Harter had complained that Joslyn and his chief editor, Wright Patterson, refused to disseminate socialist materials; “thus the searching, social ideas being discussed widely and openly in London and elsewhere in Europe, would no longer be spoken of in the nation’s dominant ready-print, the U.S.A.’s only national newspaper publication of the time . . . [and those ideas] were to be little known west of New York City.”³⁴

Harter’s mistaken analysis, of course, overlooked the existence of the popular socialist newspaper, *Appeal to Reason*, published in Kansas; the success of Midwestern socialist politicians such as Victor Berger, the mayor of Milwaukee and later a congressman; as well as the triumphs of the Progressive movement of that era which instituted forms of

municipal socialism in cities across the United States (including Omaha, which created the city-owned Metropolitan Utilities District in 1912). More likely, in 1912, when the Department of Justice suit against the WNU and the APA referred to a fear of a monopoly over economic ideas it was worried about the domination of a laissez faire economic philosophy espoused by big businesses trying to ward off Progressive reformers who demanded substantial government regulation of the economy.

Moreover, Harter implied that no further hearings were held after the 1914 Senate investigation because Joslyn was “politically powerful.” His interpretation of the subcommittee’s inquiry relied on an inaccurate quotation of testimony that appeared in the *Collier’s* magazine editorial. That piece contained serious mistakes, erroneously identifying the chairman of the subcommittee and presenting testimony out of context and out of sequence, and fallaciously had Joslyn stating that he purposefully sent out unmarked advertising as if it were legitimate news.³⁵

Actually, the tone of the testimony reveals that some senators began the hearings in a hostile mood because they believed the scenario delivered by the president of the WNU’s competitor, which supposed a plot that included deception, intimidation, and unethical enrichment. As Joslyn and Alfred Washington explained the actual operation of the business, however, the senators’ attitudes changed. While they remained confused about the differences between ready-print and boilerplate, they seemingly accepted the testimony that demonstrated that individual editors could decide what materials to buy and in what form it was delivered—as ready-print without advertising, ready-print with advertising, or boilerplate.

Although some remained concerned that advertisements such as the Canadian material were not labeled prominently enough (it was a long story with the single word “advertisement” printed beneath the conclusion), they understood that

advertisements of that kind went out only as boilerplate, that editors received a print copy before deciding to order, and many editors did use it as cheap filler material. The senators also came to understand that advertising revenue to the WNU helped lower the overall costs of its other products, and most of them probably agreed with Senator Knute Nelson (Republican, Minnesota) who concluded in a reply to Joslyn: “You have reduced the cost of living, then—intellectual living.”³⁶

Between the Civil War and World War I the United States experienced an industrial revolution that transformed the economy from one composed of artisans who served local clients to one dominated by big businesses that supplied a national market. Critics of the new economy denounced what they called the ruthless, greedy, immoral practices of big businessmen, labeling them “robber barons.” On the other hand, supporters of the new economy argued that few big businessmen were actually thieves and, instead, praised the scale, efficiencies, new business forms, and inexpensive new products. They claimed that entrepreneurs were responsible for America’s extraordinarily high standard of living and its newly attained stature in world affairs, calling big businessmen “industrial statesmen.” Both epithets describe aspects of Joslyn’s business career.

Joslyn was the right person at the right time to exploit a business opportunity. Ansel Kellogg, the inventor-innovator in the field, died before the period of national business consolidation in the ready-print field. Joslyn became president of the WNU during the era of rapid business concentration, and, through efficient organization, excellent products and service, low prices, and ruthless (and, if the stories of deception and intimidation are true, immoral) competition, eliminated or absorbed his competitors.

Joslyn’s career peaked as the auxiliary printing business reached its zenith. He died on October 4, 1916, at the age

George Joslyn

of sixty-eight. In the two years before his death, in what seemed to be an act of kindness for the widow of a friend, he bought and then quickly sold an unrelated business, the Van Court Stone Company, which distributed crushed rock. It was purchased by C. A. Richey.³⁷

In 1915, Joslyn had moved into a new six-story office building at 621 South Fifteenth Street designed by John McDonald (it still stands). The Western Paper Company occupied four floors. Joslyn also purchased several nearby downtown buildings and lots with the apparent intention to erect a skyscraper as the WNU headquarters building, replacing the Chicago offices. The plan died with him.³⁸

At that point the company had thirty-one plants in twenty-five states and

serviced about 12,000 newspapers. Additionally, the WPC had nine facilities in eight Midwestern states that wholesaled paper and printing supplies. Briefly, with the acquisition of the APA a year later, the WNU soared to new heights, supplying more than 14,000 clients in the mid-1920s. At the same time, however, rapidly expanding technology began replacing the need for ready-print, or at least eliminating most of the newspapers that relied on it.³⁹

The Linotype machine, patented in 1884, finally became affordable and widely used, reducing the cost of typesetting. National weekly news magazines proliferated, and radio (and eventually, television) exploded onto the scene, presenting alternatives to preprinted weekly news digests, editorials, and

features. The market for ready-print dwindled, and the WNU ran its last order in 1952. Today, only the Western Paper Company, under new ownership and with a new name (Xpedx) remains from the once sprawling holding company.

