

The Newspaper that Captured a State: A History of the *Des Moines Register*, 1849–1985

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"ANY HISTORY OF AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS," writer William Zinsser once cogently observed, "is also a history of American life." Recent scholarship has not overlooked the importance of newspapers, but attention has generally focused on nationally recognized, influential papers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or the *Los Angeles Times*. Although some respected, regional dailies have been examined, a history of the *Des Moines Register* is noticeably absent. Because the *Register*, perhaps more than any other paper in the United States, reached into all areas of its state, a history of the *Register* is also a history of Iowa. The *Register's* expansive circulation and distribution made it unique among American newspapers: lacking the population base of a big-city daily, the company's strategy was to look beyond the confines of the metropolitan area to create a statewide newspaper.¹

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1. William Zinsser, review of *The Paper*, by Richard Kluger, *Columbia Journalism Review* 25 (1986), 73. Histories of nationally influential newspapers include Jack R. Hart, *The Information Empire: The Rise of the Los Angeles Times and the Times Mirror Corporation* (Washington, DC, 1981); Chalmers McGeagh Roberts, *In the Shadow of Power: The Story of the Washington Post* (Cabin John, MD, 1989); Jerry Martin Rosenberg, *Inside the Wall Street Journal* (New York, 1982); and Gay Talese, *The Kingdom and the Power* (New York, 1969). Histories of smaller

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The *Register* began its move toward statewide news coverage and circulation in the early decades of the twentieth century. By the 1960s, the *Saturday Review* reported, "The Des Moines *Register* has, with the exception of the *Christian Science Monitor*, the highest percentage of circulation-outside-the-city-of-publication—i.e., throughout Iowa—of any paper in the country."² Its wide readership provided a large audience for the paper's editorial views.

Over the years, the *Register's* success was largely due to management's ability to innovate or quickly adopt proven ideas already in use. The company sometimes acted as a pioneer in the newspaper business; at other times it mirrored ongoing transformations. The *Register* was on the cutting edge of American journalism in its distribution, use of photographs, branching into radio ownership, employing airplanes, and creating a statewide opinion poll. In other ways—in the move from partisanship to independence, the creation of a syndicate to sell columns and cartoons, the expansion into other communications media, and finally being taken over by a larger newspaper company—the *Register* reflected fairly common patterns in the field.

Beginning in the 1870s, but really from the 1920s on, when its circulation began to take off, the *Register* sought to appeal to all Iowans. In so doing, it became a unifying force within the state. In an age when tensions between farmers and merchants, politicians and professionals, rural and city people, and even men and women were increasing, the paper provided a common meeting ground for all Iowans. It held the attention of the state's various constituents by providing special sections to appeal to certain groups: it offered detailed coverage of agriculture; campaigned for programs of statewide interest, such as the

newspapers include David Leon Chandler, *The Bingham of Louisville* (New York, 1987); Jack Claiborne, *The Charlotte Observer: Its Time and Place, 1869–1986* (Chapel Hill, 1986); and John M. Harrison, *The Blade of Toledo: The First 150 Years* (Toledo, OH, 1985). Surprisingly little has been written on the *Des Moines Register*. The only attempts are the interesting but largely anecdotal works of George Mills: "The *Des Moines Register*," *Palimpsest* 30 (1949), 273–304; and Harvey Ingham and Gardner Cowles, Sr.: *Things Don't Just Happen* (Ames, 1977).

2. William Furlong, "The Cowles Empire Expands," *Saturday Review*, 11 May 1968, 71–72.

promotion of good roads; and identified the views of Iowans on important issues in the Iowa Poll. Through such efforts, the *Register* brought citizens of the state together, and in many ways helped define what it meant to be an Iowan.

As historian Harold Livesay stresses, the study of organizations often overemphasizes bureaucratic structures and corporate strategies while failing to acknowledge the role of people.³ To explain the *Register's* rise, its heyday, and its ultimate sale, one must also examine its publishers and editors. Most prominent were the Clarkson and Cowles families. Coker Clarkson and his sons, James and Richard, owned and operated the paper company from 1870 to 1902. Through innovation and entrepreneurial flair, they moved the paper toward statewide coverage by running items competitors did not, such as Coker's popular farm column. The Cowles years at the *Register* began in 1903. Unlike the Clarksons, who ran both the editorial and business side of the paper, the Cowles family generally stuck to management and relied on the editorial talents of others to handle the journalistic side. Gardner Cowles, his sons John and Mike, and then grandson David Kruidenier headed the operation. They concentrated on expanding revenues from subscriptions and advertising. The family hired outstanding editors, writers, and political cartoonists who continuously improved the quality of the product.

From its founding in 1849 to 1985, when the newspaper was sold to the Gannett chain, the *Register* remained true to its self-proclaimed mission in 1870: "The *Register* is emphatically an Iowa paper, a champion of Iowa interests, and an advocate of the Iowa people. . . . No other paper in the Union has ever made its own state a specialty like the *Register* has in Iowa."⁴

THE *REGISTER'S* ORIGINS date back to a nineteenth-century America that, in the words of historian Robert Wiebe, amounted to "a collection of island communities." Prior to the

3. Harold Livesay, "Entrepreneurial Persistence through the Bureaucratic Age," *Business History Review* 51 (1977), 415-43; and idem, "Entrepreneurial Dominance in Businesses Large and Small," *Business History Review* 63 (1989), 1-21.

4. *Daily Iowa State Register*, 15 June 1870.

coming of the railroad and a connection to the developing national transportation network, Americans were an insular people, relying on their local communities for almost everything.⁵ In 1846 the newly created state of Iowa certainly fit that description. Over the next three years settlers scrambled over the prairie, grabbing the rich, recently opened lands, creating small towns, and expanding settlements. In these growing Iowa communities, sixteen newspapers, including the *Iowa Star* located in Fort Des Moines, were founded between 1847 and 1849.⁶

At the time these Iowa newspapers were established, American journalism was undergoing revolutionary changes. By the early 1830s, new steam-powered printing presses increased the output of older hand-operated presses tenfold. Such an advance made it possible to replace the standard six-cent newspaper with one that could be sold for one cent. Lower prices made news more accessible to the masses. The so-called penny press was introduced in large urban areas along the eastern seaboard. These papers broadened the scope of coverage to encompass international and national events as well as local news, societal events, and sports.⁷

Although important to the world of journalism, these innovations hardly touched Iowa or the frontier Midwest. As late as 1850, Iowa, Minnesota, and territories that were to become the states of Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas lacked daily newspapers. The earliest publications were small weeklies, most often tied to and subsidized by a political party. Sometimes political rivals began papers primarily to voice competing views. Such papers featured favorable stories about one political party, carried mostly local news (often slipping into promotional boosterism), and featured literary pieces. Some national news,

5. Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order* (New York, 1967), xiii.

6. Mills, "Des Moines Register," 274.

7. See Alfred M. Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America: The Evolution of a Social Instrument* (New York, 1947), 97-132; and Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of the Mass Media* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1988), 112-43. See also James Crouthamel, *Bennett's New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press* (Syracuse, NY, 1989); and Richard Kluger, *The Paper: The Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune* (New York, 1986), 28-39.

when it could be gleaned from telegrams or lifted from out-of-town papers, also appeared.⁸

The *Iowa Star* was a fairly typical frontier weekly. Founded by early land agent Barlow Granger, along with Judge Curtis Bates and other partners, the *Star* premiered on July 26, 1849, promising that it would be "decidedly democratic, not to be circumscribed or governed by dictations of any party, clique, or influenced in any way by the mere prejudice of party sectarianism." The intended weekly publication schedule was hampered by the difficulties of frontier life, and the second issue did not come out until a month later. Thereafter the seven-column *Star* came out on a fairly regular schedule, although funding was a constant problem.⁹

In January 1850 the *Iowa Star* faced competition from a rival Whig newspaper, the *Fort Des Moines Gazette*, started with the promise of a \$350 capital contribution from the Whig Party. Initially, Granger thought the second newspaper spoke well of the town: "It tells well for the prosperity of this town—only three years old—that two papers can be established with even a hope of being sustained."¹⁰

By February, however, the many difficulties had proved too much for Granger, who was ready to give up the fight and turn

8. Lee, *Daily Newspaper in America*, 716.

9. *Iowa Star*, 26 July 1849. On the paper's origins, see Curtis Bates to Barlow Granger, 29 April and 23 May 1849, vol. 1, Barlow Granger Papers, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines; Johnson Brigham, *Des Moines: The Pioneer of Municipal Progress and Reform of the Middle West Together with the History of Polk County, Iowa*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1911), 1:66–70; Katherine M. Young, "Notes on the History of Iowa Newspapers, 1836–1870," *University of Iowa Extension Bulletin* (1924), 85; David C. Mott, "Early Iowa Newspapers: A Contribution of the Newspapers Established in Iowa Before the Civil War," *Annals of Iowa* 16 (1928), 206; *The Story of the Des Moines Register and Des Moines Tribune* (Des Moines, 1940). On the paper's financial difficulties, see Curtis Bates to Barlow Granger, 3 and 15 November 1849, 22 December 1849, and 3 January 1850, vol. 1, Barlow Granger Papers; *Iowa Star*, 7 January 1850, quoted in Brigham, *Des Moines and Polk County*, 68; and *Iowa State Register*, 29 June 1902.

