

## PIONEER JOURNALISM IN IOWA

By John R. Adney, Miles, Iowa

*The story of pioneer journalism in Iowa forms an interesting chapter in the history of the state. The stories of early day editors who faced extreme hardships on the frontier, are accounts of courage and perseverance.*

*This paper is based on a number of articles which I wrote during the last few years; I have revised the original articles and largely re-written some of them so as to include references to additional newspapers which have been found in an account written in 1868 by an itinerant printer who was personally acquainted with many Iowa editors of his day.*

*I am indebted to Dr. William Petersen, Superintendent, The State Historical Society of Iowa, who permitted me to use information from several Historical Society publications.*

No other group of pioneers left a more lasting imprint on the written history of Iowa than the editors and publishers of frontier days. They were leaders in community affairs and were the self-appointed promoters of the social, spiritual and cultural growth of their neighborhoods. However, few men were subjected to more financial reverses and discouragement than were these frontier editors.

Of the 222 newspapers established in Iowa between 1836 and 1860, fully 118 had ceased to exist before the census of 1860 was taken. It is doubtful if any other pioneer enterprise encountered so many pitfalls.

In 1867, Ed. Wright, Secretary of State, and his deputy, W. H. Fleming, compiled an official record of journalism in Iowa. From their records, it appears that there were 143 newspapers and other periodical publications in the state. Of these, one was devoted to agriculture, two were temperance organs, one was a law journal, one was educational and 138 were political of which 27 were exponents of the Democratic faith and 111 organs of Republicanism.

In August of 1857, Dubuque had seven newspapers, six of them dailies: *Times*, *Tribune*, *Express and Herald*, *Northwest*, *Republican* and *Demokrat*, the last being a German publication. At that time Dubuque had a population of 15,000. One hundred years later, Dubuque's population had increased to 45,000 inhabitants and was served by one daily newspaper, *The Telegraph Herald*.

#### Problems of Early Newspapers

Quite often, the pioneer newspapers were forced to suspend publication for weeks and even months due to difficulties experienced in securing paper and other supplies by overland transportation and by Mississippi River steamboats. At Gutenberg, the editor of the *Clayton County Journal* explained to his subscribers on March 22, 1859, that the failure of the paper to appear was due to the non-receipt of the paper stock from Dubuque. A Marshall County editor wrote earlier, "We offer no apology for the non-appearance of our paper. We sent for paper and had a large stock at Iowa City for weeks, but the incessant rains had swept the bridges away and rendered the roads impassable so that it was impossible to get it up from the city at an earlier day."

Editors also had to contend with strikes. The scarcity of dependable printers was usually due to the fact that the printers were constantly on the move from one newspaper to another; working westward and following the ever advancing edge of the frontier. The editor of the *Dubuque Daily Times*, on Sept. 24, 1857, complained that his journeymen were dissatisfied with some changes he had made and left his employ, leaving him to get out the paper with the help of one man.

Iowa newspapers were often filled with pleas to delinquent subscribers to bring in potatoes, chickens, flour, and other produce if it were not convenient to pay cash. It was neither dishonesty or thoughtlessness that caused newspaper bills to go unpaid. The first settlers on the frontier were often hard-pressed to pay for their land and meet the ordinary expenses of living.

In 1838 the editor of the *Iowa News* at Dubuque, learned that a lyceum had chosen as its topic: Is it expedient for printers to starve to death to oblige their subscribers. The editor wrote on April 14, "We await the decision of this question

with great anxiety, not that we shall 'give up the ghost' if the affirmatives carry the day, but we wish to see the matter settled and a precedent established, as the impression seems to be gaining ground that a newspaper is an article you may pay for or not, as best suits your purpose."

The physical discomfort endured during the cold, winter months made the delivery of wood necessary if the typesetter was to continue to set up his paper. There was an abundance of wood on the frontier and many cords were exchanged for newspaper subscriptions.

In October, 1860, the editor of the *Franklin Record* at Hampton made his usual appeal for firewood from his delinquent subscribers. "Wood! Wood! Wood!" cried the editor. "If some of our many suscribers who have promised us Wood, do not respond to the call very soon, the *Record* will have to 'dry up' until a milder 'spell of weather' comes on. The atmosphere is altogether to frigid to think of 'sticking type' without a fire, and our conscience will not allow us to STEAL any more. What say you, sir, shall we have the wood? We would also state in this connection that our cow is woefully in need of a 'nubbin' of corn, or other nutritious substance, with which to sustain life, and a small quantity of milk for the 'little fellers' during the coming winter."

