Journalist

For over a decade Johnson Brigham worked, sometimes as reporter or business manager or editor or all three, on several papers in the state of New York. His apprenticeship was served on the Watkins *Express*. In 1872 he bought a small Democratic weekly at Brockport, which he immediately turned into a Republican paper in support of Grant.

Later in the seventies he returned to the Watkins *Express* as part owner. There in 1875 he married Antoinette Gano, the daughter of Levi Gano, who was financially interested in the *Express*. Johnson and Antoinette Gano Brigham had one daughter, Anna, now Mrs. C. P. Hartley of Washington, D. C. The couple, however, became estranged and were divorced.

Subsequently, Brigham sold his interest in the *Express* and moved to Hornellsville where, until May 16, 1881, he edited the *Daily Times*. In 1881, however, because of poor health, he began considering the West as a new journalistic field.

An unexpected circumstance probably determined the events of his later life and ultimately brought him to Iowa. He accompanied a group of newspapermen to Wahpeton, south of Fargo, in

expanding Dakota Territory, where he called on a former friend, Dr. J. B. Hall, editor of the Fargo *Daily Republican*. Hall unexpectedly offered him an editorial position on his paper, and Brigham accepted.

On his return to Fargo, after a brief trip East, Brigham found that his chief duty was "to boom the territory editorially." And this he did. For several months the columns of the Fargo paper glowed with vivid accounts of reapers drawn by six horses, of the rapidly increasing population, and of the fine character of the populace. In 1881 the people of Dakota Territory were already hoping for a division so that there would be two Dakota states. Brigham's ability was recognized when he was asked to prepare a brochure to be presented to Congress. With a delegation of which he was made secretary and spokesman, he himself presented the "Memorial" to a joint committee of both houses of Congress.

Again a chance call on an editor, this time at Madison, Wisconsin, changed both the immediate and the future plans of Johnson Brigham. Returning from Washington, he called at the offices of the Madison *Daily* where he was introduced to Fred W. Faulkes, a journalistic visitor from Cedar Rapids. Faulkes, learning that Brigham was interested in locating in the Middle West, told him that the Cedar Rapids *Republican* was for sale and launched into a long monologue in which he so

eulogized Cedar Rapids and Iowa that Brigham was at once interested. Neither man then knew that he was facing an editorial rival, for later Faulkes became the vigorous editor of the Cedar Rapids *Gazette*.

This accidental interview resulted in Brigham's investigation of the *Republican,* and of his assuming its editorship a few months later. On March 1, 1882, the Cedar Rapids *Republican* was officially transferred to J. R. Sage, Johnson Brigham, Fred Benzinger, and H. P. Keyes. Two years later Brigham bought out the interest of J. R. Sage, and L. S. Merchant purchased the interests of the other two.

On that March morning when Johnson Brigham officially assumed his responsibilities, both he and Iowa were approaching their thirty-sixth birthdays. His most impelling journalistic need, he felt, was first-hand knowledge and contact with the people of Cedar Rapids and the near-by towns in Linn County. By assuming the self-imposed duty of canvasser and collector, he not only increased the number of subscribers to the *Republican* but also established lasting contacts with farmers and with professional and business men in Cedar Rapids and throughout the county. He also endeavored to familiarize himself with the surviving Indian legends and with past and current social and political history of Iowa and the Midwest. These interests he pursued up to his death in 1936.

As a journalist Johnson Brigham set his sights high. Near the close of the decade of the nineties, with nearly twenty years of newspaper work behind him, he responded to an invitation to address the students of Cornell College at Mount Vernon, Iowa, on the aims and ideals of journalism. Briefly summarized, they included a broad knowledge of history which embraced social, economic, and political theories and practice. To this he added "an encyclopedic knowledge of things in general." (In later life he claimed that he himself had read a hundred thousand books.) Besides, the journalist's kit and accoutrement should include "a keen sense of what is news" as well as "what is legitimate and useful to print." An editor should possess "inherent honesty of thought and purpose." He concluded, "The journalistic field is the world and the curriculum of study for that field is as wide as the whole world."

In the decade between 1882 and 1892, in his attempt to reach these ideals, Johnson Brigham experienced tensions and tangible and intangible rewards. A heavy debt on the *Republican* had to be overcome. Politically, Editor Brigham stood out strongly for the protection of American industries and for the regulation of railroads in order to combat the exploitation of the Midwest farmer. In another direction he turned the *Republican* into a strong advocate for prohibition. The first of these policies brought him considerable opposition from

the Democratic press of the state, the second from the railroad lobbies, and the third from state and local liquor interests.

His energetic rallying of Republican forces in caucuses, rallies, and conventions, both in person and through the columns of his paper, brought him state-wide recognition. As a delegate in 1888 he attended the Republican National Convention in Baltimore where he hoped to see Senator William Boyd Allison nominated. On his return to Cedar Rapids he gave the full support of his paper to the successful nominee, Benjamin Harrison. In 1892 he was made president of the Republican League of Iowa.