10. *Iowa Star*, 23 November 1849. Granger was responding to a prospectus of the *Fort Des Moines Gazette*. Edited by Lampson P. Sherman (half-brother of Des Moines pioneer developer Hoyt Sherman), the *Gazette* was published from 14 January 1850 to 6 February 1851.

his attention to the practice of law. With Granger gone, Bates continued to put out the Democratic weekly. The paper, however, was always strapped financially and, in fact, was not published between February 3 and April 28, 1853. It remained unprofitable, and Bates, who had supported the weekly through his law practice, decided to give it up in January 1854. The new owners proved unable to turn the paper around, and seven months later, in August 1854, the last issue of the *Star* appeared.¹¹

In early 1855 the Democratic paper was reestablished as the *Iowa Statesman* by new owner Will Tomlinson. Two years later, in February 1857, it was bought by managing editor Will Porter, who renamed it the *Iowa State Journal*.¹² Porter sold the *Journal* to a twenty-two-year-old Harvard graduate, Stilton Hutchins, and George Todd. Hutchins, a fervent Democrat, found the Republican dominance of the capital too much to bear, and he sold his interest in the paper to his partner, Todd, in 1862. The Democrats fought to maintain a Des Moines paper, and for the remainder of the decade, the *Journal* went through several name and ownership changes. Not until 1870, with the founding of the *Iowa State Leader*, did the party establish a paper with real staying power.¹³

Meanwhile, the city's Whigs were also struggling to keep their paper going. Following the demise of the *Fort Des Moines Gazette* in 1851 (financial support from the party never materialized), another Whig paper, the *Iowa State Journal*—started just one month after the *Gazette*—failed in 1852.¹⁴

The Democrats' new political rivals obtained an organ in February 1856, when the Free Soil *Iowa Citizen* was established. After being owned for a short time by Des Moines businessman

11. *Iowa Star*, 22 February 1850, 19 January 1854, 17 August 1854. See also Young, "History of Iowa Newspapers," 85; and *The Story of the Des Moines Register*, 4.

12. See Brigham, *Des Moines and Polk County*, 81; *Iowa State Journal*, 27 February and 22 August 1857.

13. After selling the *Journal*, Hutchins purchased the *Dubuque Herald*. He went on to found the *St. Louis Daily Times* in 1866 and the *Washington Post* in 1877. See Brigham, *Des Moines and Polk County*, 550–51. For the creation of the *Leader*, see Mott, "Early Newspapers," 207.

14. *The Story of the Des Moines Register*, 2; Mott, "Early Newspapers," 207.

and hotelier James C. Savery, the paper was purchased in December 1857 by John Teesdale, the recently elected state printer. Born in England, Teesdale had worked for several American newspapers before buying the *Iowa City Republican* in 1856. When the state capital was transferred to Des Moines the next year, Teesdale decided to follow and purchase the *Citizen*. Known for his radical antislavery views, he took the Free Soil stance of the newspaper quite seriously. In February 1859, for instance, he assisted abolitionist John Brown and his band as they passed through the capital escorting escaped slaves to freedom. Teesdale interviewed Brown and paid the group's ferry passage across the Des Moines River.¹⁵

In January 1860 Teesdale changed the name of his paper to the *Iowa State Register*. He considered the new moniker, taken from a defunct Black Hawk County newspaper, fitting for "a journal at the capital of the State." But more grandiose than the renaming, Teesdale (somewhat prophetically) proclaimed the *Register* the "Official Paper of the State." It was issued as an afternoon daily throughout the Iowa legislative session, January through April, then as a weekly for the remainder of the year. Although still a small, four-page, five-column paper, it focused on state and national politics with little attention devoted to local events.¹⁶

In 1861 Teesdale was appointed postmaster of Des Moines and sold the paper to Frank W. Palmer. Palmer was a Whig and

15. For biographical information on John Teesdale, see Benjamin F. Gue, *History of Iowa: From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, 4 vols. (New York, 1903), 4:259; Brigham, *Des Moines and Polk County*, 553; and Young, "History of Iowa Newspapers," 42. In 1857 the state capital was transferred from Iowa City to Fort Des Moines, and the capital was renamed Des Moines. John Brown's time in Iowa is recounted in James Connor, "The Antislavery Movement in Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 40 (1970), 462-63, 465, 467-71; Benjamin F. Gue, "John Brown and His Iowa Friends," *Midland Monthly* 7 (1897), 273-76; Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York, 1970), 210, 221-23, 242-43, 265; Charles E. Payne, *Josiah Bushnell Grinnell* (Iowa City, 1938), 108; Richard Acton, "An Iowan's Death at Harper's Ferry," *Palimpsest* 70 (1989), 186-89; idem, "The Story of Ann Raley: Mother of the Coppoc Boys," *Palimpsest* 72 (1991), 22-23.

16. Teesdale explained the paper's name change in the *Daily Iowa State Register*, 10 January 1860. The phrase the "Official Paper of the State" appeared on the very first issue of the *Daily Iowa State Register*, 9 January 1860.

then Republican newspaper editor who had been active in New York politics. In 1858 he moved to Dubuque, Iowa, where he became editor and part owner of the *Dubuque Times*. Following his election as State Printer of Iowa in 1860, he moved to the capital and bought the *Register*. Once at the paper, he proved to be an able publisher and editor. He expanded the four-page paper to include more local news. Then, beginning on January 12, 1862, Palmer instituted two more changes: he converted the *Register* from an afternoon to a morning paper, and it became the city's only regularly issued daily. While it improved qualitatively, the paper remained unabashedly abolitionist and Republican in orientation. Besides enhancing the paper, Palmer ensured its continued growth by hiring a number of talented young men, including Richard and James Clarkson. But by December 1866, the strain of simultaneously serving as the paper's editor and publisher, in addition to acting as State Printer, had taken its toll, and Palmer sold the *Register* to Frank and Jacob Mills. Palmer stayed on as editor until 1868, when he returned to politics, winning a seat in the United States Congress.¹⁷

Under the Mills brothers' ownership, the *Register* expanded its horizons beyond Des Moines. The brothers worked to improve the paper's coverage of the state. They acquired correspondents from various areas in Iowa and started a series of reports from around the state on a county-by-county basis. Although they devoted time and resources to improving the *Register*, the Mills brothers were first and foremost printers, and the paper never became their main endeavor.¹⁸

While Teesdale, Palmer, and then Frank and Jacob Mills increased the *Register's* influence, the city of Des Moines was

17. Palmer's sale of the paper is explained in the *Iowa State Daily Register*, 6 December 1866. For more on Palmer, see *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774-1989* (Washington, DC, 1989), 1607; Brigham, *Des Moines and Polk County*, 553; Robert Cook, *Baptism of Fire: The Republican Party in Iowa, 1838-1878* (Ames, 1994), 140-41, 144, 149, 161, 190, 194; Leland Sage, *William Boyd Allison* (Iowa City, 1956), 46, 94-95, 99-100; and *Register and Leader*, 4 December 1907.

