

Book Reviews

Covering Iowa: The History of the Des Moines Register and Tribune Company, 1849–1985, by William B. Friedrichs. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2000. x, 307 pp. Illustrations, tables, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth.

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William Friedrichs has written a readable, well-researched business history of Iowa's major newspaper. His main theme is the *Register's* career as a publishing enterprise. He gives attention to the paper's editorial policies but provides little on its news coverage. He mentions special features but does not discuss or analyze their content. There is nothing wrong with these choices, but a fair review should alert the reader about what to expect.

Even so, *Covering Iowa* is more than a typical "business" history. Because the *Register* is a newspaper, its business was to respond to the market for news, information, and entertainment. The history of the *Register*, then, is to a large degree a history of popular culture as well as business decision making. It is also a significant story in the history of American journalism. During its long career, the company that owned and operated the *Register* won 13 Pulitzer Prizes, published a mass-circulation magazine (*Look*), and branched into radio and television. It was the only newspaper to spread its news coverage throughout its state, in a sense seeking to make itself everyone's hometown daily.

The *Register's* origins date from the rise of the Republican Party in Iowa. It was a fitting start, since from the founding of the republic newspapers had served as agents of party propaganda. In the beginning Iowa had been thoroughly Democratic, but during the 1850s the rise of the slavery issue and migration into the state of persons of more northerly, often New England, origins produced a Republican vote that could capture the state and support a party newspaper. Thus was born the *Iowa Citizen*, to be renamed in 1860 the *Iowa State Register*. During the 1860s the paper passed through several owners but remained on a constant course. It supported abolitionism and equal rights for African Americans. As its owners rose through the ranks of the Republican Party, it expanded its coverage to become the state-wide Republican voice. Wartime exigencies gained it telegraph access

and membership in the region's major newsgathering organization, the Northwestern Associated Press, which collected national and international news.

In 1870 the *Register* benefited from the first of a series of fortunate shifts in ownership, when the Clarkson family purchased it. James "Ret" Clarkson expanded the paper's statewide coverage, added features, and increased circulation and advertising. Most important, he kept the paper sound politically, which meant solidly in the Republican Party mainstream and in alliance with the dominant Grenville Dodge-William Boyd Allison faction of the party. This worked splendidly for Ret. Unfortunately, his rise in party ranks took him away from the *Register*, which languished in his absence. It was rescued by dealings that brought in associate editor Harvey Ingham of Algona, who in 1903 persuaded the principal owner to sell to an Algona banker named Gardner Cowles.

For most of the rest of the century Gardner Cowles and his sons John and Gardner Jr. ("Mike") dominated Iowa journalism and emerged as major figures on the national scene. From the beginning Cowles was a builder, and what he wanted to build was a first-class newspaper. Believing that advertising revenues depended on circulation, he boosted sales. He spread circulation throughout the state by direct mail on weekdays and a network of carriers on Sundays. Within four years two-thirds of sales were outside of Des Moines, while growth within the Des Moines area increased local advertising revenues. More money bought a better press, more staff, and the evening *Tribune*.

As the *Register* grew in scope and complexity, Cowles turned over the daily details of management to subordinates but maintained a hands-on supervisory style, wandering about the offices and plant, making suggestions and storing information. He left editorial policy to Harvey Ingham, who modernized the paper's content by forsaking political partisanship for an "independent" Republican perspective that separated news from editorial opinion, allied with no faction, and on rare occasions supported a Democrat. This was journalism in the turn-of-the-century social scientific style that emphasized "facts," pressed for "civic improvement," and stood on "principle" rather than "party." *Register* editorials boosted municipal "reform," civil rights for African Americans, woman suffrage, and internationalism.

