

B. H. Shearer, Country Editor

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Traditionally the country editor has probably been one of the busiest individuals in small-town America. On a normal weekday the editor engaged in many activities: walking up and down Main Street soliciting advertising, sending out subscription notices to country customers, keeping track of receipts and expenditures, attending a luncheon meeting of the Rotary Club or the executive board of the Chamber of Commerce, rushing to report a grass fire or an auto accident, answering the telephone, attending a trial at the county seat, visiting with the callers at his office, writing up news stories, editing copy, making up the pages for the next weekly edition, reading proof, sweeping the floor and emptying the wastebaskets before going home for dinner, and then attending a school board or city council meeting in the evening.

The editor was—and still is—a community leader. He was either a member of every important committee in town or he reported its activities. He joined most civic organizations and supported such activities as the Boy Scouts. Finally, he was a town booster. This last requirement involved the editor in his most ticklish problems.

The small-town weekly newspaper tended to emphasize the positive side of life. People liked to see their names in the paper, and so country papers carried many local items of social news from the town and surrounding countryside. Births, deaths, marriages, social events, news of churches, schools, stores, clubs, lodges, gardens, athletics, and the comings and goings of home-town folks provided the copy for the country weekly. Since he knew most of the people in town, the editor often found it difficult to report on local arrests, mortgage foreclosures, bitter lawsuits, suicides, and other unpleasant occurrences. When he printed a distressing story, he risked offending someone he knew personally. If he omitted such a story, then he was sometimes accused of cowardliness.

Finances were an important consideration for the editor. Advertis-

ing constituted one of his major sources of revenue. Advertisers wanted circulation, and to get circulation a paper had to have appealing news stories, features, and pictures. Job printing, such as the printing of letterheads, circulars, posters, and the like, was another source of income. Two of the great financial fears of the editor were competition from another paper and large monetary obligations to local leaders which might constrain his editorial policy.

Perhaps the most difficult problems were mechanical ones. Printing presses and Linotypes were complex machines that often broke down a day or two before the press run. The lucky country editor was endowed with some mechanical ability. A final hazard was the risk of becoming provincial. In addition to knowing his town, the editor tried to keep abreast of the country and his times. However, the editor found compensations as well as difficulties. He had a chance to meet many people in his work and, if he was kind and understanding, he could be a great force for good in his community.

On May 1, 1909, Brainard Hayes Shearer purchased *The Columbus Gazette* in Columbus Junction, Iowa, a town in Louisa County in southeast Iowa, near the juncture of the Iowa and Cedar rivers, about fifteen miles west of the Mississippi River. He was to remain editor and publisher until his death in 1970. Mr. Shearer was born on December 15, 1881, on a farm near Ida Grove, Iowa. His parents, Jacob L. and Laura Plasterer Shearer, had come to Iowa that year from Pennsylvania. "B. H.," as he came to be known, attended school in Ida Grove and graduated from high school in 1902. During the 1903-1904 school year he went to Drake University in Des Moines, and then from 1904 until 1907 he taught school in Ida County. In 1907 he became a printer, working in various towns in South Dakota and Pennsylvania at what was often, in those days, an itinerant occupation. Then in 1909 he bought the *Gazette* from Mrs. O. I. Jamieson.¹

O. I. Jamieson, who founded the *Gazette*, had been a longtime editor in Louisa County. In 1883 he purchased *The Wapello Times*, a Democratic weekly in Wapello, Iowa, which he published until 1884. He then moved his office to Columbus Junction and changed the name of his paper to the *Louisa County Times*. In 1886 he sold the paper, and the new owner changed the name to *The Columbus Gazette*. The next year, 1887, Jamieson again bought the paper, which he continued

¹ The biographical information in this article is based upon the Brainard Hayes Shearer Papers, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa, covering the years 1901 to 1970. The Shearer Collection includes diaries, newspaper clippings, and photographs, as well as correspondence from such prominent Iowans as Edward C. Eicher, Guy M. Gillette, H. R. Cross, Clyde L. Herring, William F. Kopp, Nelson G. Kraschel, W. D. Jamieson, and Milo Reno.

to edit until his death in 1908. Jamieson had been a partisan Democrat, and his politics were inherited both by his son, William D. Jamieson (1873-1949), a Democratic U.S. Representative from Iowa (1909-1911), and by B. H. Shearer.