On Dec. 23, 1857, the editor of the *North Iowa Times* at McGregor, resorted to poetry as a method of stirring up his tardy subscribers:

It is pleasant to sit with one's wife,  
By the light of a brilliant taper,  
While one's dear companion for life,  
Looks over the family paper—  
And now and then reads a song or story,  
A marriage or death tragedy gory.  
Oh! Happy is the man who is blest,  
With a wife who can tastefully read,  
Who will give a newspaper no rest,  
Till its items have all gone to seed—  
Who exclaims now and then, as she picks up the taper  
My dear won't the printer want PAY for his paper?

The editor of a Clinton County newspaper, the *DeWitt Standard*, made an unusual plea to his subscribers in January,

1861: "We will take on subscriptions old clothes, old barrels, crockery, crates, rags, cigar stumps, old chews of tobacco, cats and dogs, old iron, pieces of glass, pigs feet, pieces of broken jars, lead pencils, spoiled meat, second hand toothbrushes and toothpicks, worn out boots and shoes, hoops, old socks, broken furniture, refused oysters, sour bread, cold buckwheat cakes, frozen potatoes, rotten apples, superannuated saur k-r-a-u-t, chips, slop buckets, post holes, cows' hoofs and horns, ashes, soap grease, old stovepipe hats, and in fact almost any old trash that can be picked up in back alleys."

During the Civil War the editor of the *Sioux City Register* determined to abandon his fight on the western frontier and return to Dubuque. Among the assets which he was happy to turn over to his successors he listed "some Patent Office reports—a few empty bottles—an antiquated, harmless pistol—a well worn pair of scissors and several fights, which we regret to say prior engagements prevent us from attending to."

#### Advertising in Early Papers

Next to delinquent subscribers, the editor was irritated by non-paying advertisers who often sought and demanded rates that were unprofitable. These were vendors of patent medicines, newspapers, and magazines who advertised on a regional or even national basis.

On Sept. 15, 1858, the Iowa Editorial Association was organized at Cedar Falls and passed the following resolutions:

Resolved: That owing to the innumerable losses occasioned by the system of credit for newspaper subscriptions . . . we will from this time forward demand payment in all cases in advance;

Resolved: That after the completion of all contracts of the kind now in force we shall publish no patent medicine advertisements for less than the full regular price . . .

Resolved: That for the publication of all legal notices, sheriff sales, &c we will charge the same prices as for other work, and that for the publication of tax sales for delinquent lands, we will demand the full price now allowed by law, which is thirty cents for each description published; and that ten lines of nonpareil, twelve lines of minion and fourteen lines of brier, shall constitute a square. . . .

Resolved: That we will no longer submit to the impositions constantly practiced upon the Western Press by eastern advertising agents in the dictation of prices and hereafter will insert no advertisement for any of them at less than 25 percent discount from our usual rates.

The average Iowa newspaper, at the time it began, devoted only about one-fourth of its columns to advertising. When the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* began publication at Iowa City on Dec. 4, 1841, it contained only two small business notices by Attorney M. Reno and Dr. H. Murray. Six months later, about one-fourth of the paper was devoted to advertising. On Feb. 11, 1846, nine of the paper's 28 columns were filled with advertising and four columns were devoted to notices by the postmaster general requesting bids to carry the mails on numerous routes that had been established in Iowa.

The *Iowa Standard* of Iowa City contained approximately the same proportion of advertising, neither paper approaching 50 percent, even though considerable advertising was done by businessmen in Cedar Rapids, Burlington, St. Louis and Cincinnati. The *DuBuque Visitor* had five of its six columns given to advertising and the bulk of this was local in character. Subsequent issues contained advertisements of merchants and professional men in Mineral Point, Galena, Peru and St. Louis. Among the prominent advertisers were E. Lockwood, Emerson & Crider, G. S. Nightingale, Quigley & Butterworth, Wheeler & Loomis, and O'Ferral & Cox. The medical profession was represented by Horatio Newhall, R. Murray and F. Andross.

The editor of the *Cedar Valley Times* of Cedar Rapids, addressed the following to the merchants and businessmen on Sept. 8, 1859: "Now is the time to advertise in order to secure the Fall trade. The *Times* being the most widely circulated paper in this portion of the State has no superior as an advertising medium. Many businessmen do not seem to fully appreciate the advantages of having their names constantly before the public in the advertising columns of the newspapers."

