

Hometown News: The Ballad of Ray and Rose

by Matt Lubich

There's an old journalism adage, usually uttered by editors who haven't had their butts out of a comfy leather newsroom chair in years, which goes: "You know... the news just doesn't walk in the door."

But sometimes, it does.

The Johnstown Breeze has been publishing weekly news since 1904. It covers the northern Colorado communities of Johnstown and Milliken. Johnstown was founded in 1902, when Harvey J. Parish platted a town where nearly two decades before he had begun to farm.

The town got its name from his young son, John, who lay in a Denver hospital near death from a ruptured appendix when the community-creating was going on.

Asked what he'd name his new town, Parish replied, "It will be my son's town. Let's call it John's Town." Lore even has it that he went down to the hospital in Denver and told his sick son of his plan, and encouraged him to get better so he could come back to his new "home."

One wonders, given the chances for survival from peritonitis in those days, if Parish didn't secretly believe in his own breaking heart that at least his son's memory would live on in the name of the new town. John Parish in fact rallied and returned to "John's Town." In the early 1930s, he would serve as its mayor.

The newspaper sits on the main street: Parish Avenue. Down the block there's a McDonald's on the exact spot where Harvey Parish set up his tent and began to farm. Some see that as a sign of success and progress. Others an omen of more ominous things.

The town is changing. This past fall, a decades-long project to fix a weird jog in the main intersection, at the only stoplight, finally was completed. The jog had been necessitated at the beginnings of the town, when one farmer could not be induced to part with a portion of his land for the road easement. The jigsaw intersection was something different. Disputes with landowners to fix it continued until the day the asphalt was broken to straighten it out.

With the new intersection came a new stoplight. The old one was a snakeball of wires attached from light pole to light pole like someone's grandfather had erected it in a bit of weekend civic volunteerism. The new one looks like any intersection anywhere else. And a little bit more of Johnstown's unique identity is subsumed.

Just this past week, across the street from the McDonald's, they leveled a house and old convenience store that had served as a corner landmark, albeit a ratty looking one lately, for decades and generations.

A woman who grew up in the house found out from a story in the newspaper. She wrote a bit chiding, if not altogether appreciative letter to the editor the week after the story ran, setting the record and the lineage of the property straight.

Coming over from Loveland where she now lives to get some copies of the paper, I thanked her when she came into the office for the contribution to the historical record. We had been caught off-guard when the wrecking crane had started smashing walls, I told her. Apparently, the current landowners plan to build a new

convenience store. A corporate one. They had called the old building an “eyesore” and we shared her hurt feelings. That's why we had tried to lay out the building's long history the best we could on deadline.

She asked how much she owed for the papers. I told her nothing, she helped fill it. She smiled and pressed the dollar bill into my hand, reminding me, “You've got to make a living to.” I thought about the beautiful absurdity of my life that someone pays me for a copy of a correction to an error I made.

Later that day, while walking to get the mail, I see the woman picking through the rubble that was left in the now-vacant lot. Looking for a piece of a time she could take with her. I don't intrude. I just walk through the intersection when the coast looks clear, proud at my little blow for anarchy, as I ignore the new WALK and DON'T WALK signals.

Milliken, about two miles to the east, started a handful of years after Johnstown's beginnings. The planned hub for a fledgling railroad company led by a Denver lawyer and judge, Judge John D. Milliken, that hoped to lay a line that would someday stretch to the Pacific.

It never even made it out of Colorado, or even to the new town of Milliken, for that matter.

The railroad died, but somehow the town lived on. And like a man who knows he should have perished, and is now living on charmed, borrowed time, it developed a wild and reckless streak loudly celebrated in its saloons and road houses. An image that residents began to wear as a pioneer punk-rockish badge of honor, like vomit stains on your lapel smelling of whisky, tobacco and women's perfume. An attitude that is quieter now today, more refined and

buffed up, but which still retains the sly grin of debauchery and resemblance of dangerous and drunken DNA.

Rumor has it that the streets of the new town -- all women's names -- were in honor of the prostitutes that serviced the new residents faithfully as they built a community by day and partied all night. It has never been confirmed, but it's known that the female names do not correspond to the names of wives of the railroad officials.