The fierce business practices and the opulent lifestyle of George Joslyn certainly fit the label "robber baron." Just as surely, the efficient business organization that he created, producing high quality products at low prices and contributing to "reducing the intellectual cost of living" for large numbers of Americans who otherwise would not have received the product, places him in the category "industrial statesman." His philanthropy also encourages the application of that title. Some writers enjoy conspiracy and need to invent



Called Lynhurst by the Joslyns, their opulent stone residence, built 1902–03, was widely known in Omaha as "The Castle." Historical Society of Douglas County Library/Archives Center, Omaha, Nebraska.

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villains, others see Providence and heroes. Usually, history is more complex than either of those one-dimensional scenarios. Joslyn was a complex man of his age who did some unpleasant things, but also made significant contributions to the business of journalism and to the well-being of his community.

Notes

¹ Laura Elmendorf Skeels, "The Joscelyn-Joslyn Family," *Journal of American History* 6 (1912): 517–526; Matt Bushnell Jones, *History of the Town of Waitsfield, Vermont, 1782–1908* (Boston: George E. Littlefield, 1908), 19, 25, and the genealogy section.

² Jones, *History of Waitsfield*, 19, 25, genealogy section.

³ Marriage Certificate, Joslyn Manuscripts, Library of the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska (hereafter Joslyn Mss).

⁴ The Montreal research was conducted by Kathryn Harvey, then a graduate student in history at McGill University. Her notes are in the author's possession. Alan McDonald (John's son) to Dr. Hartley Burr Alexander, Nov. 29, 1929, Joslyn Mss. According to the *Des Moines City Directory* W. H. Welch and W. C. Andrews owned the Iowa Printing Co. in 1878–79. Using Jones's genealogy the author was unable to establish the family connection.

⁵ Obituary, *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 6, 1916.

⁶ Elmo Scott Watson, *History of the Auxiliary Newspaper Service in the United States*, (Champaign, IL: Illini Publishing Company, 1923), 1–34; *Kellogg's Auxiliary Hand-Book* (Chicago: A. N. Kellogg, 1878).

⁷ *Wolfe's Omaha City Directory*, 1880–81. For one year the name of the company was listed as the Omaha Newspaper Union. WNU Articles of Incorporation (1880), Office of the Iowa Secretary of State. Copies of all extant incorporation documents are included in the Joslyn Mss.

⁸ *Omaha World-Herald*, Nov. 21, 1975, Joslyn Mss. The distant relative is also quoted as saying, "However, when George decided to buy into the Western Newspaper Union Uncle Ferd didn't think it was a good idea; so they parted company. Uncle Ferd became a beekeeper while Uncle George became a millionaire." Actually, Ferdinand R. Joslyn, George's cousin, worked for George at the Metropolitan Hotel and then at the WNU until 1905, when he became an apiarist at his residence. *Omaha City Directory*, 1880–1920.

⁹ Oral interview with Sally (Magowan) Hersey and Joslyn (Magowan) Birdzell, Sept. 26, 1991, Joslyn Mss.

¹⁰ U. S. Census figures from James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska

Press, 1966), 154; Eugene C. Harter, *Boilerplating America: The Hidden Newspaper* (New York: University Press of America, 1991), 51.

¹¹ Elmo Scott Watson, *A History of Newspaper Syndicates in the United States* (Chicago: 1936), 54; *Omaha City Directory*, 1883, 1886, 1900.

¹² Watson, *Auxiliary Newspaper Service*, 35–37; Amendments, WNU Articles of Incorporation, copy in Joslyn Mss.

¹³ McDonald to Alexander, Nov. 29, 1929; *Omaha City Directory*, 1881–82, 1883–84; *Nebraska State Census*, 1885.

¹⁴ Many of the Joslyn myths first appeared in print in an article by Volta Torrey, Sunday editor of the *Omaha World-Herald* from 1931 to 1935. Unidentified, undated article, Joslyn Mss. Internal references indicate it was written shortly after the opening of the Joslyn Art Museum, probably early 1932.

¹⁵ James W. Savage and John T. Bell, *History of the City of Omaha, Nebraska* (New York: Munsell & Co., 1894), 502.

¹⁶ Harter, *Boilerplating America*, 93; A photocopy of a newspaper advertisement dated Feb. 20, 1907, is in the Joslyn clipping file, Historical Society of Douglas County Library/Archives Center, Omaha, Nebraska (hereafter HSDC).