John and Mike Cowles sustained their father's vigorous, hands-on leadership. But they also kept up with the times. They added features that included the "Big Peach" sports section and printing the nation's leading columnists on the editorial pages. They bought up the last competing Des Moines paper and came up with creative ways to im-

prove delivery and billing. With the arrival of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, they established a Washington bureau. With improved techniques and reader interest in photojournalism, they subscribed to the Associated Press's wirephoto service and instituted aerial photography. In 1943 the *Register* became the first newspaper to sponsor a statewide opinion poll. At the same time it sent Gordon Gammack to the front lines to report how Iowa boys were fighting against Fascism and Nazism. Most important, John and Mike hired excellent talent. By 1984 the *Register* had won 13 Pulitzer Prizes. Prominent winners, who were also household names to *Register* readers, included Jay N. "Ding" Darling, Frank Miller, Don Ultang, Clark Mollenhoff, Lauren Soth, and Richard Wilson. Thus, the *Register* became a barometer of Iowa's self-image: literate, accomplished, forward-thinking, outward-looking, while at the same time prudent, moderate, proud, and modest.

In these ways John and Mike brought the *Register* national recognition and made themselves national figures. In 1935, after conferring with Henry Luce, who was about to publish a weekly photo magazine named *Life*, they brought out their monthly photo feature magazine, *Look*. They entered the radio market, eventually owning six stations throughout Iowa, and later the television market. In 1935 John purchased the *Minneapolis Star*, to which he applied his *Register* experience to move it from the weakest of the city's three dailies to leadership and dominance. During that time, John served on the Associated Press board of directors, and during World War II Mike served as a director of the Office of War Information, and both served as advisers to Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie.

All of this was accomplished with astute business leadership that navigated the *Register* through the advertising declines during the depression, wartime shortages, and rising newsprint and labor costs. Friedrichs handles these subjects skillfully and gives real insight into the newspaper business as it was conducted by some of the business's most accomplished practitioners. By 1950, the *Register* and evening *Tribune* circulation reached 380,000, putting them within easy reach of almost every resident of the state.

The postwar *Register* maintained its moderate tack. It adopted a "pragmatic" Cold War stance that opposed Soviet expansionism but promoted diplomatic contacts and negotiation. It found little use for the likes of Senator Joe McCarthy, General Douglas MacArthur, and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. It favored Truman's policy in Korea and warned against involvement in Indochina. It continued its support of civil rights for African Americans.

By 1960 the *Register* had passed to Kenneth MacDonald and David Kruidenier, the latter a grandson of Gardner Cowles. They continued the paper's standards for excellence in journalism, picked up more Pulitzers, and invested in advanced printing techniques. At the same time, they contended with new market forces. Television was eating up the public's media attention span, powerful combines like Hearst and Knight-Ridder were buying up newspaper properties, and, most important, the *Register* was reaching the saturation point in its market and by the early 1970s was in sharp decline. Kruidenier responded with different strategies. He tried to purchase other newspaper properties, cut unprofitable routes, kept an eye out for investment opportunities outside Iowa, and brought into his management team Iowans Michael Gartner and Gary Gerlach, young men with successful careers in journalism. In the end, however, losses outran gains. The principal difficulty was the failure of new properties to pay well enough to cover the cost of their purchases. In the meantime the inflationary 1970s drove up the *Register's* costs faster than its revenues. By the end of the decade, Kruidenier was playing defense, trying to protect the company from hostile takeovers and dissident stockholders. The company also closed down the afternoon *Tribune*, which had been losing circulation.

The turning point came early in the 1980s. Publishing conglomerates targeted the *Register* for purchase, and dissident stockholders began to demand that the company be put up for sale to boost the value of their shares. When Kruidenier took John Cowles Jr.'s place as head of the Minneapolis paper and then attempted to merge the papers, Gartner and Gerlach objected and attempted to purchase the company with the aid of Des Moines attorney David Belin and financing from the Dow Jones Company. Friedrichs covers this aspect of the *Register's* history in fascinating detail. In the end, the Minneapolis merger fell through, and the major stockholders, almost all of them Cowles heirs, demanded that the paper go on the market. The highest bidder was the Gannett newspaper company. Al Neurath, Gannett's CEO, promised to maintain and even to improve the paper's quality. How well he kept that promise has been for a decreasing range of Iowans to decide, as part of Gannett's strategy came to focus the *Register's* circulation on Des Moines's metropolitan area.

Scholars, journalists, general readers, and Iowans who, like this reviewer, grew up with the *Register*, will find this an engaging book. It belongs on many library shelves and in any serious classroom on the history and business of journalism in the United States.

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