In 1909 there were two newspapers in Columbus Junction, the *Gazette* and *The Columbus Safeguard*. The population of the town in 1910 stood at 1,185. The *Gazette* had a circulation of 1,000 and the *Safeguard* 900. Having two papers in a small Iowa town was not uncommon in the nineteenth century. Grundy Center, Iowa, a town of about 1,300 persons in 1890, at one time had three newspapers.

After purchasing *The Columbus Gazette*, Shearer was quickly established as a leading citizen of Columbus Junction. In 1912, the year of his marriage, he was president of the board of directors of the Independent School District of Columbus Junction. He was elected to the board of education for various terms totaling more than twenty-four years. In 1913 he was one of the directors of the Columbus Chautauqua and a member of its program committee. Over the years he continued to serve on various committees promoting Chautauqua, and served as a director of the Louisa County Fair Association. After World War I Shearer was president of the Columbus Junction Chapter of the American Red Cross. In 1931 he was appointed by State Senator E. R. Hicklin to a committee to study conditions of government with respect to counties, townships, municipalities, and school districts. Governor Nelson Kraschel made him a member of the Iowa Centennial Committee, and Governor George A. Wilson appointed Shearer a member of the Louisa County Defense Council in 1941. After World War II he served for many years as treasurer of the Louisa County Chapter of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis. Perhaps his most devoted service was to the Columbus Junction Methodist Episcopal Church, where he was superintendent of the church school for more than thirty years.

One of Shearer's favorite leisure-time activities was listening to the radio. In 1926 the School of Journalism of The University of Iowa broadcast two series of lectures over radio station WSUI dealing with the community weekly newspaper. Shearer wrote to the station: "I was much interested in your discussion of the country newspaper. . . . Although our esteemed President Coolidge was on the air I waited for the morning paper to read his address while I kept the dial on WSUI."² During the 1930's Shearer was to join other Americans in listening to many radio talks, including the speeches of Father Charles E. Coughlin.

² "Journalism on the Air," *The Iowa Journalist*, 2 (April, 1926), p. 16.

In 1909 the type was set by hand for the *Gazette*, a seven-column eight-page paper with four pages printed in the office and four pages printed in Chicago. The latter were called “ready print” or “patent insides,” and many country weeklies used this method of publishing their papers. In 1918 the *Gazette* installed a slug-casting machine known as the Linograph.³ Later it was replaced by a newer model Linograph and eventually by a Linotype machine.

In 1924 Shearer purchased the mailing list of *The Columbus Safe-guard* and incorporated it with *The Columbus Gazette*. In addition to the editor, the staff of the *Gazette* consisted of a foreman in charge of the mechanical department, a girl who operated the typesetting machine, an office girl who also did the bookkeeping, and sometimes another shop assistant. Of course there were also the country correspondents who sent in the news items from the areas surrounding Columbus Junction.

In addition to publishing the *Gazette*, Shearer printed the Columbus Junction phonebooks during the 1930's and 1940's. For several years in the 1920's he also published a small church newspaper, *The Blessed Truth*, which had a world-wide circulation of about three thousand copies every month. His largest sideline, however, was publishing *The Iowa Union Farmer* every two weeks. The Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union of America, usually called the Farmers Union, was started in Texas in 1902, but it was not until the World War I years that the Iowa Farmers Union became a force in Iowa agriculture. In 1919 Shearer began to publish *The Iowa Union Farmer* in Columbus Junction.

Publishing *The Iowa Union Farmer* brought Shearer into contact with Milo Reno, who was the most prominent leader of the Iowa Farmers Union. In the 1930's Milo Reno was the leader of the farm revolt known as the Farmers Holiday movement. Reno joined the Iowa Farmers Union in 1918, and by 1921 he was president of the organization. During the 1920's Reno wrote a president's column for *The Iowa Union Farmer* and acted as a sort of editor-in-chief. Thus, Shearer was privy to the problems as well as the vision of Milo Reno.