18. On the Mills brothers and their printing and newspaper operations, see Frank M. Mills, *The Mills Family and its Collateral Branches with Autobiographical Reminiscences* (Sioux City, SD, 1911).

undergoing change. Growth continued in the capital; by 1870, its population topped 12,000, while the state's reached nearly 1.2 million. Besides becoming more densely populated, Des Moines began to shed its isolated, "island community" tinge. In 1862 the telegraph finally reached the city. Originally established in the eastern Iowa cities of Burlington and Bloomington (Muscatine), telegraph lines stretched westward across the state as far as Cedar Rapids by 1860. Omaha and Council Bluffs were also soon reached, but the lines had been built through northern Missouri rather than Des Moines and central Iowa. The lack of a telegraph connection led one Des Moines editor to complain that "news from the east was brought to Des Moines by stage from the west (Council Bluffs)." In early 1862 telegraph lines finally reached Des Moines, and on January 14 the *Register* carried its first telegraph news column featuring dispatches from the Civil War.¹⁹

Now, via the telegraph, Des Moines had convenient and reliable access to news of the outside world. News dispatches were put together by the New York Associated Press, which sold the reports. Prior to that time, editors relied largely on newspaper exchanges as their major means of gathering news from outside their locale.²⁰ The telegraph offered news more immediately and more consistently. The significance of the change was not lost on *Register* editor Palmer, who gleefully explained,

Ever since Adam was an infant, the City of Des Moines, or the site where it is located, has been cut off from the exterior world. We have no Railroads. We have no telegraph. We have been excluded from the activities of commerce. Situated midway between

19. For more on the coming of the telegraph to Iowa, see Robert L. Thompson, *Wiring a Continent: The History of the Telegraph Industry in the United States, 1832-1866* (Princeton, NJ, 1947), 22-27, 131-32, 281-97, 363, 368-69; and Ben H. Wilson, "Telegraph Pioneering," *Palimpsest* 6 (1925), 373-93. The quotation is from "The Telegraph Reaches Iowa" (unmarked clipping, n.d.), Iowa Clipping File 2, Communications — Telegraph in Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI), Des Moines. See also *Iowa State Daily Register*, 14 January 1862.

20. Menahem Blondheim, *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 56. Other sources on the telegraph and news services are Victor Rosewater, *History of Cooperative News-Gathering in the United States* (New York, 1930); and Richard A. Schwarzlose, *The Nation's Newsbrokers*, 2 vols. (Evanston, IL, 1989, 1990).

the two great rivers of the continent, without anything but coaches and stage roads to connect us with the rest of mankind, our condition has not been the most pleasant in the world.

To-day our situation is immensely improved. We have the privilege of reading the latest dispatches in our own paper. The lightning and telegraph company have at length made us even with the Mississippi cities.²¹

Unlike many mid-nineteenth-century cities where the telegraph and railroad arrived simultaneously, however, Des Moines did not obtain a railroad connection until 1866. That August the Des Moines Valley Railroad reached the city from Keokuk. More important, however, was the 1867 arrival of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad, which hooked Des Moines directly into the national rail network. Des Moines was rapidly becoming not only the political but also the commercial center of the state.²²

The same year the Rock Island arrived in Des Moines, the Mills brothers' *Register* and twelve additional Iowa newspapers joined seventeen others from Illinois and Nebraska to create the Northwestern Associated Press, which embraced all of Illinois (except Chicago), all of Iowa, and the eastern portion of Nebraska. Prior to the Northwestern's founding, the small dailies in the region had received their telegraphic news through individual contracts or agreements with the Western Associated Press—consisting of big city dailies largely in the Ohio River Valley—formed in 1865. The creation of the Northwestern AP gave the small papers some leverage in negotiating their contract and fees with the Western AP.²³

21. *Iowa State Daily Register*, 14 January 1862.

22. With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, the federal government wanted a telegraph line completely in Union territory, and with the uncertainty about Missouri, a telegraph line was strung across Iowa, building west from Cedar Rapids and east from Council Bluffs. Because Des Moines was included on this line, it gained a telegraph connection four years before it was reached by a railroad. See "How the Telegraph Came into Iowa" (unmarked clipping, 29 June 1938), Iowa Clipping File 2, Communications—Telegraph in Iowa, SHSI, Des Moines. On Des Moines and the railroads, see Barbara Beving Long, *Des Moines and Polk County: Flag on the Prairie* (Northridge, CA, 1988), 24–27.

23. See Schwarzlose, *Nation's Newsbrokers*, 2:23–24, 38; Lee, *Daily Newspaper in America*, 509.

During the first twenty-one years of journalism in Des Moines many small party newspapers opened with high hopes only to change hands or cease publication altogether. As 1870 came to a close, the capital's newspaper industry had stabilized, with two highly partisan papers dividing up the news market: the *Iowa State Register* was the city's leading paper and a growing force in Republican circles; its competition, the *Iowa State Leader* (a descendant of Barlow Granger's *Iowa Star*) was new to the field, but offered Democrats a more favorable forum.

THE END OF 1870 opened a new period in Iowa journalism. Late that year James and Richard Clarkson (both already employed at the *Register*) along with their father purchased the paper from the Mills brothers. Together the new owners made the *Register* the voice of the state's Republican Party and Iowa's most influential newspaper. James, known as "Ret," a nickname he acquired because he scrawled the editorial abbreviation for "return" across copy he wanted to proofread personally, served as editor and used the paper to further the agenda of his wing of the party. In so doing, he advanced his own position in GOP ranks. Because of the editorial power he wielded, Ret became a leading figure in the circle of politicians and businessmen known as the Des Moines Regency, a group that dominated the state's Republican Party for the last third of the nineteenth century.²⁴

According to historian Robert Cook, members of the Regency were "essentially pragmatic, business-orientated Republicans whose allegiance to consensus politics rendered them intensely suspicious of moralistic ideologues. . . . Under their control it was unlikely that the party would ever be ruled for long by the heart rather than the head."²⁵ Such pragmatism

24. On Clarkson and his nickname, see Leland Sage, "The Clarksons of Indiana and Iowa," *Indiana Magazine of History* 7 (1954), 439. For more on the "Des Moines Regency," see Sage, *William Boyd Allison*; Cook, *Baptism of Fire*, 128-30, 194-96, 217-33; and Jeffrey Ostler, *Prairie Populism: The Fate of Agrarian Radicalism in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, 1880-1892* (Lawrence, KS, 1993), 37-38, 40, 60.

25. Cook, *Baptism of Fire*, 196.

was also visible on the *Register's* editorial pages. Ret used the paper to fight off many challenges to the Regency's control. He once explained that the paper was dedicated to maintaining "in power the great party of real Republicanism which saved the nation from destruction by war, returned it to peace, and is fast advancing it to unexampled prosperity."²⁶ Because the GOP controlled politics in Iowa, changes to the status quo threatened its position and needed to be co-opted or quashed altogether.

Most menacing was the growing dissatisfaction among the state's large agricultural constituency. In an age when farmers' autonomy seemed to be slipping away, they were organizing to protect their interests. These efforts encompassed the Grange movement, the Iowa Farmers Alliance, and the Populists. While the *Register* supported agriculture and even advocated farm organizations, it constantly railed against farmers moving into politics and opposed any third party movements. Less threatening, but still of concern were reformers calling for temperance legislation. The *Register* favored prohibition until the 1890s, when GOP leaders concluded that the outright anti-alcohol plank of their platform hurt the party. In addition, there was the controversial issue of woman suffrage. Much like society, the *Register* moved back and forth on the issue, but ultimately preferred that women remain in their traditional domestic sphere. Working to quiet these movements, Ret and the *Register* helped maintain the Regency's position of dominance.²⁷

26. *Iowa State Register*, 7 December 1871.

27. For general background on the farm movement in late nineteenth-century Iowa, see Solon J. Buck, *The Granger Movement: A Study of Agricultural Organization and Its Political, Economic, and Social Manifestations, 1870-1880* (Cambridge, MA, 1913); Cook, *Baptism of Fire*, 203-226; Judith Gildner, "An Organizational History of the Iowa Farmers' Alliance, 1881-1890" (M.A. thesis, Drake University, 1972); Ostler, *Prairie Populism*; Mildred Throne, "The Anti-Monopoly Party in Iowa, 1873-1874," *Iowa Journal of History* 52 (1954), 289-326; and idem, "The Grange in Iowa, 1868-1875," *Iowa Journal of History* 47 (1949), 289-324. On prohibition, see Ballard C. Campbell, "Did Democracy Work? Prohibition in Late Nineteenth Century Iowa: A Test Case," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (1977), 87-116; Dan Elbert Clark, "The History of Liquor Legislation in Iowa" [a three-part article covering the years 1846-1908], *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 6 (1908), 55-87, 339-74, 503-608; and Diana Pounds, "Booze, Ballots, and Wild Women: Coverage of Suffrage and Temperance by Three

While fighting political battles from their newspaper's pages, the Clarksons also improved and modernized the *Register*. The paper continued to focus on politics, but it introduced subtle changes in content. Like other newspapers across the country, the *Register* carried a growing number of nonpolitical stories. In an effort to appeal to a broader spectrum of readers, the paper began to feature regular departments. This trend had actually started in 1871, when the Clarksons initiated Coker's weekly column, "Farm, Orchard and Garden," designed to reach the region's many farmers. Later in the decade other offerings included a women's section, book reviews, church news, a criminal calendar, courthouse news, and a gossip column.²⁸

In addition to adding features, the Clarksons decided to expand their coverage—in hopes of expanding circulation—beyond the confines of the city. After all, Des Moines, with a population of 22,000 in 1880, was relatively small, and the *Register* had to compete with the *Democratic Leader* for readers. So they added a section originally known as "Iowa Intelligence," which reported on events around the entire state. The *Register* relied on local correspondents—who could usually be obtained cheaply or at no cost at all—to supply this news. The practice of employing local correspondents was fairly common among small newspapers, but the *Register's* move toward broader state-wide coverage was more unusual.²⁹ In the 1870s and 1880s, for example, it reported on such issues as gold mining in Winnebago County in northern Iowa, the reduction of the Davenport police force in eastern Iowa, and a suicide in Cedar Rapids.³⁰

Iowa Newspapers, 1870–1875" (M.A. thesis, Iowa State University, 1990). On woman suffrage in Iowa, see Louise R. Noun, *Strong-Minded Women: The Emergence of the Woman-Suffrage Movement in Iowa* (Ames, 1969); and Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames, 1969), 135–36, 152–53, 157–70.

