

Anna Josephine Lawless



Anna/e Josephine Lawless Johnson

BIRTH 30 Sep 1893 Decatur, Burt County, Nebraska

DEATH 8 Aug 1975 (aged 82) Miller, Hand County, South Dakota

BURIAL Saint Ann's Cemetery, Miller, Hand County, South Dakota

MARRIAGE: May 8, 1915 to Oliver Victor Johnson in Bancroft, Cum-
ing, Nebraska, United States

The local Decatur newspapers are a source of information about the Lawless family life when Anna was growing up. The social column of the paper in those years told who visited who and what they did. (*See Eugene's story.*) Anna's best friend, Nell Conneally, lived on an adjacent property and they visited often. This is probably where Anna started her life-long passion for playing cards. Besides visiting, the Lawless family participated in many of the social events in the community and also organized dances and fairs. She probably learned the art of story-telling from her Irish parents and in later years entertained her grandchildren with her stories. She met her future husband Oliver Johnson when he visited her house with friends.

The Decatur Herald Thu Apr 4 1907

Anna studies for her confirmation.

E. W. Lawless returned from Marysville, Mo., the latter part of last week, where he accompanied his youngest daughter, Anna, who will enter the St. Joseph's Hospital there to complete her church studies preparatory to confirmation. She will also enjoy a visit with her cousin, Sister Anselma, formerly Eileen Lawless, daughter of Chas. Lawless, who is one of the instructors in the school. Eugene reports crops as looking fine, cattle are in the pastures and the gardens are all up. It rained considerable while he was there.

See the Eugene Lawless Appendix for letters and newspaper articles about the family and many of their social events. Samples of some of the letters are included that show handwriting of the Lawless parents. The newspaper articles document more of the events than are mentioned in these chapters about the family.

Anna was a good student. Her 4th grade report card from 1903-1904 shows grades in the 90s for all subjects. (*See the Eugene Lawless Appendix.*)

Anna was a student at St. Joseph's Academy in Clyde Missouri beginning in 1907 when she was 14. She was there through 1909. She went to the Academy because her cousin Sr. Anselma was a nun there. (*See the Charles Lawless story.*) Her mother and other family members wrote letters to her while she was at the Academy.

At school Anna was lonesome and homesick. Her mother's letters and told about the happenings around Decatur and encouraged her to give attention to her studies to help her adjust to being away from home. Anna kept some of the letters.

When Anna had been at school only a week, her mother wrote her so the letter would arrive on the day of her first communion. (*Letter: April 13, 1907.*)

These are a few of the happenings Bessie told in those letters:

- Minnie moved to Bonner's Ferry in Bonner County, Idaho.
- Eugene went on an overnight fishing trip and brought home many fish.
- Bessie wrote a letter on Anna's birthday and appreciated all the letters Anna wrote to her.
- Bessie tells of a person who was impersonating a priest in Onawa and got money from several Catholics. He was found out.
- Both parents sent letters praising Anna for her good grades.

Anna Josephine Lawless (cont.)

- Anna’s cousin Sr. Anselma was ill at the hospital where she worked in Maryville (1909). Anna also received a letter from Sr. Anselma saying she had been too sick to write. (*See more in the Charles Lawless story.*)

Bessie calls Anna “my little one”, “my own little treasure”, “my darling little one”, and other endearing greetings in her letters. Anna was well loved! Anna also received letters from her best friend Nell Conneally, her sisters Eugenia and Minnie, her brother Johnny, and her father.

After her mother died in 1911, Anna kept house for her father and her brother John helped with the farming.

A note in the July 31, 1913 paper says Anna returned from Wayne NE. It is not known what she did there, but she may have attended Wayne State College. (A teacher’s college in Wayne Nebraska.) She may have been visiting or may have taken a summer course there. Anna was 20 in the fall of 1913. (See https://www.wsc.edu/info/20011/about/89/history_of_wayne_state_college for a nice history of the college.)