³ Linograph machines were made by an Iowa corporation. The Linograph was devised by Hans Petersen (1872-1924), a Danish immigrant in Minneapolis, who had been working on plans for a low-cost linecasting machine since 1910. Petersen and his two brothers were induced by the Greater Iowa Association to locate their plant in Davenport, and their first machines were marketed in 1913. The simplicity of the earliest Linograph machines appealed to buyers, especially country printers such as Shearer. In 1944 the Intertype Company bought the Linograph works. The University of Iowa Library has a small collection of parts catalogs, specimen books, and advertising brochures relating to the Linograph Corporation of Davenport.

In the twenties Reno worked to build the Iowa Farmers Union into a prosperous organization, involved in cooperative enterprises such as stores, filling stations, and insurance companies. Reno had to be alert to any force which might damage the Iowa Farmers Union. In October, 1923, Wallace M. Short, mayor of Sioux City, sent an article on the Ku Klux Klan to B. H. Shearer for *The Iowa Union Farmer*. In the 1920's some rural and urban Iowans became members of the Klan and joined with that organization's hatred of Catholics, Jews, Negroes, and immigrants. Short wrote to Shearer that he thought "the promoters of the Klan are making some headway in their purpose to get the mass of the people to fighting over questions of race and creed and so destroy their unity in the battle for better conditions on the farms and in the shops."⁴ Shearer printed Short's article in the farm paper. Reno, however, saw the Klan as an issue which might split the Iowa Farmers Union. He quickly wrote to Shearer: "I was somewhat surprised that you would allow this to be injected into our paper at this time. Our policy is to absolutely ignore anything that would cause confusion among our membership. . . . There will be no further notice taken of this, unless we will be compelled to do so, because any discussion of it might lead to results that would be disastrous in our organization."⁵

Occasionally Reno communicated with Shearer about his dreams for the Farmers Union. In a letter dated July, 1928, Reno wrote about the Farmers Union Mutual Life Insurance Company: "It was not only established to write life insurance at cost, but to, if possible, form a contact with the farmers, teaching them the power of centralized wealth, and hoping, when the time comes that the food producing land in this country will be owned and operated by corporations, that we might be able to build within our own membership a great cooperative land corporation that would, at least, prevent the peonizing entirely of the American farmer."⁶

About 1928 a young man named H. R. Gross took charge of publicity and advertising for the Iowa Farmers Union. Gross had been a newspaperman for *The Muscatine Journal* and *The Burlington Gazette*, and a political reporter for the United Press. He was soon to become editor of *The Iowa Union Farmer* and legislative representative of the Farmers Union. While editor, Gross wrote a column entitled "Mustard Seed, Thistles, and Quack Grass" which could be informative, humorous, and vitriolic all at the same time. Gross remained as editor of *The*

⁴ Wallace M. Short to B. H. Shearer, October 8, 1923, B. H. Shearer Papers. All succeeding citations refer to correspondence in the Shearer Papers.

⁵ Milo Reno to B. H. Shearer, October 23, 1923.

⁶ Milo Reno to B. H. Shearer, July 17, 1928.

Iowa Union Farmer until 1935, when he went to WHO radio.

Shearer continued to publish *The Iowa Union Farmer* during the 1930's except for one brief interval. In 1935 the editorship of *The Iowa Union Farmer* and *The Farm Holiday News* (the official organ of the Farmers' Holiday Association) was held by Dale Kramer, who was later to become known as an author of books and magazine articles. Kramer decided in November, 1935, to publish in one place both of the newspapers that he edited. Consequently, in 1936, *The Ames Tribune* took over as printer of both of the papers. After the death of Milo Reno in May, 1936, Kramer went to Minnesota to edit a Farm Holiday Association publication and to serve as national secretary for that organization. By January, 1937, *The Iowa Union Farmer* was again being published by Shearer in Columbus Junction. He was to continue as publisher well into the 1940's. In addition, Shearer published *The Illinois Union Farmer* from about 1926 until 1935.