28. On this general trend, see Frank L. Mott, *American Journalism, A History: 1690–1960* (New York, 1962), 478–88.

29. Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, WI, 1992), 95. Baldasty states that county weeklies and small dailies used this technique to obtain local and regional news. The *Register* used this method to obtain stories from all over the state.

30. See Mills, "Des Moines Register," 287; and *Iowa State Register*, 5 May 1880.

The greater variety of stories and broader coverage did attract a wider readership, and a larger circulation produced growing revenues. From 1870 to 1890, the *Register's* daily circulation more than tripled, rising from approximately 2,000 to 7,157.³¹ More readers meant more advertising income, which was becoming an increasingly important source of revenue for newspapers in the late nineteenth century. In 1879 advertising made up 44 percent of newspaper income nationally, while subscriptions accounted for the remaining 56 percent. Ten years later, advertising and subscription income were roughly equal, and by 1899, advertising made up 54.5 percent of total American newspaper revenue while subscriptions had fallen to 45.5 percent.³²

To accommodate the broadening content and increased volume of advertising, the Clarksons expanded the paper from four to eight pages. In doubling its size and increasing its advertising space, the *Register* was merely following a decade-old trend in the industry, identified by journalism historian Gerald Baldasty as "the commercialization of the news." As businesses grew larger, developed national markets, and sought customers for their products, they turned increasingly to advertisements. And as advertisers began to replace political parties as the chief financial supporters of newspapers, publishers and editors altered their content to entertain and capture as large an audience as possible. To avoid offending potential readers, many newspapers abandoned their partisan political position. Most papers did not drop their political affiliation during this period, but a trend in that direction was apparent. Historian Michael McGerr estimated that at mid-century 95 percent of American newspapers were partisan. By 1890, papers that identified themselves as partisan had declined to 66 percent of the total.³³ The *Regis-*

31. See Geo. P. Rowell & Co., *American Newspaper Directory, 1873* (New York, 1873), 77; and N. W. Ayer & Son, *American Newspaper Annual, 1890* (Philadelphia, 1890), 206.

32. Lee, *Daily Newspaper in America*, 748-49.

33. Baldasty, *Commercialization of News*, especially 36-80; Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York, 1986), 14; and Mott, *American Journalism*, 411-12. For changes in society, business, and the economy during this period, see Alfred Chandler Jr., *The Visible Hand:*

ter, however, was not among those leaving the partisan ranks. While conceding to the growing commercialization of the industry with a greater variety of features and more advertising, it remained committed to the GOP throughout the Clarksons' tenure.

James Clarkson's prominence as editor of the influential paper led to his rise in the hierarchy of Republican Party. In 1888 he sold his portion of the company to brother Richard and moved to the East Coast. The following year he was appointed First Assistant Postmaster General, and he would go on to serve as chairman of the National Republican Executive Committee. Richard, meanwhile, ran the paper for over a decade before selling to George E. Roberts and Samuel Strauss in 1902.

MORE WAS INVOLVED in the sale than a mere change of the *Register's* ownership. Roberts, along with Strauss, the owner of the *Des Moines Leader*—which had left the Democratic fold to become an independent paper in 1896—had decided to end the ruinous competition between the papers and consolidate the properties. When the deal was finally worked out, the two jointly purchased the *Register* and merged it with the *Leader*. The new owners each held 50 percent of the paper—now the *Register and Leader*—but, as the agreement stated, Roberts had absolute control of the “policies and preferences of the company,” and the paper was to be “Republican in politics.” Strauss was to act as the business manager.³⁴

The sale of the *Register* appropriately coincided with the decline of the Regency's domination of state politics. Although Republicans continued to control the statehouse and the Iowa delegation in Congress for another thirty years, the progressive wing of the party assumed power. Ret Clarkson, of course,

The Managerial Revolution in American Business (Cambridge, MA, 1977); Wiebe, *Search for Order*; and Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870–1920* (Chicago, 1990).

34. The details of the sale of the *Register*, the merger with the *Leader*, and the politics of the new paper can be found in Minutes of the Board of Directors Meetings, Register and Tribune Company, 1902–1933, vol. 1, pp. 1–8. This is part of a collection privately held by David Kruidenier, Des Moines.

found the change in the Iowa GOP deplorable, but worse still was the editorial shift at the paper that would take place when Roberts and Strauss soon sold out.

Roberts, director of the United States Mint and publisher of the *Fort Dodge Messenger*, hired Harvey Ingham, then editor of Algona's weekly, *The Upper Des Moines*, to edit the newspaper. Within a year, however, the publisher realized that he could not devote adequate time to managing the *Register and Leader* from his home in Washington, D.C., and he decided to sell.³⁵ Three prominent Iowa Republicans—Abraham Funk, a newspaper editor from Spirit Lake; Fred Maytag, the Newton farm equipment maker (later the successful appliance manufacturer); and Osage lumberman James Smith—agreed to purchase the paper on October 31, 1903. But Ingham, who would not have been editor under the new ownership, persuaded Roberts to give him the chance to get another offer. Ingham convinced his friend, Algona banker and businessman Gardner Cowles, to buy a half interest in the paper. Together, Cowles and Ingham controlled a two-thirds stake in the company. On November 7, 1903, the *Register and Leader* announced that the new publisher, Gardner Cowles, would concentrate on the business side of the paper while Ingham would continue as editor. Cowles explained what led to his apparently sudden decision to buy the *Register*: "Both Harvey [Ingham] and I always had the feeling that it was possible to build a strong daily newspaper in Des Moines." Besides seeing an opportunity, the banker later said that he "had no pressing need for the money, but it seemed to be a good thing to do on the theory that something would arise."³⁶

On the surface, Cowles and Ingham appeared to be opposites. While the publisher was quiet and reserved with a penchant for conservative Republicanism, the editor was talkative and affable with leanings toward liberal and progressive causes.

35. See George E. Roberts to Gardner Cowles, 17 June 1927, Harvey Ingham Scrapbook, Harvey Ingham Collection, SHSI, Des Moines.

36. Memorandum of Agreement, 31 October 1903, Harvey Ingham Papers; Announcement [that the agreement was off and Cowles was publisher], Harvey Ingham Papers; Mills, *Things Don't Just Happen*, 16 (Cowles quotation).

But the shared commitment to building a newspaper that stressed objectivity and covered the entire state bound the two together. As son Gardner "Mike" Cowles Jr. recounted, "Their individual talents were perfectly complementary. Father was the quintessential business manager, who delighted in the minutiae of circulation and accounting. Ingham was the quintessential editor who delighted in rooting out the news and advocating ideas."³⁷

Under its new management, the *Register* adopted a more liberal editorial stance, much to the chagrin of Ret Clarkson. With Cowles giving Ingham free rein over editorial policy, the paper moved away from the conservatism of the Clarksons to advocate a wide variety of reforms. So began two traditions at the *Register* that would remain in place until its sale to Gannett in 1985: editorial positions were left up to salaried managers, and the paper continued to take up liberal causes.