In March of 1865, *The State Press* of Iowa City devoted 56 percent of its space to advertising. In March of 1875, this same paper contained 57 percent advertising. Of these advertisements, 17 were for drugs, 7 for dry goods, 6 for real estate, 8 for professional services. Foodstuffs, saloons and brewries, books and magazines, each accounted for four. There were two advertisements each for furniture, undertaking firms, farm implements, livestock, banks and insurance.

Printing, barber services, tobacco and cigars, music, saddles, and jewelry, each accounted for one advertisement.

#### Slow Mail Hinders Newspapers

The difficulties encountered in mail delivery among the widely scattered population caused many subscribers to pay for undelivered newspapers. Editors experienced frequent difficulty in obtaining news because of failure of the mail to arrive. Most editors were too busy to gather local news items and as only the larger newspapers were able to retain a reporter, the editors of the smaller newspapers were often embarrassed by the scarcity of news.

"News, news, news," wailed the editor of the *Clinton Weekly Age* in October, 1893, "It's enough to give a man the blues, nobody married, and nobody dead, nobody broken an arm or a head. Nobody came to talk of the 'scrap,' no one got boosy to start any scraps; no one to run in for taking a 'horn,' nobody buried and nobody born. Oh! for a racket, a riot, a fuss! Somebody come in and kick up a muss; someone to stir up the peace laden air, somebody's comet to give us a scare. Somebody trumped within an inch of his life, someone to run off with another man's wife, someone to come in and pay up his dues, anything, anything, just so it's news."

#### Editorial Advantages

Despite the many hardships and difficulties on the Iowa frontier, there were many advantages that served to attract men to the newspaper profession. The following poem printed in the *Sioux City Eagle* on July 30, 1859, enumerates not a few of these:

#### I WISH I WAS AN EDITOR

I wish I was an Editor,  
 I really do indeed;  
 It seems to me that Editors  
 Get everything they need.  
 They get the biggest and the best,  
 Of everything that grows,  
 And get into the circusses,  
 And other kinds of shows.  
 When a mamoth cheese is cut,  
 They always get a slice  
 For saying Mrs. Smith knows how  
 To make it very nice.

The largest pumpkin, the longest beet,  
 And other garden stuff,  
 Is blown into the sanctum by  
 An editorial puff.  
 The biggest bug will speak to them,  
 No matter how they dress  
 A shabby coat is nothing if  
 You own a printing press.  
 At ladies' fairs they are most hugged  
 By pretty girls who know  
 That they will puff up everything  
 The Ladies have to show.  
 And thus they get a 'blow out' free  
 At every party feed;  
 The reason is because they write  
 And other people read.

#### Expenses of Printing

While subscribers and advertisers were of first importance to editors, other economic problems had to be considered. The investment in a press and equipment was no small item and generally two or more persons participated in the venture. In 1840, four of the newspapers in the Territory of Iowa employed 15 men and had a capital investment of \$5,700. While this sum seems trifling when compared to the costly printing equipment and buildings of today, it should be remembered that 160 acres of farm land could, at that time, be purchased for \$200.

It was only natural that each community made an effort to secure its own newspaper. A newspaper served as the best medium of attracting other settlers on the frontier, aiding both the local community in which it was printed and the surrounding region on which that local community depended for its growth. In 1836, a Pittsburgh editor expressed amazement that only 50 years had elapsed between the establishment of the first newspaper at Pittsburgh and the printing of the first paper in the Black Hawk Purchase beyond the Mississippi.

The influx of journalists into Iowa and the Upper Mississippi Valley took place at an early date. In 1837, the editor of the *Quincy Argus* observed that "It is actually astonishing to witness the number of newspapers which have been established in the far west, during the past year or two. Scarcely a town of any note, either in the interior of the country, or on the navigable waters of the State of Illinois, and Missouri,

or in the Territory of Wisconsin [Iowa], but it has its newspaper, and not one of these less than Imperial, and most of them Double Medium in size."

