

Cowles and Ingham

Gardner Cowles, Sr. proved to be an outstanding circulation and business executive in the newspaper field. He even memorized Iowa train schedules in his unceasing campaign to provide the best possible newspaper service for every section of the state. There is little point in putting out a good newspaper, he reasoned, unless the paper reaches the subscriber without fail and in the shortest possible time.

He insisted that the *Register and Leader* should not claim more circulation than it actually had. His Chicago advertising agency left him because he would not be a party to padding circulation figures, a common practice in those days. "The more honestly a paper is conducted, the more successful it will be," he said. At his direction, the *Register* in 1909 announced it no longer would take liquor advertising. That policy still is in force. His maxim was: "Things don't just happen. Somebody makes them happen."

He gave Harvey Ingham full leeway in running the news end of the paper. Together Cowles and Ingham constituted a remarkable newspaper team. They saw the opportunity in Iowa of building a great newspaper serving a whole state much as

the metropolitan papers in the East serve the cities where they are located. But nobody could be certain what would happen when they took over the *Register and Leader* in 1903.

The two newspapers had been consolidated into a morning daily, the *Register and Leader*, in 1902 by George Roberts, publisher of the *Fort Dodge Messenger*, who had persuaded Ingham to come to Des Moines from his Algona weekly to serve as associate editor. Ingham embarked on the unknown waters of editing a large daily when he was forty-four years old. Roberts spent nearly all his time in Washington where he was director of the mint. Things did not work out well back in Des Moines and he decided to sell the paper.

A group of noted Iowans, F. L. Maytag among them, almost closed a deal with Roberts and his partner, Samuel Strauss, for the *Register and Leader*. Ingham held only a minority stock interest; had this group succeeded in buying the paper he probably would have been removed as editor.

"Uncle Harvey," as he was called in later years, sent a telegram to his banker friend, Gardner Cowles, asking him to come at once. Cowles, then forty-two, skipped church in Algona one Sunday morning and came by train to Des Moines. He and Ingham talked late into the night about the paper. Early Monday morning Cowles offered Roberts and Strauss \$300,000 for the paper. They

said "yes" before he could change his mind. The price was high in those days for a paper \$180,000 in debt and with 14,000 subscribers.

Cowles and Ingham had their work cut out for them. A large bribe was offered to Cowles in the early months of his operation of the *Register and Leader*. Though the paper was losing money, he turned it down.

Don Berry, now an Indianola, Iowa, publisher, was a reporter on the *Register and Leader* in those days. He was advised to "go slow" on a certain story because prominent people were involved and there were strong differences of opinion in Des Moines on the subject. Berry talked to Ingham about it. The editor ordered: "Write the truth and let the chips fall where they may."

Ingham had set the pattern for the newspaper in an editorial he wrote when the *Register and Leader* were consolidated in 1902. The editorial said in part: "The first and supreme purpose of everyone 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. It means that the editorial conduct must be dignified and unprejudiced, appealing, where it attempts to influence, to the judgment of its readers, seeking to instruct and enlighten, and recognizing that the

primary function of the paper in all its departments is to gather and present with fidelity to its subscribers the facts and considerations that are essential to right conclusions."

The editorial declared that the paper would support the policies of the Republican party. The party was described as being obligated to "preserve the country from experiment and alarm." "And yet [the party] must be responsive to the developments of the times," the editorial added.

Stating that "the field of the paper is Iowa," the editorial then continued:

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 in another state, with its own local constituency to serve, can possibly be. . . .

It will give the local news, it will give all the facts bearing upon any issue, but it cannot enter editorially into all the local strifes, or occupy its space with protracted discussion that is neither instructive here nor of interest outside.

And, as it cannot spend its strength in local quarrels, neither can it give its influence to the service of individuals, or its energies to factional or personal politics. It will not undertake to make or unmake the political fortunes of individuals.

This does not mean that the paper will never have a choice for a political position, but that it conceives its first responsibility to be to its readers, and that every choice will be a free one, made when the occasion arises, and not predetermined by factional alliances or considerations.

Within eight months after Cowles and Ingham took over, the paper was in the black financially. By 1906 it had a circulation of 27,514. The *Register and Leader* acquired the *Des Moines Tribune* in 1908. By 1910 the *Register and Leader* had a circulation of 35,271, and the afternoon *Tribune* distributed 16,802 copies daily. In 1921 the *Sunday Register* passed the 100,000 mark.

These circulation achievements seem low now compared with the present circulation of the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*. The *Sunday Register* circulation reached 550,000 with its centennial edition July 24, 1949. The six-months average has exceeded 515,000. The combined circulation of the daily *Register and Tribune* exceeds 360,000.

Only ten cities in the United States have a Sunday newspaper with a circulation exceeding half a million and Des Moines is one of them. The other nine are much larger than Des Moines, whose estimated population is 180,000. The nine are New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, and Detroit. What a far cry from the days in pioneer 1851 when Lampson Sherman's struggling *Fort Des Moines Gazette* had only 125 subscribers!