Despite the paper's advances under the Clarksons, the increasingly crowded newspaper market in Des Moines in the 1880s meant that by the 1890s the *Register* was no longer the state's largest daily. By the time Cowles and Ingham took control in the late fall of 1903, they found themselves managing the smallest daily newspaper in Des Moines. Although the sellers had assured Cowles that circulation stood at 32,000, it actually was somewhere around 14,000, with paid subscriptions of only about 8,000. Two afternoon papers, the *Capital* and the *News*, had larger circulations.³⁸ Cowles's early years at the *Register and Leader* were a constant struggle, and, like his predecessors, he thought seriously about selling out. He did manage to put the paper in the black by late 1904, but competition for the city's readership increased in 1906, when Charles D. Hellen established a fourth daily, the evening *Tribune*. Cowles stuck it out, however,

37. Gardner Cowles, *Mike Looks Back: The Memoirs of Gardner Cowles, Founder of Look Magazine* (New York, 1985), 10.

38. Cowles was too good a businessman to be duped by the inflated circulation figures. He was brought into the deal by his good friend Harvey Ingham, and it is likely that the editor apprised Cowles of the company's true financial situation. In addition, circulation figures were readily available from N. W. Ayer, which as of 1902 had listed the *Register* as a distant fourth in Des Moines daily newspaper circulation. See N. W. Ayer and Son's *American Newspaper Annual, 1902* (Philadelphia, 1902), 248-49.

and the tight market forced him and editor Ingham to adopt innovative business and editorial practices.

On the business side, Cowles restored the paper's financial health by closely monitoring costs, buying up rival newspapers, and, most importantly, focusing on circulation. The austere publisher tightened budgetary controls by personally approving every bill paid and signing every check. Furthermore, to improve the company's cash flow, the publisher culled out unpaid subscription accounts—sometimes two, three, or four years past due—and announced that subscriptions would be accepted only on a cash-in-advance basis. After getting his first paper on a solid footing, Cowles, like many other publishers of his era, hoped one day to buy out the competition. Roughly two decades later, he had succeeded. By 1927, Des Moines had only two papers, both owned and operated by Cowles: the morning *Des Moines Register* and the evening *Des Moines Tribune*.³⁹

Cowles's primary interest and genius was in the area of circulation. As he once explained to an editor, "It does you no good in a business way just to put out a good paper. You have to go out and sell it."⁴⁰ His earlier work experience provided a good background for such missionary work. In his youth he had traveled from farm to farm selling maps, and during one vacation he had worked on a survey crew planning a railroad through central Iowa. His interest in railroads led him to take a summer job between his junior and senior years in college working on the Union Pacific's Oregon's Shortline from Portland to Utah. The most pertinent lesson for later expanding the *Register's* readership came when he went into business with his father-in-law, Ambrose Call. Their firm solicited government contracts to run mail by horseback or wagon to small towns not served directly by railroads. They soon maintained more than thirty routes in Iowa, Kansas, and the Dakotas.⁴¹ Together,

39. Cowles purchased the evening *Des Moines Tribune* in 1908, the *Des Moines News* in 1924, and the *Des Moines Capital* in 1927. On consolidations going on at the time, see Frank Luther Mott, *The News in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1952), 188–93.

40. Cowles, *Mike Looks Back*, 11.

41. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

these jobs gave Cowles an understanding of sales in rural areas and an awareness of the importance of a state's rail network.

The highly competitive newspaper market in Des Moines led Cowles to look to the entire state as a potential market. He believed the key to increasing circulation was to expand subscription sales. After hiring and firing several circulation managers, he assumed responsibility himself. Because much of rural and small-town Iowa lacked ready access to a daily newspaper, Cowles chose to focus his attention on that virgin territory. Here his interest in railroads proved invaluable. Because railroads provided the only efficient means of distributing the paper outside of Des Moines, Cowles studied maps and memorized railroad timetables. Printing schedules for various editions were then adjusted to fit the departure times of trains out of Des Moines. The publisher's obsession with getting up-to-date, quality newspapers to readers paid off handsomely. By 1906, circulation had nearly doubled, reaching more than 25,000. That same year, Cowles found a solid circulation manager in William Cordingley, but he continued to keep close watch on this part of the business. Circulation continued to increase, and by 1912 it stood at 50,000. By that time, the *Register* led all Des Moines papers in advertising lineage, and the company's evening *Tribune* ranked third. Such increases in readers and advertising led to growing profits: net earnings rose from \$23,900 in 1906 to \$38,500 in 1912.⁴²

Cowles's background in small-town Iowa and his work as a mail contractor further assisted him in distributing the paper. Because many of his newspapers sold outside of Des Moines were sent through the mail, the system worked for the Monday through Saturday daily editions. To get the *Sunday Register* to readers throughout the state, Cowles relied on local news dealers in small towns. But for the growing number of farm subscribers located on rural free delivery routes, that system was inadequate. Cowles circumvented the problem by developing an efficient network of carrier boys and rural route salesmen to deliver the Sunday edition to farmers' doors. This service

42. Special Report, Register and Tribune Company, 1925-1952, p. 123, held by David Kruidenier.

became a big selling point, and company advertisements played up this competitive advantage: "No other newspaper covers the news of Iowa as does The Register and Leader each morning. No other daily newspaper is delivered to all Iowa towns and on almost all rural routes on the morning of issue as is The Register and Leader."⁴³

Cowles was now well on his way to creating a statewide newspaper. As railroad traffic began to decline, and more and more papers were distributed via truck, the publisher became an early and ardent advocate of the "Good Roads Movement." From a circulation standpoint, his interest in improving Iowa's roads was self-serving, but the state's highway system was indeed abysmal, and Cowles was clearly not alone in advocating better intrastate transportation. Better roads did, in fact, lead to circulation growth. By 1930, for example, the *Sunday Register's* 212,100 subscribers represented every Iowa county and exceeded Polk County's population of 172,800 by nearly 40,000.⁴⁴

Editorially, Ingham improved the quality of the *Register* by stressing objectivity in reporting. In the first edition of the combined *Register and Leader*, Ingham established his editorial vision for the paper: "The first and supreme purpose of every one concerned is to make a worthy newspaper in the broad and modern meaning of the word. This requires that the news service shall be ample and reliable, and maintained scrupulously independent of the editorial opinions of the paper." Ingham noted that the owners were still dedicated to supporting the Republican Party, but that the paper's "first responsibility" in its editorials was to its readers; "every choice will be a free one, made when the occasion arises, and not predetermined by factional alliances or considerations." The editor added, "The field

43. See Pamphlet, "Ten Successful Agents Tell How to Sell the Sunday REGISTER AND LEADER" (1908); Pamphlet, "Instructions and Terms to News Dealers and Newsboys" (ca. 1907); and Advertisement (1908), Harry T. Watts Scrapbook, held by Harry T. Watts.

44. See Cowles, *Mike Looks Back*, 11; *Time*, 1 July 1935, 26; Mills, *Things Don't Just Happen*, 30-31; and Raymond Moscovitz, *Stuffy: The Life of Newspaper Pioneer Basil "Stuffy" Walters* (Ames, 1982), 36. The name *Leader* was dropped from the paper's masthead beginning in 1916, and the company was renamed the Register and Tribune.

of the paper is Iowa, and special efforts will be made to cover the news of this state and to make a paper more satisfactory to Iowa readers than any paper published."⁴⁵

Ingham's policy statement sounded at once both old and new. With his notion of running a paper that covered the entire state, he was following the path already laid out by the Clarksons. But with his pledge to separate news and opinion, the editor was breaking with the paper's partisan past and was right in line with the "new journalism" beginning to take hold across the nation at the end of the nineteenth century. Advocates of this new form "believed in the news function as the primary obligation of the press; they exhibited independence of editorial opinion; they crusaded actively in the community interest; they appealed to the mass audience through improved writing, better makeup, use of headlines and illustrations, and the popularization of their contents."⁴⁶

In fact, by stressing accuracy and independence, Ingham's blueprint for the *Register* sounded remarkably similar to Adolph Ochs's 1896 announcement of policy for his newly purchased *New York Times*: "It will be my earnest aim that the New York Times give the news, all the news, in concise and attractive form, in language that is parliamentary in good society, and give it early if not earlier, than it can be learned through any other reliable medium, [and] to give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect, or interest involved."⁴⁷ Soon after Ochs took over the *Times*, his policy was reflected in the paper's famous motto, "All the News That's Fit to Print."

In addition to concentrating on accuracy and objectivity, Ingham knew that because the Des Moines market was small, the *Register and Leader* needed to differentiate itself from other local papers. His strategy was to build on the Clarkson heritage of statewide coverage; longtime sports reporter and editor Leighton Housh once explained that the *Register's* goal was "to

45. *Des Moines Register and Leader*, 1 July 1902.