Many years later in a letter to her son Victor, Anne said she wished she had completed that education. She might have been a teacher like her older sister Minnie. She was good with words and spent time writing poetry, creating puns, and writing jokes that were plays on words. Anna’s poetry and other writings were collected in a book. (*Our Mother’s Song*)

If Anna had become a teacher she would have had to quit when she married. Married women were not allowed to teach.



Nell Conneally. She was Anna’s best friend and they stayed in touch for many years. Anna talked about her even late in life.

Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration

The original monastery was founded in 1874 by a group of five sisters led by Sister Mary Anselma Felber, O.S.B., who came from the young monastery of Maria-Rickenbach (founded 1857) in Switzerland. Arriving in Clyde, Missouri, they founded the Benedictine Convent of Perpetual Adoration. This remains the motherhouse and largest community of the congregation.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benedictine_Sisters_of_Perpetual_Adoration

Their Monastery Creations business makes hosts for Catholic churches and wonderful soaps, lotions, and lip balms. The Soap Sister throws a little Holy Water in the soap.

They no longer have a school at the Clyde location.

The hospital in Maryville is still in operation.



The Decatur Herald_Thu_Mar_18_1909

The Decatur ferry boat, which had been anchored insecurely, was over-come by an ice gorge last Friday and sank to the bottom of the muddy Missouri and it is doubtful whether or not it can be recovered. It is hoped that if it is replaced by a new one it will be more practical and give better service than the old one. This ferry boat service is a matter of great concern to Onawa business men as the Nebraska trade is an important one. Any measures by which better service could be secured should be promoted.—
Onawa Sentinel.

The Ferryboat Story

Decatur and the Ferry

“One of Nebraska’s early river towns, the history of Decatur is long and colorful. Closely tied to that of the Missouri River, the ferry carried horses, wagons and cars across the river into the 1930s.” (*Nebraska State Historical Society*)

In a letter to Anna in 1909, Bessie said the ferry across the river to Onawa sank.

“The old ferry boat that runs between Decatur and Onawa Iowa across the Missouri sank again. No one is sorry.”

Apparently it happened fairly often. There are several items about Eugene taking farm products to Onawa, so he must have crossed on the ferry. When the boat sank, he could not transport his grain to Onawa. The ferry was in operation until the 1930s. A bridge was built in 1951.

Letters to Anna

This is a summary of letters that Anna received between 1907 and 1913. The letters from her mother and others tell a lot about happenings and what the family was doing. Most are from when Anna was in school in Missouri. The letters have been scanned and the originals are in a notebook. The original scans of the letters are not included in the Web site or in documents as images.

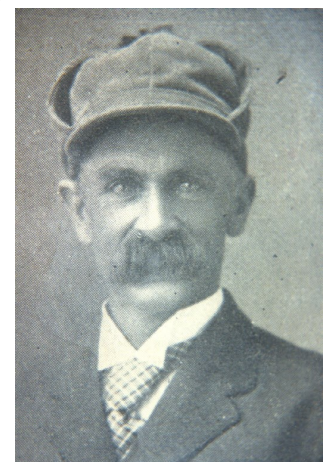
Letters from Bessie

Bessie and Anna exchanged letters weekly. Bessie reported on the farm successes and failures.