Judge Milliken had a house built in the town, but never lived there. Today, a grinning biker by the name of Pat Day does, along with his constant companion, a wiry Jack Russell Terrier he calls "Panhead." A welder by trade, Pat refers to himself as "The Hottest Rod in Town" in his ad in *The Breeze*.

One morning, years back, Day awoke to the sounds and smells of a fire consuming the house across the street from him. Rushing outside he grabbed a ladder and rescued a young girl that was stuck in a second-floor bedroom. Asked if he wasn't afraid of what might happen to him, he said he was more afraid of having to live with himself for the rest of his life if he didn't do something.

Several years ago, in trade for his advertising bill owed to the paper, Pat agreed to rebuild the wrought-iron handrails on our front porch. Sometimes, Pat and Panhead would show up just around the end of the day, and tinker and measure and mutter among themselves -- without much of any work getting done -- before they'd wander back to Pat's truck and disappear into the night.

Then, some mornings we would begin to awake to the fact that somehow in the night, Pat had managed to come and remove the rails entirely.

Days later, they would return, evolved in form and function. Sometimes they'd sit unchanged for months, other times, they'd change every week. Then, they would disappear again. For a period of time, we even grew fonder of the porch without rails, and fretted about what we could and should tell Pat.

One winter, when temperatures were below zero, he would show up late at night and weld on the rails, his work creating our own private lightning storm as my wife Lesli and I lay in bed and watched television with the girls, as Pat and Panhead barked and bickered outside our bedroom window with each other, a huge go-cup of coffee made by Lesli sitting beside them and steaming up into the night.

"We're going to have moved for twenty years and he's gonna be coming over here and taking those rails in the middle of the night," I would tell Lesli as we'd round the corner onto our street and see Pat's truck parked out front. Finally, the project now seems to have come to some permanence. But Pat has yet to submit a bill for payment to settle against his steadily growing ad bill that has also gone unpaid, so perhaps, the job is not yet finished.

And chronically it all, every Thursday for more than 103 years, another issue of *The Johnstown Breeze* has hit the streets as they've gone from rutted, rural dirt roads to asphalt state highway. I've worked at the paper since 1991. In 1997, Lesli and I bought it and she came to work here: becoming one of more than a dozen husband and wife teams -- sprinkled with the occasional ink-stained bachelor printer/owner -- that have kept the pages coming off the presses.

Still independently owned, the paper bears little resemblance to the cubicle word-farms that corporate bean counters have planted in newsroom across the country. "We have a dress code," my wife tells new employees and interns, "you have to wear clothes." In Erik Larson's book "The Devil in White City" he describes the

Whitechapel Club, a group of Chicago journalists at the turn-of-the-century, and their clubhouse:

"....a room full of men, some young, some old, all seeming to speak at once, a few quite drunk. A coffin at the center of the room served as a bar. The light was dim and came from gas jets hidden behind skulls mounted on the walls. Other skulls lay scattered about the room. A hangman's noose dangled from the wall, as did assorted weapons and blankets cake with blood The weapons on the wall had been used in actual homicides and were provided by Chicago policemen; the skulls by an alienist at a nearby lunatic asylum, the blankets by a member who had acquired it while covering a battle between the army and the Sioux."

There are no skulls hissing fire at The Breeze today, but on one wall hangs a Texas state flag that flew over the state capitol on the day Lesli and I were married. Right next to it still sticks an ad with the visage of an unsmiling Charlton Heston, holding a musket, promoting the National Rifle Association convention in Denver that year, that got pulled at the 11th-hour of deadline when the shootings at Columbine High School hit the media and the ad agency cancelled all the ads.

Newbies at owning the paper, we had struggled with whether to take the NRA's money in the first place. We needed it. And didn't they have a right to advertise their event? History never forced us to swallow hard on our principles and cash the check, but I keep the ad on the wall as a talisman/reminder of the responsibility we've been given, and what kind of paper we want to run.

One day, under Charlton Heston's Moses-With-a-Rifle gaze, Stan Heffner walked into the paper looking for his family.

You have the people who walk in to do business. To place a classified for their garage sale. To bring in a write-up of their sixth

grade daughter's basketball team. You have those who are angry about something already printed. An error in a story. A missing phone number in an ad. And you have those who want to swim in the newsprint sea that is the bound archives of past issues.