46. Emery and Emery, *Press in America*, 194.

47. Quoted in Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York, 1978), 110.

cover the state as would a local newspaper."⁴⁸ Ingham took advantage of his Des Moines location by providing detailed coverage of affairs at the statehouse. A 1906 advertisement stressed that feature: "The *Register and Leader* will be indispensable to Iowans who wish a complete, accurate report of its [the Iowa legislature's] sessions day by day."⁴⁹ To interest the state's large rural population, agricultural coverage was enlarged. A full-time farm editor was added during World War I, and beginning in 1920, a full-page agricultural section covering farming of the entire state appeared every Saturday. Meanwhile, color comics had been added, and the *Register* provided the most extensive sports coverage in Iowa. In addition, to make national and international news more readable for Iowans, those stories always stressed, where appropriate, an Iowa angle. Sometimes such a perspective had to be created. In an August 1914 editorial, for example, Ingham brought World War I home to Iowans by comparing Belgium (which had just been invaded by Germany) in size, population, and economy to the state of Iowa.⁵⁰

Yet Cowles and Ingham experienced their greatest coup in product differentiation when they hired the talented political cartoonist Jay N. "Ding" Darling in 1906. Prior to coming to Des Moines, Ding had spent six years at the *Sioux City Journal*. A week before his arrival, the paper announced that it had "contracted for the exclusive services of J. N. Darling, better known as 'Ding,' who won wide popularity as cartoonist for the *Sioux City Journal*. 'Ding's' daily cartoons dealing with the affairs of the state and nation will be warmly welcomed by the readers of *The Register and Leader*. . . . The addition of Mr. Darling to its staff will further strengthen the position of *The Register and Leader* as the best newspaper in the state."⁵¹

48. Leighton Housh, "First Person Pronoun" (Des Moines, 1981), 55. This typescript is available at SHSI, Des Moines.

49. *Des Moines Register and Leader*, 5 January 1906.

50. *Ibid.*, 11 August 1914.

51. Advertising copy sent to other newspaper and journals, 4 December 1906, Watts Scrapbook. The nickname "Ding" was an abbreviated form of Darling. Darling signed his artwork "D'ing" as a contraction for his last name. See David L. Lendt, *Ding: The Life of Jay Norwood Darling* (Ames, 1979), 13.

When Darling's first *Register and Leader* cartoon appeared in December 1906, it sparked immediate controversy. Its portrayal of an overweight monk smoking a pipe inscribed "soft coal" angered both coal dealers and Catholics, who "were offended at the notion that the monk was responsible for the city's heavily polluted air. Darling had mistakenly assumed that 'Des Moines' derived from the French word for monk."⁵² Despite his rocky beginning, Darling's works quickly became popular, and his cartoon on the front page of every *Register and Leader* was "a trademark of the paper." Although Darling left the *Register and Leader* in late 1911, he returned less than two years later and remained there until his retirement in 1949.⁵³

Ding was given complete freedom to deal with any topic in any way he wished. Such leeway led to battles between the conservative artist Ding and liberal editor Ingham. The disputes were mediated by Cowles, who always stressed teamwork. Because Darling and Ingham were each important members of the *Register and Leader* team, Cowles often had to remind the former to stick to cartooning and the latter to concentrate on the editorial page.⁵⁴ Yet given their contrary political outlooks and the control each held over his own domain, it is not surprising that Ding's cartoons sometimes presented different opinions from those expressed on the editorial page. "In 1915, for example, Darling argued for national military preparedness while the editorial page condemned the worldwide arms race."⁵⁵

In addition to gracing the pages of the *Register*, Darling's cartoons were soon syndicated and appeared in more than one hundred newspapers from coast to coast. Thousands of new readers across the country became familiar with Ding's simple drawings that conveyed a "gentle but unmistakably barbed

52. Lendt, *Ding*, 23.

53. *Ibid.*, 24-29.

54. Mills, *Things Don't Just Happen*, 18-19.

55. Lendt, *Ding*, 31.

ridicule." Over the course of his long career at the *Register*, Darling won two Pulitzer Prizes.⁵⁶

When Cowles hired Darling, he had high hopes that the cartoonist would help attract readers to the *Register and Leader*. By the 1920s, Darling had surpassed the publisher's greatest expectations and was a major reason for the paper's success. John M. Henry, a friend and colleague of Ding, claimed that the cartoonist "did more for the *Register* than Cowles did."⁵⁷ Henry's remark was an exaggeration, but it does confirm Darling's critical role in the paper's rise to prominence in Iowa and across the nation.

THE COMPANY PROSPERED through the 1920s as managerial leadership passed to Cowles's sons, John and Mike. The brothers shared ambition, energy, and a passion for journalism. Yet in other ways they were different. Much like their father, John was a conscientious, detail-oriented manager. Mike, on the other hand, was more of a visionary and promoter. Their skills proved complementary, and the Cowles brothers, together with editors Basil "Stuffy" Walters and William Waymack, took the company to new heights. Circulation of the *Sunday Register*, for example, went from 147,000 in 1925 to 397,000 in 1941, while net profits nearly doubled, climbing from \$483,000 to \$885,400.⁵⁸

56. Kluger, *The Paper*, 353. Darling won his first Pulitzer in 1924 for a 1923 cartoon titled "In the Good Old U.S.A." It emphasized hard work and opportunity by depicting the rags to riches success stories of Herbert Hoover, Dr. Frederick Peterson, and President Warren G. Harding. Darling was the second cartoonist to be awarded a Pulitzer. The first went to Rollin Kirby of the *New York World* in 1922, and no award was given in 1923. See Lendt, *Ding*, 38. Darling received a second Pulitzer in 1943 for a cartoon of the previous year titled "What a Place for a Waste Paper Salvage Campaign." It featured a drawing of the U.S. Capitol buried under piles of government reports and press releases. In addition to the cartoons reproduced in Lendt's biography, many of Ding's cartoons are reproduced in Jay N. Darling, *Ding's Half Century* (New York, 1962); and *In Peace and War: Cartoons from the Des Moines Register* (Des Moines, 1916). The University of Iowa Libraries Special Collections department holds some 6,000 of Ding's original drawings, along with related correspondence, speeches, and other papers.

57. Lendt, *Ding*, 32.

58. Special Report, Register and Tribune Company, 1925-1952, pp. 16-17, 61.

Beyond its sales growth, the firm embraced new strategies to meet the challenges of a changing environment. The Cowles brothers modernized the paper, often applying and adopting the latest technology. They ventured into radio, made use of readership studies, pioneered in the area of photojournalism, and, in the late 1920s, acquired their first airplane to facilitate statewide news coverage. In addition, following the lead of others, the brothers set up a syndicate to sell stories and cartoons, and they established a Washington news bureau.

Like a handful of other newspapers, the Register and Tribune Company became interested in the potential of radio as a mechanism for expanding the news audience and hence increasing circulation. The Register and Tribune's station, WJB (the call letters were soon changed to WGF), made its maiden broadcast in March 1922. Although the station lasted only a year-and-a-half, the firm remained interested in the medium. In 1931 it established a subsidiary, the Iowa Broadcasting Company, and purchased three Iowa radio stations: KWCR (Cedar Rapids), KSO (Clarinda), and WIAS (Ottumwa). In November of the following year, KSO was moved to Des Moines, and in 1935 KWCR was changed to KRNT (the new call letters were in honor of the parent company) and also moved to the capital.⁵⁹ This was the company's first flirtation with a communication business outside of newspapers; others were to follow in the post-World War II era.

In the late 1920s Mike Cowles employed pollster George Gallup, then a graduate student in journalism at the University of Iowa, to conduct some of the nation's first readership surveys for the *Register and Tribune*. The studies showed that the highest readership in the newspaper was tied to stories accompanied by pictures or graphics, especially if they were connected in a sequence or series. The results of Gallup's studies confirmed

59. For information on newspapers' interest in radio, see Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 3 vols. (New York, 1966), 1:33-34, 61-64, 98-99; and Emery and Emery, *Press and America*, 311-12. On the Register and Tribune's move into radio, see *Des Moines Tribune*, 10 March 1922; the Register and Tribune employee magazine, *The Spirit* (May 1972), 2-5; and Register and Tribune Radio Clipping File, Des Moines Register Library, Des Moines.

the popularity of the photographic sequences that Mike Cowles was already running in the special rotogravure (photographic) section of the Sunday paper. He subsequently greatly increased the use of photos in both the *Register* and the *Tribune*, and, as a result, circulation shot up.⁶⁰

Photojournalism, in fact, had already been given a boost in 1928 when, based on John Cowles's initial proposal, the company bought an airplane for promotional purposes, the first of eleven planes to be owned by the company. A statewide contest to name the plane produced "Good News." Besides making a number of promotional flights and putting in appearances at events such as county fairs, the plane was soon shuttling reporters and photographers to events and breaking stories in all corners of the state. It was equipped with a trap door for vertical aerial photography and a dark room to develop pictures in flight. Several years later, *Register* and *Tribune* photographer George Yates developed a special "machine gun" camera that permitted rapid exposure. The new camera made continuity or sequence pictures possible; such photographs were soon widely used in sports coverage. The plane and then the unique camera vaulted the *Register* and *Tribune* to national prominence in the early days of photojournalism.⁶¹

Sometimes copying the moves of other newspapers paid off as well. In 1922, just a year after he joined the staff of the *Register* and *Tribune*, John Cowles made an important decision. Following other dailies, such as the *Chicago Tribune*, he launched the *Register* and *Tribune* Syndicate. It was designed to sell news stories, serialized fiction and nonfiction, cartoons, and photographs to other newspapers worldwide. This division received

60. Gallup, who went on to found the Gallup Poll, was a pioneer in scientific polling techniques. See Becky Wilson Hawbaker, "George Gallup, Iowa, and the Origin of the Gallup Poll," *Palimpsest* 74 (1993), 98-113; and Robert Desmond, *Windows on the World: The Information Process in a Changing World, 1900-1920* (Iowa City, 1980), 527-28.