- September-October 1908—Minnie, Eugenia, and John are away helping neighbors. Anna is doing “fancy work” (maybe making lace or embroidery?). She made a doily for her mother’s birthday and Bessie treasures it. Some of the younger chickens fell into a bucket and “committed suicide”. They now belong to Lyons parish and Fr. O’Donohue is the priest. From Eugene: Anna’s grades are excellent. Weather spoiled the carnival. Eugene was Marshall. The balloon could not ascend because of a strong wind.
- A calf was born on Anna’s birthday in 1908.
- Eugenie and Johnny were confirmed (1908).
- Oct 1908—Swine cholera is going around and he hopes their hogs don’t get the “dreadful plague”. Eugene was worried about his hogs getting Cholera. At least one pig had died.
- November-December 1908—Sr. Anselma is ill. (*See Sr. Anselma’s letter.*) Eugene organized a wrestling match in Decatur and there was great excitement about it. They husk corn by hand and it seems to take a while (weeks?). They went to a neighbors in a sleigh for Thanksgiving, but sleighing has been very bad. Eugene took hogs to Omaha to sell. A corn exhibition is going on there. Eugene will visit the “Poor Clares” in Omaha because they make artificial flowers that they want for the church in Decatur.
- Anna was confirmed in November 1908 in Maryville (Missouri) and took the confirmation name Mary.
- December 23, 1908—Bessie wrote to Anna: “I am with you for a few minutes as my heart is all the time, sending a message of love to my darling & wishing you a Merry Christmas.” Anna was spending Christmas at St. Joseph’s Academy. Anna sent her mother a rosary that Bessie thanked her for in a letter written December 31, 1908.
- January 1908—Eugene helped sell at a big sale in Beemer (Nebraska, west of Lyons) - one of his enterprises was as an auctioneer. Eugene was installed as general consul of the “Woodmen”. Anna’s letters are “a ray of sunshine”. They are having cold and snow and sometimes it warms up a little. Minnie is in Idaho.
- February 1909—It has been very cold and snowy and they have not been able to get to town for a while, nor to school. Sr. Anselma’s health is better.
- April 1909—”Your grades are splendid which pleases me and Father so much.” Anna’s writing has improved. They will go to Lyons for Easter Sunday. The local church will not have Mass on Easter, but will have the Way of the Cross on Holy Thursday. Minnie will not be home in the summer. They want her to teach there again and will raise her salary. Nell and others are getting telephones. Bessie is incubating baby chicks and will put them with a “real hen”. The Sisters are doing well with their chickens and Anna could learn something from them.



Included in Sept 1908 letter, possibly drawn by Bessie.



Eugene Lawless on his auctioneer business card.

- May 1909—Eugenie and Johnny got the mumps but they are better. A couple of the pigs died, but they have new chicks and turkeys. Bessie heard from her Aunt Maggie (in Ireland) that her beloved brother Matthew died. Auntie Kathleen (Matthew’s wife) and children “will miss him terribly”. “I feel it so much even though I probably would never have seen him again in this world.”
- May 25, 1909—Minnie may come home for the summer. Harry Blackmore (cousin?) made arrangements with the Superiors of a convent and they would help her with employment. (*See Minnie’s story.*) It is raining a lot and some young people from Techemah asked for shelter.
- June 1, 1909—Eugene is taking hogs to Lyons. Minnie is going to Seattle, but not coming home. Bessie asks Rev. Mother to let her know when Anna would be coming home. Eugene will meet Anna at the train in Council Bluffs and can come home the same day if not too late. (Council Bluffs is 65 miles from Decatur—that is a long trip in a horse and buggy!)

Letters from Eugenia

Her letters tell Anna about people, who visited, people news. In April 1907 she is still in school (age 19). The letters were written between 1907 and 1913. In 1911, Eugenia was in Whiting Iowa—just north of Onawa.

Letters from John

- Jan 4, 1909.—John rode his pony to school. John, Nell and Eugenia went to town on Saturday night and had a “fine time”. The parents were away and he is lonely. He sent a card from Lyons. Eugenia got a new riding bridle on Saturday night.
- Mar 16, 1909—John was sick with the grippe for 8 days. Eugenia is getting fatter every day. Minnie weighs 133 pounds. There is going to be a social and Nell will sing. Eugenie will speak a piece. “I suppose I will get Nell’s box. She will tell me when it goes up.” [*John (age 18) appears to be sweet on Nell Conneally. Nell mentions him in several letters to Anna.*] The family went to a dance. Eugenie plays the organ.