Those people usually start the conversation with a date, a time, but always, there is a story.

Heffner and his wife had lived most of their lives in Denver. Now, they planned to move to a farm they had bought in South Dakota, and before they left, he wanted to tie up a loose end. Or more accurately, see if he could find the beginning of the string. Heffner said he had never met his grandparents, Ray and Rose Gordon. Their son, his father, said only that "they died in an accident when I was a baby."

Then, several years ago, at a family reunion, his aunt told him a different tale.

Ray had shot Rose then turned the gun on himself, the aunt said. It happened on Christmas Eve. In 1915. In a town just an hour's drive north of Denver. A town called Johnstown.

And there, bobbing in the wood-pulp waves, it sits. On the front page of the Dec. 30, 1915, issue of *The Johnstown Breeze*: RAY GORDON KILLS WIFE AND SELF, the headline shouts in all caps. "Town Shocked By Tragedy on Christmas Eve -- No Motive Known."

Calling it "the most revolting crime ever committed in this part of the state," the story goes on to say Gordon showed up at about 6:30 in the evening at the home of his in-laws, the Haffners, where his wife was staying with their infant son.

"Just what proceeded the shooting is known only to the members of the family," the story states. Today, the 24/7 maw of the News

Beast would demand more. But given the journalistic sensibilities of the time, and the small town nature of journalism even today, it went no further in explanation.

The Haffner Family took the baby and raised him themselves. Two weeks after the shooting they had already adopted the child and changed his name. His father had had no contact with the Gordon side of the family, Heffner said. When he asked his aged father about what the aunt had told him, his dad would only say again that he was a baby and remembered nothing.

"But my mom said later that he (my dad) was so affected by this that he changed his name by usage from Haffner to Heffner sometime in the 1930s and went the rest of his life as Heffner," he said.

Almost the entire patriarchal branch of his family tree had been ripped off and carried away in the hurricane of emotion that followed the shootings, Stan Heffner said. While the small news story answered some questions, it only created others. He left his name and number, "in case you find out something else."

Several months later, a letter came in the mail.

"I'm currently researching our family's history and hope that you can help me to find some details regarding a 'skeleton in the closet,'" the writer began.

The writer misspelled Rose Gordon's maiden name, but the story was the same ... but from the other perspective. The woman, who lived in Juneau, Alaska, said she had spent hours listening to her husband's grandmother talk about her brother, Ray, who had died in a town named Johnstown, in Colorado, when he shot his wife and then killed himself. Worse yet, she said, it had happened on Christmas Eve. And there was a baby, she said, a toddler, who the

Gordon family had never seen nor gotten to know. "I have my fingers crossed..." the woman concluded.

I called Stan Heffner. Was he interested in talking to the woman? Of course he was, he said. And together, they began to put together the familial pieces that had been shattered by two cracks of a pistol nearly a century ago.

The story of Ray and Rose Gordon stretches back to the literal beginnings of Johnstown. Rose, who was born in Russia of German descent, came to the community with her family as a 12-year-old in 1904, making them among the first families to settle here.

Ray, born in 1886, hailed from Missouri. The story goes his family came to Virginia in the 1760s, a husband, wife and son. The father went back to Ireland and never returned. The mother and son eventually moved to North Carolina and then on to Missouri. Along the way, once, a bolt of lightning struck a house where family was living, killing two people. At another point, descendants lived in the home built by Siamese Twins Chang and Eng Bunker.

It's unknown how Ray and Rose met. Ray came to the area in 1910, most likely looking for work as a laborer -- the "Go West Young Man" mantra still rattling around the brains of young men following the lure of open land and new opportunity.

Ray would have been about six years older than her. Family members have a postcard written by Rose, but never sent, that talks about her, "Having my picture taken with Ray Gordon's Kodak," and a promise to send one when she got it. They also have one of Ray sitting on a motorcycle.

In another picture, date unknown, the couple pose together. Rose is sitting on Ray's lap, his hand holding her right shoulder tightly.

Both are smiling broadly. It's unusual, people remark, to see two people even smiling in photographs from that era, much less sitting on each other's lap.

