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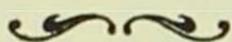
EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXX

ISSUED IN JUNE 1949

No. 6

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Collecting Iowa Dime Novels

"HELP!" The thrilling cry for aid rang out over a wild scene. An almost trackless western prairie was on fire! . . . "Help!" Again that appeal arose high and clear above the roaring of the flames. This time it reached Charley's ears, and he gazed in the direction from which the cry came. . . . He beheld a white man in the grasp of a brawny redskin. The white man was on his knees; the Indian stood over him with uplifted tomahawk. . . . "Halt!" the command pealed from Charley's lips as his rifle flew to his shoulder. . . . "Crack!" The rifle pealed forth its shrill note, . . . and the redskin fell lifeless to the ground, shot through the body by the unerring aim of the Missouri marksman.

The afternoon sun was tipping the hills on the Illinois side of the Mississippi, causing soft shadows to fall in the valleys. Across the Father of Waters the city of Keokuk drowsed in July heat. A steamboat was coming slowly upstream, laying behind it a wedge of white foam — black smoke pouring from its two stacks.

Two boys lay stretched in the grass on a sunny hillside, reading, near the sleepy old village of

Hamilton. One of them was the writer, surreptitiously digesting his first half-dime novel, *Frank Reade and His Steam Man of the Plains*, the opening paragraphs of which are quoted above. Purchased for a nickel in Keokuk, where another boy and I had been sent to get supplies for a camp, it was probably my first investment in literature of any kind!

Even though this investment was made before the turn of the century, this was not the first of the dime novels. Nor was this particular classic published by the famous Erastus Beadle. But it whetted my appetite for a field that has continued to this day.

Erastus Beadle and his brother, Irwin P., appeared on the New York scene in 1858. As Beadle & Co., the brothers specialized in the printing of dime publications such as song books, joke books, almanacs, etc. Their first dime novel, *Malaeska, The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, was published in June of 1860. Written by a woman, Ann S. Stephens, it has become the most famous and rarest of all published Beadles. Issued in a yellow pictorial wrapper, 4 by 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches, it can now be bought by collectors for around \$50.00. A good copy is not readily found.

Now, what chance has today's collector in building a collection of dime novels — especially in building a collection which has Iowa as its

locale? Pretty good, I would say. Practically all early dime novels have their scenes laid west of the Missouri River. There are, however, a few which belong to the state of Missouri and a very few to Iowa. I was able to unearth ten Iowa titles — *Old Kyle, the Trailer; Antelope Abe; The Boy Spy; Hawkeye Harry; The Boy Chief; Old Bald Head; Thornpath, the Trailer; Silent Shot, the Slayer; The Dumb Spy; and The Man Hunter* — which I have presented to the State Historical Society of Iowa. All of these titles are scarce, selling at from \$15 to \$20 apiece, depending on condition, but they can be found.

I have no estimate on the number of titles which were published during the heyday of the dime novel. However, the number must be extremely large. For example, 591 titles in the Beadle series record the exploits of Buffalo Bill. Luis P. Senarens, who wrote under the pen name of "Noname," was the author of the *Frank Reade* series for the publisher, Frank Tousey. During his writing life, from 1873 to 1903, some 1,500 dime and half-dime thrillers flowed from his pen. And Senarens was just one author. There were hundreds of others, among them Colonel Prentiss Ingraham, Edward S. Ellis, Ned Buntline, Harlan P. Halsey, George W. Patten, Oll Coomes, Captain Mayne Reid, Ed Wheeler, and Major Sam Hall (Buckskin Sam). Even Mark Twain had his fling at the

field. Beadle's *Dime Book of Fun*, No. 3 (1866), is a genuine and rare Twain "first" in book form, by virtue of the inclusion of three of his stories.

From this you may see that the total can be a large one. In fact, it is large enough to lend interest to the chase as various titles are tracked down. My own collection of dime and half-dime thrillers consists of less than 200 numbers, original issues and reprints. But it is growing. You can make the same sort of collection.

I do not think it is sophistry to argue that dime novels are literature. A bulletin of the New York Public Library issued in 1930 reads: "The Beadle books present a more accurate and vivid picture of the appearance, manner, speech, habits and methods of the pioneer Western characters than do many formal historians." That this is true I have no doubt, but it is not a complete defense of the dime novel, because it touches only the periphery of the subject. Was the influence of the dime novel on boys of 50 to 70 years ago good or bad?

I assert that the influence of dime novels was usually for good, seldom for evil. Rereading these old thrillers today will convince any thoughtful reader that there was nothing baneful about them. They were harmless, indeed, when compared with the so-called "comic" books corrupting our youth of today.

T. HENRY FOSTER