Letters from Uncle Charles Lawless

Two letters were sent to Anna in 1911. In the first sent July 19, Charles talks about a fire at Port Arthur in Texas where he worked and how he helped put it out. He asks how Eugenia’s chickens are doing and wants other news of the family. In September, he sent another letter. He had a girlfriend whose father gave her a car and he is trusted to drive it. He wants to buy a “machine” for himself then Anna could come and drive it for him. [*Charles was Sr. Anselma’s father.*]

Letters from Sr. Anselma (Eileen Lawless—See Charles Lawless story) and Sisters at the Benedictine Convent of Perpetual Adoration.

- Oct 12, 1908—Sent from St. Joseph’s Hospital. Sr. Anselma has been sick and not able to teach school for several weeks. She thought of Anna on her birthday (September 30). They haven’t had many patients at the hospital because they had not enough heat, but thinks it will be fixed soon. Many have colds. Sr. Crescentia is harvesting the potato crop which is exceptionally good. “She says she owes it to St. Benedict as she planted his medal in the patch.”
- Apr 19, 1909—From Sisters of St. Francis, Maryville MO. She encourages Anna to pay attention to her work so the time will pass quickly before she can go home. She heard that Minnie is staying in Idaho for the summer and Bessie longed to see both Minnie and Anna in June. She will probably go to Decatur soon for about a month.
- May 31, 1909—From Wabash Hospital in Decatur Illinois (Pop. 20,000). Sr. Anselma is working there and likes the hospital. She tells about the local church and the Irish congregation. The priest came from Ireland 2 years before and she enjoys listening to his brogue. The town had quite a few Catholic congregations and several different orders of nuns.

- August 8, 1909—To Aunt Bessie from Sr. Anselma at Sisters of St. Francis, Maryville MO. Sr. Anselma is concerned with Bessie’s health and offers prayers and novenas for her healing. She says the Sisters at the Academy are hoping Anna comes back. They are highly pleased with her and expect her to “make an exceptionally good teacher if she gets another year’s study.” She says Sr. Anselma will take her Perpetual Vows “in three years from July 23 last.”
- (See more of Sr. Anselma’s letters in the Charles Lawless story.)



Sr. Anselma died of tuberculosis in June 1911 just a few days after she took her final vows. (*FindAGrave Memorial ID: 157982006*) Anna corresponded with the Sisters after that.

What happened next.

Anna didn’t go back to The Academy after 1909 to complete her education. It might have been because her mother was ill and she was needed at home. Eugenia and John were still at home also. Minnie was in Washington teaching. Sometimes John and Eugenia were working away from home.

Bessie Lawless died March 28, 1911—just a few months before Sr. Anselma. Anna was 17. Anna sent \$2 to the Benedictine Convent for Masses for her mother’s soul. She received a letter from Sr. M. Dorothea thanking her for the money and gave her news about the school and other Sisters. This is a summary of a few things in the letter dated July 6, 1911:

- “Yesterday I received your letter with enclosed \$2.00 and have already made arrangements to have the Masses said for the repose of your beloved mother’s soul. I know how sad and lonely you feel without her, but her work on earth was done otherwise God would have left her here. I am sure she will continue her mother’s mission interceding for you with God, even beyond the grave.”
- Sr. Dorothea mentions that Anna was considering going to teach in Washington, but was hoping that she would consider coming back to the Academy to finish her schooling there. Six of the students had completed the work for second level certificate and had taken the examination. At that time, girls could get a “second grade” teaching certificate by getting three years of high school education. After some experience, they could get a higher level certificate.
- “Then Sr. Anselma died on Pentecost Sunday. Mother Augustine was over soon after and told us all about her last days and her happy death.”

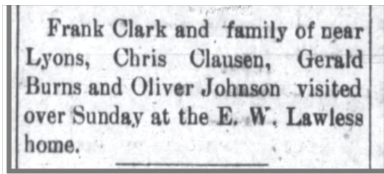
April 4, 1912—From Mother M. Augustine at the St. Francis Hospital. Anna sent \$1 to the St. Francis Hospital to have Masses said for her mother. She mentions “our dear Sister Anselma”. She also asks about Charles Lawless since he was there the previous year. They think about him and wonder how he is getting along.