¹⁷ *Omaha World-Herald*, Apr. 5, 1891.

¹⁸ Hersey/Birdzell interview, Sept. 26, 1991, Joslyn Mss. Saratoga research conducted by Field Home; notes in the author's possession.

¹⁹ *Omaha City Directory*, 1889–93; Jones, genealogy section. Frederick's home-based patent medicine company may support the "mix and bottle on demand" hypothesis.

²⁰ George Joslyn owned 4,997 shares valued at \$100 each. Coit Farnsworth, Phil Cowling, and H. F. McCoy owned one share each. Cook Remedy Co. Articles of Incorporation, Office of the Illinois Secretary of State, Joslyn Mss. *Omaha City Directory*, 1890–1912; *Chicago City Directory*, 1890–1912. The huge investment is perplexing since the company remained a one-person office. It may be related to an accounting procedure that brought Joslyn some benefit. Author's research at the National Archives and Records Administration and the Federal Court Records for the Northern District of Illinois.

²¹ *Civilization*, Apr./May 1997, 44; *Omaha City Directory*, 1900.

²² WNU Articles of Incorporation (1890), Office of the Illinois Secretary of State, copy in Joslyn Mss; Watson, *Newspaper Syndicates*, 50.

²³ Watson, *Newspaper Syndicates*, 50–51.

²⁴ Arthur C. Wakeley, *Omaha: The Gate City* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1917), 2:11; Western Paper Company clipping file, HSDC.

There are no incorporation records for the WPC in Nebraska. However, in 1914 the company voted to discontinue business in Nebraska. The WPC headquarters remained at 621 South Fifteenth Street in Omaha. *Miscellaneous Incorporation Records, State of Nebraska*, 24:270, 490.

²⁵ CWPCM Articles of Incorporation (1906), Office of the Maine Secretary of State, copy in Joslyn Mss.

²⁶ Watson, *Auxiliary Newspaper Service*, 36–37; CWPCM Articles of Incorporation (1906), Office of the Maine Secretary of State, copy in Joslyn Mss.

²⁷ Watson, *Newspaper Syndicates*, 52–53.

²⁸ *New York Times*, Aug. 4, 1912, Part II.

²⁹ *Ibid.* See also *New York Times*, June 7 and July 25, 1912, and *Omaha World-Herald*, Aug. 3, 1912.

³⁰ Watson, *Newspaper Syndicates*, 53.

³¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Maintenance of a Lobby to Influence Legislation, Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary*, 63rd Cong., S. Res. 92, Pt. 59, Jan. 17, 1914, 4644–4650.

³² *Ibid.*, Pt. 60, Jan. 28, 1914, 4661–4664.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4665–4691; *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 19, 20, 29, 1914; *Omaha World-Herald*, Jan. 17, 20, 28, 1914; *Collier's*, June 6, 1914, 16.

³⁴ Harter, *Boilerplating America*, 23–26, 148–56, 120.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 156–160; *Collier's*, June 6, 1914, 16. Compare these renditions to Joslyn's actual testimony cited in note 32.

³⁶ *Subcommittee Hearings*, Pt. 60, 4683. Although the hearings ended on a positive note for the WNU the duel with the APA continued until the buyout. In 1915 charges of unfair business practices were filed against the WNU in Chicago. The action merited a brief report in the *New York Times* of June 8, 1915, but no trial ensued.

³⁷ An unidentified newspaper article dated Oct. 13, 1889, in the Joslyn clipping file, HSDC, reporting a joint vacation trip taken by the two families establishes the friendship; *Omaha City Directory*, 1913–1916; *Miscellaneous Incorporation Records, State of Nebraska*, 36:139.

³⁸ *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 5, 9, 1916, clipping file, HSDC.

³⁹ Watson *Auxiliary Newspaper Service*, 39. Over the years several newspaper stories have used the figure 16,000 customers, misinterpreting Watson's calculation of the total number of auxiliary print users (p. 41); Neil M. Clark, "Twelve Thousand Newspapers," *The American Magazine*, (October 1927): 37, 158–63, is an article about the WNU. Its title demonstrates the onset of decline during the 1920s. The acquisitions to 1912 established the peak of expansion for the WNU under Joslyn's leadership. At that time it had thirty-one offices and the Western Paper Company had nine.

The Auxiliary Printing Business

For rural and small-town newspaper publishers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a primary impediment to increasing the newspaper's size and diversity of content was the labor, cost, and time required for setting type. For some small papers, the typesetter might also be the owner, publisher, editor, chief reporter, and pressman; even for papers with skilled, professional typesetters, more pages meant more time and more expense.