He never hesitated to use his editorial columns for causes in which he believed. He stood out so strongly for state prohibition in the late eighties that his life was frequently threatened and he had to keep a gun in his desk. He recalled, "My way home led past a row of vicious saloons where my enemies congregated. . . . My old mother used to wait up for me until I got home at one or two o'clock in the morning. 'Thank God, you are safe,' she used to say as I entered the door."

According to William Boyd of Cedar Rapids, "Johnson Brigham made the columns of his paper almost classical." For over ten years Brigham himself wrote for his paper critical articles on Robert Browning, John Burroughs, James M. Barrie, Mark Twain, and Walt Whitman, championing

the last two in the face of much current disapproval. Once a week for a number of years he himself edited a "Book Table" in which the works of English and American writers were reviewed.

Another period of momentous decisions for Johnson Brigham came in 1892 and 1893. After careful thought, he decided to sell his holdings in the Cedar Rapids *Daily Republican*. This he did on October 21, 1892, probably aware that in the offing lay an appointment abroad in the consular service. Officially this came in February of 1893, when President Benjamin Harrison appointed him consul at Aix La Chapelle (now Aachen).

Johnson Brigham had then completed ten years as editor and part owner of the *Daily Republican*. He had seen Cedar Rapids grow from a straggling town of approximately 10,000 to double its size. He had been largely responsible for paying off the heavy debt of the *Republican* which had been assumed in 1882, and he had had the extreme satisfaction of seeing the *Republican* established in new headquarters with up-to-date machinery. Fred Faulkes, the rival owner of the Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, in his editorial of October 22, 1892, stated that Johnson Brigham had sold his holdings for $20,000 to William R. Boyd and Luther A. Brewer, and implied that Brigham's championing of the farmers' cause versus the railroads, as well as the aroused antagonism of the liquor interests, had hastened his relinquishing of the paper.

The Republican press of the state, however, expressed deep regret that Johnson Brigham, then president of the Iowa Republican League, was leaving newspaper work. "Ret" Clarkson of the Des Moines *Register* wrote, "The retirement of Mr. Johnson Brigham is a distinct loss to the Iowa Press. Mr. Brigham has been not only a successful editor but a scholarly one, and has done his part to dignify and elevate the tone of Iowa journalism."

The summer of 1892, before he had definitely decided to dispose of the *Republican,* provided the most pleasant interlude in Johnson Brigham's life. He was not only anticipating his consular appointment, but he joined an editorial excursion to the west coast. Among the editors was A. W. Lee of the Ottumwa *Courier,* later controller of the Lee syndicate of newspapers, who was accompanied by his wife, Minnie Walker Lee, and her sister, Lucy Walker. These were the daughters of W. W. Walker, builder of the North Western Railroad across Iowa, a banker, and prominent citizen of Cedar Rapids. Johnson Brigham, thrown into companionship with Lucy Hitchcock Walker, fell in love with her. Somewhere on a train in Colorado they became engaged. The two were married on December 20, 1892, and combined a few months of consulship with a wedding trip in Europe.

Later Johnson Brigham paid high tribute to his

wife and to the ideal home life which she created in *An Old Man's Idyl*. This little book was published in 1905 under the pseudonym of Alexander Wolcott. Slightly disguising the incidents, he antedated his courtship ten years and carried the life history of his charming little daughters ten years beyond their age at the time of its publication. The author chose, and wisely too, to adopt for his *Idyl* the genre of the apparently artless fantasies popularized by Donald Grant Mitchell in *Dream Life* and by Jerome K. Jerome in *The Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*. For his *Idyl* Brigham might have chosen the more descriptive, if more prosaic, title of "Idealized Home Life Realized."

The dream narrative, written simply yet crowded with many literary allusions, begins with the rearing of their two little daughters in a well-adjusted home. Occasionally, too, he throws in a philosophic remark concerning parents' fallibility and youngsters' resourcefulness. Then midway in the book there is a throwback to his courtship of Lucy Walker as the steam cars carried them westward, to their marriage, and to the wedding journey to Aix La Chapelle, their enjoyment of "the castled Rhine," of the *pensions* of France, and particularly of the Lake country in England. There, much to their delight, they met an old cabby who remembered Wordsworth. Johnson Brigham quoted him as saying, "It's nice in you

outsiders to 'old 'im in such store; but between me and you, barrin' portry, of which I hain't no judge, 'e wa'n't thought to be so much mor'n 'is neighbors, and I'm certain 'e never set 'imself up to be."

The consulship, which lasted only from February to September of 1893, came to an early close with the inauguration of Grover Cleveland. On his return to America, Johnson Brigham was forced to make a new decision concerning his future, but once the die was cast, he never regretted his choice.

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