December 31, 1912—From Sr. M. Dorothea at the Benedictine Convent. “It is surprising how all our old girls still seem to have a kindly remembrance of us, notwithstanding our seeming indifference and neglect. But I’m sure you know we sincerely wish them all good, though we are no hands at making much display or demonstration.” Sr. Olivia thinks that Anna would enter a convent. She tells other news about the convent.

BG—I believe that Anna’s experience at the Convent school formed the basis for her lifelong dedication to the Catholic religion. One of the letters from a Sister reminds her about all the rituals and daily devotions that she should be doing. Bessie, Anna’s mother, often sent Anna reminders about living a religious life. She followed that practice throughout her life. She was a great example to her children and grandchildren. I still miss her and wish I could hear her stories again. I wish I could ask her more about her life, her parents, and her brother and sisters. I remember her talking about her sisters Minnie and Gene (Eugenia), but not what she said about them.. [8/8/2024]

Oliver Victor Johnson Meets Anna Josephine Lawless

The Decatur Herald Thu Jul 16 1914



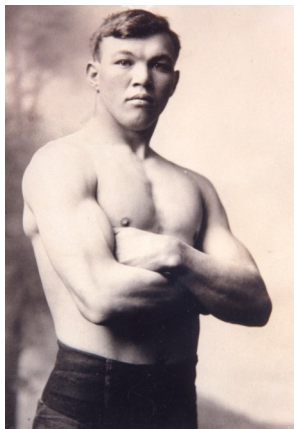
Oliver and Anna met at local social events, most likely in 1914 and became engaged. The Decatur Herald reported that Oliver visited the E.W. Lawless house in July of 1914. They probably met other times as well. Anna was 21 and Oliver was 23 in 1914.

Oliver lived in Lyons and Anna lived a few miles west of Decatur. The distance between the towns is about 17 miles. Transportation was by horse and buggy and the roads were not paved. Letter from Oliver to Anna:

****Lyons, Neb. Mar. 28, '15****

Dear Sweetheart, I received the present you sent me, and was very glad to get it. I thank you with a big kiss (X). I would like to come over, but, sweetheart, I can't get away.

Bird had a little colt Friday night and it is a dandy. I expect the other mare to have a colt tonight.

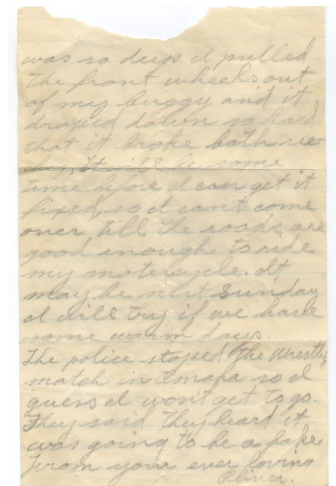
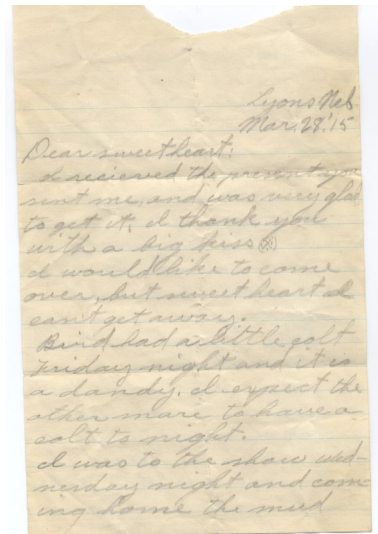


Oliver, the Wrestler.