61. See *Des Moines Register*, 30 March 1994; William W. Waymack, "Good News," *Palimpsest* 11 (1930), 398-403; and Gardner Cowles, *Mike Looks Back*, 43-44. *Register* and *Tribune* photographer Don Ultang describes and reproduces many of his aerial photographs from the 1940s and 1950s in *Holding the Moment: Mid-America at Mid-Century* (Ames, 1991), 43-101.

nationwide attention in 1933, when it offered an adaptation of Laurence Stallings's *The First World War*, which included a moving series of photographs. From its beginnings, the syndicate proved a money-making operation.⁶²

By 1933, Mike Cowles and Stuffy Walters thought another addition was necessary. The onset of the Great Depression in 1929–1930 and the coming of the New Deal suggested that the federal government's role in people's everyday lives was likely to grow. As a result, Washington became much more important to all Americans. As Stuffy Walters noted, Iowa was "no longer being run out of the Statehouse but out of Washington."⁶³ In September 1933 the *Register* and *Tribune* created a Washington Bureau and sent city editor Richard Wilson to act as its correspondent. The *Register* explained the creation of the Washington Bureau: "In recognition of the tremendous importance of Washington news to the people of Iowa in this extraordinary period . . . the *Register* and *Tribune* have expanded their own Washington news bureau . . . to cover Washington news from the Iowa angle."⁶⁴ This explanation placed the bureau squarely in the journalistic tradition of the *Register*: providing coverage of the world for its readers through the prism of Iowans' concerns. Some of Wilson's first stories, for example, dealt with New Deal farm policies and Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace.

In the late 1930s the Cowles's business empire expanded. In 1935 the family purchased the ailing evening daily, the *Minneapolis Star*. The brothers successfully turned it around using many of the same techniques already employed in Des Moines. They bought up competing papers and built circulation by solicitation and acquisition. In a second new innovative thrust, Mike made use of his interest in photographs and his experience with the *Register*'s rotogravure section to launch *Look* magazine

62. See typescript, "The Des Moines Register and Tribune" (13 April 1949), John Cowles Papers, Drake University, Des Moines; Lee, *Daily Newspaper in America*, 594–95; and Special Report, Register and Tribune Company, 1925–1952, 17, 75.

63. Moscovitz, *Stuffy*, 50.

64. *Des Moines Register*, 19 September 1933.

in 1937.⁶⁵ These new undertakings led the brothers to divide up responsibilities; John moved to Minneapolis to run the newly acquired paper, and Mike remained in Des Moines to oversee the Register and Tribune. Later in 1945, Mike moved to New York to devote more time to *Look*, but he remained in close touch with Des Moines, visiting the operations once or twice a month.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Register and Tribune stuck with its winning formula of statewide distribution and news coverage while attempting to provide the Iowa perspective on national and international stories. In its one hundredth anniversary year, for example, the *Register* and *Tribune* combined had the largest circulation of any newspaper published in an American city the size of Des Moines or smaller. Des Moines was the fifty-third largest city in the United States, but only nine other Sunday newspapers in the country had a circulation as large or larger than the *Des Moines Sunday Register*. More than 7,500 carriers and some 400 trucks traveling more than 80,000 miles per week distributed the newspaper to all sections of the state, while news coverage was conducted by 115 editorial staff members and 300 state correspondents.⁶⁶

Although the overall strategy remained much the same, the company adopted two new techniques to reach Iowa readers. First, the *Register* began to tell the World War II experience from the perspective of Iowa soldiers. In 1943 veteran reporter Gordon Gammack was assigned to North Africa as a war correspondent to the 34th Division (which contained many troops from Iowa). As the *Register* told its readers, "Gammack . . . is on assignment in the Mediterranean theater of war, charged with reporting the activities of thousands of Iowa fighting men

65. On the creation of *Look* magazine, see *Records of the Look Years* (New York, 1973); and John Tebbel and Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America, 1741-1990* (New York, 1991), 169, 230-35.

66. See typescript, "The Des Moines Register and Tribune." The nine other cities that had Sunday newspaper circulations larger than Des Moines were New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. See also William Peterson, *The Story of Iowa*, 4 vols. (New York, 1952), 2:657. For a comparison of city size, see *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1952* (Washington, DC, 1952), 18-21.

who are engaged there." He was to seek out Iowa soldiers and tell their personal stories to the readers back home. Wes Gallagher of the Associated Press suggested that what Ernie Pyle did for a national audience—reporting the "little picture of the war by providing the G.I.s' view"—Gammack did for Iowans: he told the story of the western front through the eyes of Iowa foot soldiers. Gammack's column was so popular that he was sent to Korea and Vietnam to do the same type of reporting during the conflicts in those countries.⁶⁷

The company's second major innovation was to set itself apart from the competition by creating the Iowa Poll. In 1943 the *Register* became the first single newspaper to sponsor a statewide public opinion poll. The Iowa Poll, initiated by Mike Cowles when he returned to Des Moines after working for the Office of War Information, was originally intended as a public service for the state that would also provide the *Register* with yet another feature its competitors lacked. From the first poll in December 1943, in which Iowans reported narrowly preferring maintaining farm subsidies to increasing food prices at grocery stores, the poll revealed what Iowans were thinking about a number of important issues. Here again, the *Register* and *Tribune* focused on learning and reporting what people of the entire state thought. Besides rendering this service, the Iowa Poll (and the research department that administered it) soon proved beneficial in several other ways. In an era when few public opinion polls existed, the Iowa Poll increased the newspaper's prestige. Its existence was also a key element in an advertising campaign to convince national companies to advertise in the paper. Kenneth MacDonald, a longtime editor and later publisher of the *Register* and *Tribune*, noted, "At the time [the 1940s] this poll was unique. . . . The motivation was to advertise the *Register* as a progressive newspaper that was trying to cover the state in all ways possible, including by polls of what its readers thought." Finally, the paper's research department conducted market surveys that were used

67. *Des Moines Register*, 8 October 1943; Andrea Clardy, ed., *Gordon Gammack: Columns from Three Wars* (Ames, 1979), 3.

internally by the paper, particularly by the company's advertising department.⁶⁸

Despite its successful adaptations, problems had arisen at the Register and Tribune by the mid-1960s. Circulation had peaked by the early 1950s and had been gradually declining ever since.⁶⁹ People spent more of their free time in front of the television, leaving less time to read newspapers. Declining newspaper readership was not unique to Iowa, but the Register and Tribune's problem was compounded by Iowa's stagnant population statistics; any future prospect of boosting newspaper sales within the state appeared bleak.

In response, David Kruidenier, a grandson of Gardner Cowles who became vice-president and general manager of the Register and Tribune, opted to expand into new areas. To avoid corporate stagnation, Kruidenier pushed for the purchase of other communications firms—newspapers and radio and television stations—in growing markets beyond Iowa's borders. Not supported by his uncles or publisher MacDonald, he bided his time until he was named president and publisher in 1971. Over the next few years, his objective was to expand the firm so that ultimately 50 percent of corporate revenue would come from properties outside of Iowa.⁷⁰ Kruidenier had an acquisition plan developed, and in 1972 the company made its first purchase, the *Jackson (Tennessee) Sun*. He hired a new management team, including Michael Gartner, formerly page one editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, and attorney Gary Gerlach, a specialist in communications law. After Gartner and Gerlach came on board, several more acquisitions quickly ensued. By 1981, the Register and Tribune was a large multimedia company: it owned several weekly newspapers, two dailies (besides the *Register* and *Tribune*), two television stations, and several radio stations.