In those years, the demand for more pages and more diverse features was filled by auxiliary printing companies, among them George Joslyn's Western Newspaper Union, which supplied preprinted and ready-to-print news and features to thousands of local papers.

The concept of selling preprinted news to small-town newspapers developed during the first half of the nineteenth century in Great Britain and the United States. For example, in December 1841, Moses Beach, publisher of the New York *Sun*, printed extra copies of President John Tyler's annual message to Congress and sold them to newspapers in the region. Local editors did not have to absorb the high cost of typesetting; they simply slipped the preprinted text into their editions.

Similarly, in 1847, Andrew Jackson Aiken, editor of the *Spirit of the Age*, published at Woodstock, Vermont, arranged for a Boston newspaper to print several hundred copies of President James K. Polk's annual message on one side of sheets of newsprint. He printed the other side with local news and advertising, and folded the sheets into his weekly with the local material outside and the preprinted message inside—hence the terms "patent-insides" and "ready-print."

The concept did not become standardized until the Civil War caused a labor shortage. In 1861 Ansel Nash Kellogg, editor of the Baraboo, Wisconsin, *Republic*, who lost his printer to service in the Union Army, arranged for a Madison newspaper to supply him regularly with sheets of war news printed on only one side. Several other small-town editors followed his lead. At the conclusion of the war, Kellogg sold the *Republic* and moved to Chicago to found the first auxiliary newspaper printing company, providing state, regional, and national news, special features, political news, and commentary tailored to the editor's partisan persuasion, literary supplements, and illustrated pieces. Profits from regional and national advertising sales allowed Kellogg to lower prices, until eventually local editors could buy ready-print for no more than the cost of blank paper.

Kellogg also led the way in the development of lightweight stereotype plates—"boilerplate" in printer's jargon—that dramatically reduced shipping weight (thus cost) and led to their widespread use. Individual stories were typeset, a mold was made from the composed page, and plates were cast for sale to local editors. The plates could be used as shipped, but because the boilerplate was so thin, the features could be sawed apart and rearranged to suit a local editor's preference.

An editor using boilerplate could pick and choose among

A Page for Our Women Readers

FOR THE STAY AT HOME LADY SHEET SHEET SHEET SHEET

Admission Notice to Court

THE KITCHEN CABINET

Woman's Feature Household Woman's Illustrated Kitchen Cabinet

There are subscribers from four of the features issued regularly by the Western Newspaper Union, prepared for the benefit of publishers who desire to give women readers something of special interest in members of the sex, with a suggestion as to how they can be combined in a page. The features are:

Woman's Feature Household Woman's Illustrated Kitchen Cabinet

The amount of space to be devoted to this class of reading depends upon each publisher and the size of the paper, and may be either a full page or in many columns as desired.

A page something along the lines of this will be an attraction for every woman young and old. The Household's articles in the Woman's Feature Page, on the home style in dress illustrated with pictures from photographs of living models, will enable every member of the fair sex to keep up with the fashion. Every woman wants to know when to buy more or what they are going to wear next month.

Nellie Maxwell gives recipes for all kinds of confection dishes and valuable hints for housewives in the Kitchen Cabinet page and the Woman's Illustrated and Household Pages always have a good variety of reading with illustrations.

A number page at the bottom of this kind would save almost the total cost and in the case of household features the number of the page on each a year would be very valuable for the obtaining of orders and for the advertiser.

Price of the sheet per page: Woman's Feature, \$1.00; Woman's Illustrated, \$1.00; Kitchen Cabinet, \$1.00; Household, \$1.00.

Orders for these items must be sent to Western's page and each. Please send no money unless you order.

Western Newspaper Union

Auxiliary printers supplied news, features, commentary, and fiction to editors who inserted the preprinted sheets into their editions. This women's page is from a sample sheet illustrating features available from the Western Newspaper Union. *The Publishers' Auxiliary*, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

the features offered and rearrange them to suit a preferred page layout, instead of having to insert a preprinted page identical to the page in a nearby town's newspaper. Finally, editors received a rebate for returning the used plates, which allowed the auxiliary publisher to recycle the materials.

Shipping the ready-print and boilerplate was costly; thus numerous auxiliary publishing companies sprouted in larger cities. Each developed a list of small-town newspapers subscribing to the service; hence the term "union" or "syndicate" in company names. According to Elmo Scott Watson's *History of the Auxiliary Newspaper Service in the United States* (Champaign, Ill.: Illini Publishing company, 1923), when Joslyn entered the auxiliary printing business in 1879, there were twenty-two auxiliary presses supplying 2,500 newspapers. At the time of his death in 1916, Joslyn's Western Newspaper Union, a near monopoly, had eliminated or absorbed most of its competitors and serviced about 12,000 newspapers, producing ready-print and boilerplate at thirty-one plants in twenty-five states.