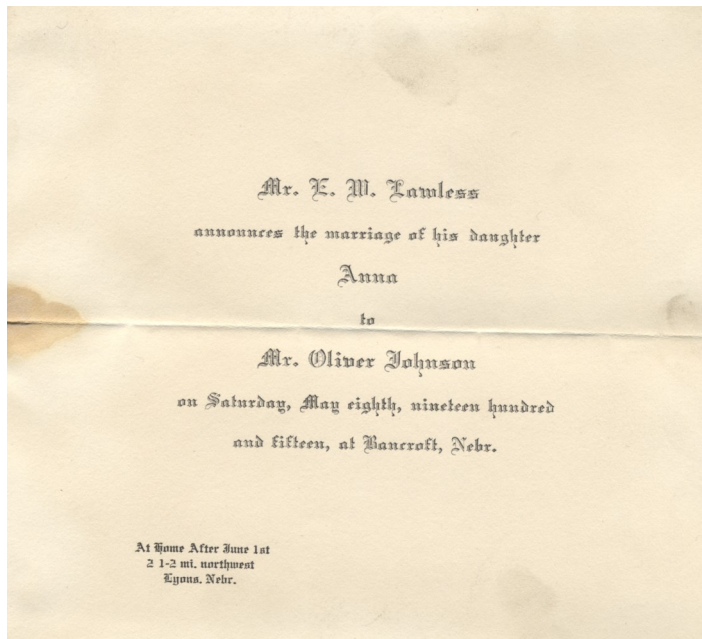
I was to the show Wednesday night and coming home the mud was so deep it pulled the front wheel out of my buggy and it dropped down so hard that it broke both reaches. It will be some time before I can get it fixed, so I can't come over till the roads are good enough to ride my motorcycle. It may be next Sunday. I'll call time if we have some warm days.

The police stopped the wrestling match in Omaha so I guess I won't get to go. They said they heard it was going to be a fake.

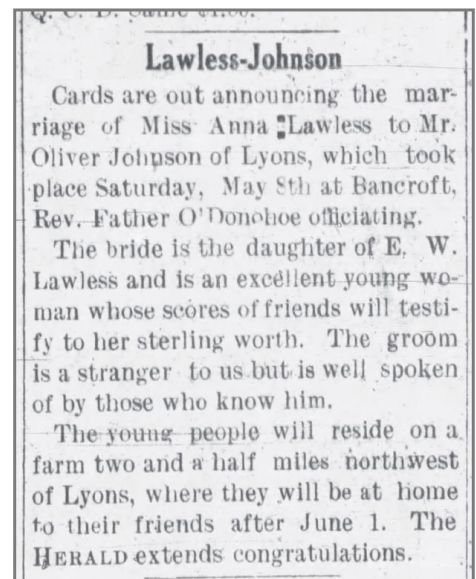
From your ever loving Oliver.



