

COLORADO GOVERNORS

Edwin Johnson



Scope and Content Note

The Edwin Johnson collection comprises approximately 70 cubic feet of record material spanning his first term as Governor from 1933-1937. Few records document his second term (1955-1957) except the Executive Record. Major record series included in the collection are correspondence; vouchers; extraditions and requisitions; the Executive Record; and reports. The correspondence series makes up the bulk of the collection and is organized by subject or correspondent.

Files concerning New Deal Programs, relief and unemployment measures, agricultural programs, and public works projects, such as transmountain water diversions, document the Great Depression. The water diversion projects promoted river compacts and spurred important water rights litigation which is also recorded in the collection. The growth of the state and federal government during the 1930's is documented through correspondence with governmental agencies. Other strengths of the collection include documentation concerning highway development, Johnson's

efforts to deport illegal immigrants, state legislation, and national politics. The weakness of the collection is the lack of records from Johnson's second term of office from 1955-1957. The Executive Record can provide documentation of the official acts of the Governor during this period, but researchers will have to look elsewhere for additional material.

Biography

Edwin Carl Johnson, Governor of Colorado in 1933 – 1937 and 1955 – 1957, was born January 1, 1884 in Scandia, Kansas. Four years later his family moved to Nebraska, where Johnson had the privilege to attend Lincoln High under the tutelage of a substitute teacher named William Jennings Bryan. After graduation in 1903 Johnson pursued his dream of becoming a railroad man, and after numerous positions became a train dispatcher/telegrapher at Fairmont, Nebraska.

In 1909 Johnson contracted tuberculosis and was advised to go to Colorado where the climate was believed to be the cure. Johnson and his new wife arrived at the tent colony in Fountain, Colorado, where he convalesced for one year. After his successful recovery, Johnson and his wife built a wilderness homestead near Craig, Colorado. During its construction, the Johnsons lived in a nearby cave that offered them scant protection from the elements. This rustic background endeared him to the Colorado populace and helped him secure eleven undefeated political elections.

"Big Ed", as Johnson was affectionately named, has the distinct honor of being the only person to serve three terms as Governor of Colorado and three terms as a United States Senator. Beginning in 1923,

Johnson served in the Colorado House of Representatives for four consecutive terms. Eight years later Johnson was elected Lieutenant Governor and served as the private secretary for Governor William "Billy" Adams. Based on his commitment to the development of the Colorado highway system and his leadership within the Democratic Party, Johnson became Governor of Colorado in 1933 and was reelected two years later. Johnson also served as President of the Colorado Senate from 1931 to 1932. In 1937 he began his first of three consecutive terms as a United States Senator.

Johnson's greatest challenge as governor was to deal with the Great Depression in the 1930's. Even though Johnson was a Democrat he did not support New Deal legislation. "Big Ed" instead created his own statewide reorganization and reform program. Tax reduction, a \$20 million highway construction program, balanced budget legislation, and civil service reform earmarked this successful program. Edwin Johnson's isolationist views became apparent in 1936 when he called out the National Guard to prevent the entry into Colorado of Mexican migrant farm laborers. Pressured by federal government and other public officials, he reversed this stance but reinstated the ban in 1958.

Despite his popularity, Senator Edwin Johnson is known for his political vacillations, which were largely caused by his allegiances being split between the Democratic Party and his Republican constituency. For instance, while "Big Ed" was a proponent of isolationism and consistently voted against America's military involvement in foreign wars, he became Vice-Chairman of the Senate Military Affairs Committee and was instrumental in the creation of the G.I. Bill of Rights, Lowry Air Force Base, and the Air Force Academy. Once the United States entered World War II, Johnson was solidly behind the war effort, even supporting the Japanese internment camps; a political stance which placed him in direct conflict with Governor Ralph Carr who was much more sympathetic to the Japanese-American population. Johnson's ideological schism is also illustrated by his isolationist votes against lend-lease legislation and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) before the war, while conversely supporting the United Nations Charter and Marshall Plan following World War II. Johnson's isolationist viewpoints surfaced again at his last major address as a United States Senator when he warned the Senate about committing American troops to the Indochina / Vietnam conflict in the 1950's.

Edwin Johnson's controversial and often conflicting stances were not limited to Depression politics and military affairs. Johnson was on the committee that censured Senator Joseph McCarthy, yet he introduced legislation requiring the licensing of movie performers based on their morality. This legislation was introduced after Johnson publicly called Ingrid Bergman "an apostle of degradation" and her lover / director Roberto Rossellini "vile and unspeakable...Unconventional free – love conduct must be regarded...as an assault upon the institution of marriage."

Concerning most of his policies and programs, however, Johnson had few detractors. He was supported in most of his endeavors and was ultimately responsible for the creation of Interstate 70 and the majority of the Colorado highway system as it stands today. Johnson also co-authored the sections to the Atomic Energy Bill that created the uranium boom in the Four Corners Area of Colorado in the late 1940's. Edwin Johnson was also a campaigner for water reclamation projects such as the Colorado Big Thompson project and for the development of oil shale as a viable energy source.

"Big Ed" seemed unwilling to retire from public office, and after his gubernatorial victory in 1954 continued to act as one of the state's most dedicated public servants. He served on numerous committees including the Upper Colorado River Commission, the McNichols Reapportionment Commission, the Colorado Commission on the Aged, and the Colorado Committee of 100 on Metro Government. He was also President of the Western Baseball League, instrumental in the construction of Bears Stadium / Mile High

Stadium, and was inducted into the Colorado Sports Hall of Fame in 1968. On May 30, 1970 Edwin "Big Ed" Johnson died of a heart related illness at Denver's St. Joseph Hospital.

Edwin Carl Johnson Bibliography

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Series Descriptions

The Executive Record

The Executive Record contains executive orders; appointments; legislative messages; pardons; extraditions and requisitions; honorary citations; and proclamations which were issued by Governor Johnson during his terms from 1933-1937 and 1955-1957. This is the only record series that contains information from his second term.

Correspondence

Making up the bulk of the Johnson collection, the correspondence series could be defined as a subject file as it contains correspondence and supporting documentation which is organized by subject. Important subject matter includes New Deal and Depression relief programs; river compacts and transmountain water diversions; water rights litigation; alien deportation; highway and other public works development; state legislation; the Moffat Tunnel project; the Panama Canal; "communist movements;" federal prohibition; civil service; national defense; Indian affairs; and national politics. There is correspondence with numerous state and federal agencies, as well as with J. Edgar Hoover and the United States Department of Justice.

Reports

Reports from this series include annual reports from state agencies and more specific reports concerning various topics. These include Colorado Planning Commission : Division of Statistics reports; the Rio Grande Compact Commission: Conference Proceedings; Committee on Penal Reform Annual Report; and documentation concerning Walter Reppin who was executed by the State in the gas chamber.

Extraditions and Requisitions

This series includes documentation concerning the surrendering of alleged criminals to a different jurisdiction for trial. Records may include the application for extradition, the warrant for arrest, and correspondence concerning the extradition.

Vouchers

This series consists of cash receipts, disbursements, and bank records regarding the Governor's account and the Colorado and Federal Emergency Relief Administration funds.