They were married in Victor, Colorado, on Sept. 6, 1914. Their son, Stan's father, was born just a bit more than a month later. Supposition is that they had moved out of the Johnstown area, all the way into the mountains, to prevent people from knowing about the out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

Then, about a year later, just before Christmas, Rose showed back up in Johnstown with the baby. On Christmas Eve, there were reports of Ray being seen around town drinking during the day. One rumor is that he found out his wife was having an affair. In another, he simply saw her speaking to another man on the street and became enraged.

He showed up at Rose's parent's house early that evening. At first, her father wouldn't let him in, but then relented. While the baby was in the other room with one of Rose's sisters, the two were, it is imagined, left alone to talk.

What they talked about, and what happened next, either was buried within days with the both of them, or if there were any witnesses within the house, the story got held tight and has probably also gone to its final rest. One sister of Rose's, it is said, was so affected by the tragedy that pictures found later would have her scratched from the image. Another story that is whispered is that she worked in the Weld County Courthouse at one time, and long ago had all the records regarding the case destroyed.

Stan Heffner and I stand in Johnstown Cemetery and try and get our bearings. We follow the notes from the records at Town Hall and find Rose's grave. Somewhere out here, in a still unmarked grave, also lies his grandfather. Stan says he heard that Ray's family

showed up days after the shooting from Missouri, quickly buried him, and left. He doesn't know if they were able to see the baby.

I hang back, giving Stan some time alone. He takes a picture. He stands and he stares at the headstone. Finally, he looks around and I feel like it's okay to again intrude.

"I literally found an entire side of my family," Heffner says quietly. "I went from not knowing anything about my grandfather, from not even knowing what he looked like, to seeing pictures of him and being able to talk to people who could tell me about him. That happened because I walked in the door of your office."

"No, it happened because it happened," I said. "The newspaper is just the place where the first rough draft of history sits. It's where people come to look. I'm glad we were able to help."

Later, after the earnest handshake and departure of Stan Heffner, I sit in the office alone thinking about him and his family. I get up and go to the back room and pull the 1915 archive volume off the shelf. Flipping pages, I again find the boldface BIG NEWS in the small town paper leaping from the grey point-typed page. Drunken shouted words. Maybe a moment of tender connection, a pleading, a searching attempt at reconnection and reconciliation. Another harsh flash of angry denouncement. The embarrassment in the small community. The coming holiday tomorrow. The cold December night wind that carried two sharp cracks and then cries.

I look at a picture of Ray and Rose I have on the wall by my computer that I put there when I was writing their story, trying to conjure some sort of connection by being able to stare into their eyes. "You're writing about people," I always tell reporters when they start here. "It may be just another story to you, but it's their lives." It's a happy picture. The one where she's sitting on his lap

with that smile, and he sits with his arm around her, a strong-jawed Son of the Soil and his beautiful frontier bride.

Nobody really knows what goes on in a relationship. What happens when it's nobody but the two of you alone. Something obviously went wrong for Ray and Rose. But on this day, in this picture, they are in love. That's the way I want to remember them. Not on that December night, Ray drunkenly pleading for his family back. Not now out under the sky and the earth at the cemetery. Not even necessarily as Stan Heffner's grandparents.

But rather as they are in that picture. Young and laughing, a prairie version of Sid and Nancy. On that motorcycle of Ray's -- Rose's arms wrapped around his waist in a tight hug as they go through the jog in the intersection just a bit too fast at night -- Ray's tires skidding for a moment before he regains control. The jolt of adrenaline from the moment of fear making both of them feel a bit more alive and more in love, as Rose squeezes Ray tighter, burying her face in his broad back and smiling, as he rolls into the throttle and they head out of town toward the lights of the saloons in Milliken.

Matt Lubich and his wife, Lesli Bangert, have owned The Johnstown Breeze since 1997. The paper has provided weekly news to the communities of Johnstown and Milliken (Colorado) since 1904. In 2002, and again in 2005, the paper was voted the "Best Small Weekly Newspaper in the State" by the Colorado Press Association. Lubich and his wife live in Johnstown with their two daughters, Riley and Harper Lee.

This is a chapter of a book Lubich is working on regarding his life as the editor and co-owner of a small weekly newspaper.

To check out a digital version of the paper, go to www.johnstownbreeze.com