68. MacDonald is quoted in the *Des Moines Register*, 19 December 1993. For more on the Iowa Poll, see Glenn Roberts, "The Iowa Poll: Des Moines Register and Tribune" (unpublished typescript, 1947), 1–21; and Glenn Roberts, interview with author, Des Moines, 8 June 1993.

69. See Twenty-four Year Report, Des Moines Register and Tribune Company, 1940–1963, p. 77, held by David Kruidenier.

70. David Kruidenier, interview with author, Des Moines, 20 July 1992.

Although expansion appeared logical, it did not prove the savior Kruidenier and his management team had hoped. The newly acquired units were not as profitable as expected, and the acquisitions were financed through borrowing. In the 1970s the firm went from having a \$30 million cash surplus to a \$40 million debt. Unexpected rising interest rates made servicing the debt a huge burden. "In fiscal 1979, the first full year after the acquisitions, the company's interest costs soared to \$3.2 million from \$116,000 the year before and just \$9,000 in 1975. In fiscal 1981, interest payments reached \$4.4 million." Besides these problems, production costs kept spiraling upward, revenues were flat, and operating earnings fell from \$7.4 million in 1978 to \$4.1 million in 1981.⁷¹

In an attempt to turn the company's fortunes around, Kruidenier and cousin John Cowles Jr., who had taken over the reins of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune Company, discussed merging the family's properties in Des Moines with those in Minneapolis. The plans were scrapped, however, when it became clear to the management group in Des Moines that their smaller company would receive significantly fewer representatives on the merged company's board. Then, in an effort to cut costs, the Register and Tribune, like many other newspaper companies of the period, stopped production of its evening offering, the *Tribune*, in 1982. Meanwhile, a concerned minority stockholder, Shawn Kalkstein, had begun writing a series of letters to Register and Tribune shareholders that were critical of company management.⁷²

Although the merger was called off in 1982, its possibility worried Register and Tribune president Michael Gartner and general counsel Gary Gerlach. Each was concerned about maintaining local control of the paper. If the two Cowles properties were combined, certainly Gartner and possibly Gerlach would

71. *Washington Post*, 20 March 1983; Des Moines Register and Tribune Company Annual Report, 1981.

72. Shawn Kalkstein is married to a great-granddaughter of Gardner Cowles Sr. Shawn Kalkstein, interview with author, West Des Moines, 4 August 1993; Shawn Kalkstein, Letters to Shareholders, 1982-1984, in possession of author; and Minutes of Des Moines Register and Tribune Board of Directors' Meetings, 1980-1984, held by David Kruidenier.

not have jobs with the new firm. In the wake of the failed merger and in an effort to restore profitability, strategic planning took on a new urgency. More shareholders became troubled about the company's future, but there was no consensus about potential solutions. Kalkstein's critical letters suggested selling the company as one possibility, while Kruidenier apparently still thought the solution might be merger with Minneapolis. Concerned about the latter, Gartner and Gerlach put together a deal with a former employer to present to the board in late 1984. The Dow Jones Corporation would purchase half of the Register and Tribune stock, and a local group of investors, headed by Gartner and Gerlach, would buy the remaining portion.⁷³

Although the Dow Jones offer was rejected, key shareholders came to believe that selling the struggling company was a sound idea. Kruidenier felt he had no choice but to put the firm up for sale. A plan providing for an orderly bidding process was set up, and by the spring of 1985, the company was broken up and sold. The Register and Tribune joined several other prominent, once independent midwestern papers as a target of large media companies. Gannett purchased the *Register*, the company's four weekly papers in Iowa, and the *Jackson Sun* for \$205 million. This amount did not include the 14 percent stake the Register and Tribune held in Cowles Media (owner of several newspapers, including the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*), which Gannett purchased for another \$56 million. The Register and Tribune's radio and broadcast properties were sold to other media companies for approximately \$90 million. From a financial standpoint, shareholders were huge beneficiaries; stock that had traded internally for between \$15 and \$30 per share was sold for close to \$300 per share.⁷⁴

Gannett's purchase of the *Register* ended three generations of Cowles family ownership and changed the relationship of the paper to the state. One prominent shareholder saw the sale

73. Confidential Memorandum, Michael Gartner and Gary Gerlach to [Register and Tribune] Board of Directors, 10 December 1984, held by Henry T. Watts.

74. See Des Moines Register and Tribune Company, Proposed Plan of Complete Liquidation of Company, 1 July 1985, held by David Kruidenier.

as serving the interest of the owners at the expense of readers. He argued that while stockholders made a huge profit, the community lost an independent, locally owned newspaper with the mission of setting an agenda for the state.⁷⁵ Journalism professor Jean Folkerts articulated this idea of loss for local communities: "As outsiders came in to run family . . . papers, the lament was of a loss of individuality—of midwestern local values giving way to the values of a national or international media conglomerate." In fact, some longtime readers saw the *Register* under Gannett as being "less aggressive and less innovative editorially."⁷⁶

Throughout the Cowles years, the *Register* cultivated a special relationship with the people of Iowa. It was a high quality editorial product; by 1984, *Time* magazine ranked it among the nation's top ten newspapers, and by 1985, it had won twelve Pulitzer prizes. Through its delivery network, the company's two papers reached into well over 50 percent of all Iowa homes at their circulation peak in the 1950s. Even though these numbers gradually declined from that point, by the 1970s the *Sunday Register's* circulation was still over 450,000, or more than double the population of Des Moines.

This statewide scope gave the *Register* tremendous influence, leading one former employee to characterize it as "the conscience of Iowa."⁷⁷ The *Register* was often ahead of its time editorially, and it guided Iowa's public opinion toward a more progressive position than many of its midwestern neighbors. From the editorship of Harvey Ingham on, the *Register* had a liberalizing impact on the state. It pushed Iowans away from conservative isolationism and toward an internationalist position. Over the years, for example, it supported the League of Nations, the United Nations, and the Marshall Plan. When many

75. See Gary Gerlach, interview with author, Ames, 30 June 1993. For the notion that the paper set the state's agenda, see Elizabeth Ballantine, interview with author, Des Moines, 18 September 1993.

76. Jean Folkerts, "From the Heartland," in Philip Cook, Douglas Gomery, and Lawrence Lichty, eds., *The Future of News: Television — Newspapers — Wire-services — Newsmagazines* (Baltimore, 1992), 134–35.

77. Lyle Lynn, interview with author, Des Moines, 11 August 1993.

in the region embraced anticommunism, the *Register* denounced McCarthyism, spoke out against the hardline rhetoric of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and supported better relations with the Soviet Union. In 1955 editorial page editor Lauren Soth wrote an editorial—which later won a Pulitzer Prize—calling for the exchange of agricultural ideas and invited the Soviets to the farm state. The piece ultimately led to Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 visit to Iowa. The paper consistently championed civil rights, and, from the editorship of Harvey Ingham on, it was also an advocate of women's rights. The *Register* remained in the forefront of progressive causes through the 1970s, when, for example, it supported a woman's right to abortion, and, in an effort to make state and local government more accountable to the people, it began publishing salaries of public officials.

FROM ITS ORIGINS in the mid-nineteenth century as a small, typically partisan weekly to its heyday in the mid-twentieth century and its eventual decline and sale, the *Register* played an important role in both the history of American journalism and the history of Iowa. Whether innovating or merely mirroring developments in the newspaper industry, the *Register* and *Tribune's* goal of broad distribution and news coverage created a unique statewide audience. Although several metropolitan dailies had larger total circulations, no other newspaper reached into every corner of its home state as the *Register* did. The *Register* was read by all demographic groups in all Iowa counties. Its news and opinion were sought out by the state's movers and shakers, while its Iowa Poll told readers what Iowans thought about important issues.

By focusing on the Iowa angle in its news stories, the *Register* made national and international news palatable to its audience. In so doing, the paper projected an internationalist and cosmopolitan air that rejected the provincial insularity so often associated with residents of the Midwest. That the paper should educate its readers made sense to John Cowles, who once defined a good newspaper as "a university on your doorstep."⁷⁸

78. Furlong, "The Cowles Empire Expands," 71.

So it was with the *Register*: its news product was superior to most others available because it explained Iowa and the world at large to its readers.

Because it was read throughout the state, the paper provided a shared experience for Iowans and a forum for the exchange of ideas. In this manner it helped mold the Iowa experience. David Kruidenier saw the *Register's* importance from this perspective: "More than any institution, other than state government, it [the *Des Moines Register*] tied the state together."⁷⁹ Although probably an overstatement, the paper usually lived up to its self-proclaimed motto for much of the twentieth century; the *Register* was unquestionably "the newspaper Iowa depended upon."

79. David Kruidenier, interview.

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