The 1930's were a busy time for B. H. Shearer in the field of politics, for, in this period, the Democratic Party came to power in Iowa. Shearer had become actively involved in Democratic politics shortly after his arrival in Columbus Junction. During the Woodrow Wilson administration he was chairman of the Louisa County Democratic Central Committee. In 1924 he was a member of the Louisa County Central Committee, secretary of the county convention in March, and a delegate to the state convention. He was also a delegate to the state convention in 1932, a year of victory for Iowa Democrats. One of the nationwide issues that year was repeal of the prohibition amendment. Although a Democrat, Shearer was a "dry." His diaries indicate that he often attended temperance meetings. Shearer's stand on temperance was similar to that of fellow Democrat Louis Murphy, who was elected U.S. Senator from Iowa in 1932. In September, 1933, Murphy wrote to Shearer: "I am sincere in my advocacy of temperance. I do not approve of prohibition but am opposed to the saloon."⁷ In a letter to a Methodist minister in November, 1932, Shearer noted that some Republicans labeled as un-Christian the Democratic position on prohibition. However, Shearer had a good political memory: "A few years ago when Senator [Smith W.] Brookhart was running as a militant dry against the wet Democrat [Daniel F.] Steck the *Gazette* supported Brookhart while many of our good Republican dry friends voted for Steck because they considered Brookhart too radical on economic issues."⁸

Although a Republican, Brookhart must have appealed both to

⁷ Louis Murphy to B. H. Shearer, September 18, 1933.

⁸ B. H. Shearer to A. W. McBlain, November 14, 1932.

Shearer and his friend Milo Reno. In a letter to Shearer written in January, 1923, Brookhart said: "When a person fights the battles of the common people he is then practically listed by big business as dangerous to the welfare of the world. As long as I am in public life it is going to be my aim to see that the farmer, laborer and soldier are given justice in the halls of Congress."⁹

With the victory of Democrat Clyde L. Herring in 1932, Shearer hoped that his newspaper would be selected for the publication of the acts of the Legislature. He wrote to Governor Herring in February, 1933: "I am not asking for any appointments or any favors but I have hopes of securing a part of this printing if I can contact the proper authorities."¹⁰ However, Shearer found that he still did not receive contracts for much legal publication.

In March, 1938, Shearer again was selected as Democratic County Chairman, a position he retained into the 1940's. E. H. Birmingham, Democratic State Chairman, wrote in a letter to Shearer: "To have a good newspaperman identified with the Democratic party, as you are, is a fortunate circumstance; to have him identified in an official capacity is even more fortunate."¹¹

The elections in November, 1938, returned the Republicans to power in Iowa under Governor George A. Wilson. Outgoing Governor Nelson Kraschel called a public meeting on December 21, 1938, for all persons interested in future Democratic success. Shearer was invited to the meeting, but Christmas week was much too busy for a country editor to be away from his office. Although he had a great interest in politics, the job of editor and publisher kept Shearer close to his newspaper office.

B. H. Shearer's later years brought him a number of awards and recognitions. In 1950 the Business and Professional Women's Club and the businessmen of Columbus Junction honored him at a community-wide appreciation dinner. At the same time he was named an "Iowa Kernel of the Tall Corn" by the Press Columnists of Iowa. Then in 1952 he was awarded the Iowa Master Editor-Publisher Award of the Iowa Press Association. On his eighty-seventh birthday the Columbus Junction United Methodist Church honored him on "B. H. Shearer Recognition Day." At the time of his death on September 1, 1970, he had had the distinction of being the editor and publisher of a weekly newspaper in Iowa under the same name and at the same location for a period of sixty years.

⁹ Smith W. Brookhart to B. H. Shearer, January 18, 1923.

¹⁰ B. H. Shearer to Clyde L. Herring, February 3, 1933.

¹¹ E. H. Birmingham to B. H. Shearer, March 22, 1938.



B. H. Shearer, October, 1912, in the office of *The Columbus Gazette* on Main Street in Columbus Junction, Iowa. The newspaper is still published from the same location.