By 1860 there was a tendency for printing establishments in the larger cities to represent a larger investment than was necessary in 1840. The three newspapers at Davenport had a total investment of \$17,350; the three at Des Moines, \$14,500; and Burlington's three at \$12,600. Since most of these papers had the steam rotary presses and were printing daily issues, the investment per issue for the small town weeklies was considerably higher. Also, there was more variation in the investments in small towns. The *Franklin Record* (Hamp-ton) represented an investment of \$600; the *Afton Eagle* in Union County, \$1,200; and the *Republican Intelligencer* at Charles City was valued at \$3,000.

The cost of the average pioneer editor's business establishment was relatively small. *The DuBuque Visitor* was printed in a two-story log cabin, erected for a residence in 1834. The first edition of the *Bloomington Herald* was printed Oct. 27, 1840, on a primitive press in a log cabin. The *Fort Madison Patriot* began its existence in a small room above a store on Water Street. At Iowa City, the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* had no permanent location. It was usually located 'over' a shop or store.

Although the newspaper office was a humble place it rivalled the general store, postoffice, and saloon as a public meeting place. The editor of the *Oskaloosa Herald*, on June 7, 1866, offered the following criticism:

#### **Newspapers Grow**

Some people think a printing office is a public resort, making it a loafing place, talk, crack jokes, etc., in direct opposition to all rules. These things we can bear, although not always with a very good grace but we are continually annoyed by persons visiting our sanctum, and carrying off exchanges, before we have had a chance to read them, and never so much as saying 'by your leave.' Under the circumstances, we certainly think we have the best right to a first perusal, and some of the offenders may get a cross word whispered to them some day.

As the years passed the press grew in political power. Editors received postmaster appointments and other responsible positions. Money was actually paid for subscriptions and advertising, and the amount of wood, vegetables and other



produce which had been offered as payment, gradually decreased.

The newspaper offices acquired fresh paint and steam presses replaced the temperamental hand-operated machinery. One by one, the newspapers grew to startling proportions until in size, appearance and advertising they little resembled their humble predecessors.

In the yellow, brittle pages of the old newspapers the story of the creation of the Commonwealth of Iowa can be traced. The files are alive with political events; the blazing of westward trails; the initiation of cultural activities; and the controversies over such questions as slavery, politics and temperance. In the life of the Territory, the newspapers played a conspicuous part.

---

#### **NEWSPAPER DIVISION ACTIVE IN RECORDING IOWA'S HISTORY**

The Newspaper Division of the Iowa State Department of History and Archives was created in 1892 when the first Curator of the Department, Charles Aldrich, foresaw the need of preserving newspapers of Iowa. With each succeeding Curator, the Newspaper Division has made an effort to expand and improve its facilities and services to the public. Today this division receives over 40 daily Iowa papers and approximately 200 weeklies. These papers are sorted, indexed and filed within the division; they are then microfilmed for better preservation by the staff.

This division has preserved papers dating from the 1850's to the present. These papers, when properly compiled, give an accurate day by day history of Iowa, its towns and cities and its people. A card index of the newspapers as well as of events is housed and developed by this division to aid researchers, students and the general public in finding desired information.

The Newspaper Division is in the basement of the State Historical Building in Des Moines and is open to the public from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, except holidays.

## **"THE FIRE FIEND DOFFS HIS HAT:" BURLINGTON'S FIRST WATER WORKS**

**By Willard I. Toussaint**  
**Professor of History**  
**Adrian College, Michigan**

The rapid growth of American cities after the Civil War created numerous problems, the solution of which called for municipal efforts on an unprecedented scale. Cities had to supply municipal lighting on a wider scale than ever before. Problems of urban transportation also called for immediate action; as a city area expanded, increasing distances separated workers from places of employment, necessitating public transportation. It was imperative, too, that cities had adequate water for public health and fire protection.<sup>1</sup>

Charles Mason was one of the first residents of Burlington, Iowa, to recognize the need of a community water system. Prior to the Civil War, Burlington citizens obtained water from cisterns or from pumps scattered throughout the town; but by the 1870's these sources were no longer adequate.<sup>2</sup> Mason, recognizing the chance for private gain in supplying a public need, tried to persuade the city to grant him a franchise to operate a municipal water system. After he founded several water companies with this end in view, he was finally

able to get a franchise for one, and as its head he led in establishing the first city water works. Mason's business history in this connection shows some of the technical and political difficulties with which one promoter in this period had to cope in creating a public service.

Mason's promotion of a city water system in Burlington was only one of the many services he rendered his adopted city and state. A native New Yorker, he had graduated from West Point in 1829, then resigned his army commis-



**Charles  
Mason**

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.