Oliver and Anna Wedding Announcement



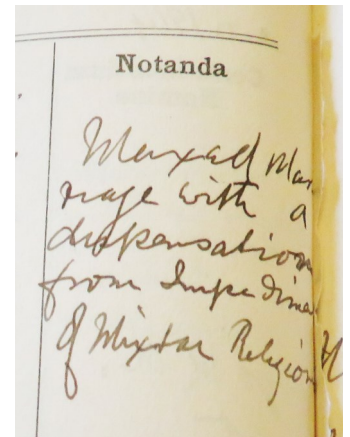
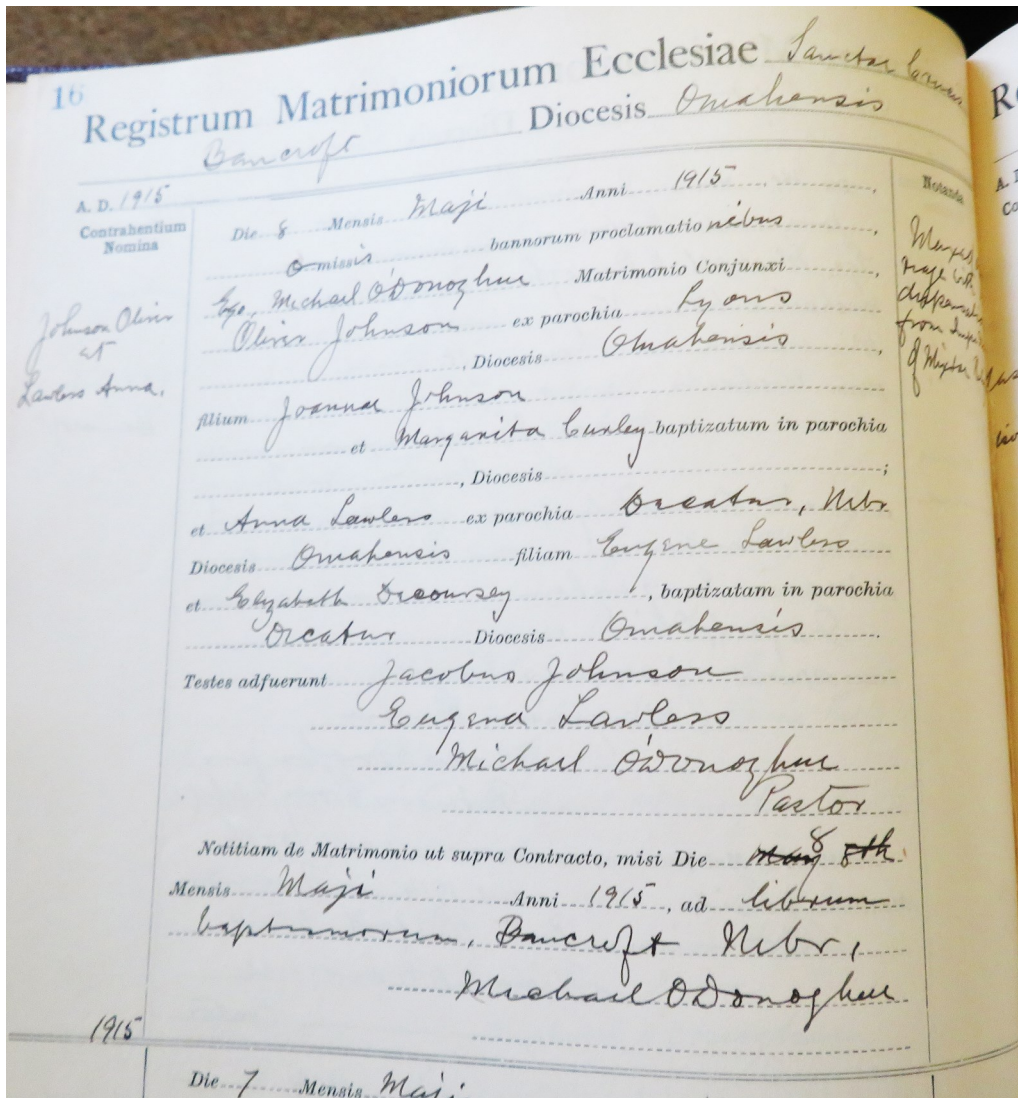
The Decatur Herald Thu May 13 1915



Oliver and Anna' Marriage Record

The marriage record was photographed at St. Joseph's Church in Lyons Nebraska by Betty Gibbs.

The record is in Latin. The marriage record is from Bancroft in the Omaha Diocese. It shows the marriage date of May 8 1915 and that it was performed by Fr. Michael O'Donoghue. Oliver's parents and Anna's parents are listed. The note on the side states that it was a mixed (religion) marriage and was performed with dispensation from the Bishop of the Diocese (Bishop Richard Scannell at the time). The witnesses were Jacobus (James) Johnson, Oliver's brother, and Eugena (Eugene) Lawless, Anna's father. Father O'Donoghue was their parish priest and mentioned in letters to Anna when she was at school (1908-1909).



Holy Cross Catholic Center in Bancroft Nebraska, 2022. Oliver and Anna were married in Bancroft, but this is not necessarily the original building.

