

Barlow Granger – Pioneer

Barlow Granger began setting type for his new newspaper one hot July day in 1849 in the village of Fort Des Moines. The air was close and sticky in his log cabin print shop, not far from the junction of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers. Soldiers stationed at the fort had used this cabin years before, but since the army post had been dismantled in 1846, the building had been deserted.

Fort Des Moines had a population of several hundred by 1849. It had "eight or nine stores, two well kept hotels, 12 or 15 lawyers, 5 or 6 doctors, and a fair supply of mechanics." Why shouldn't it also have a newspaper?

Granger decided to call his new publication the "Fort Des Moines Star." His equipment was modest, to say the least: a few boxes of type and a creaky press hauled overland from Iowa City. One type box contained a handful of fancy large letters, full of scrolls and curleyques. The printer-editor wanted to use that type for the name of the paper at the top of page one, but there were not enough letters to print the name "Fort Des Moines Star." Granger emptied the type back into the box and started over. This time he set a shorter name: THE IOWA STAR.

The change in the title of the newspaper took place in half a minute, yet it was prophetic of things to come. The publication was destined to become a newspaper of all Iowa, not of Fort Des Moines alone.

The *Star* came into being July 26, 1849, when a few hundred copies of the four-page paper were printed. Now, one hundred years later, the *Des Moines Sunday Register* has a circulation of more than half a million copies in a state of less than 700,000 families. The *Star* is the grandparent paper of the *Register*. Nowhere else in the United States is a publication so closely identified with a state as the *Register* is with Iowa.

The reasons for the strong state feeling in Iowa probably are two. First, there are no large metropolitan centers to overshadow the state, as is true in New York and Illinois for example. Then, Iowa newspapers are strongly state-conscious, and this is particularly true of the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*. From the first it has had a deep pride and interest in Iowa and in the affairs of Iowans.

In the opening issue of the *Star*, Granger announced that he would do everything in his power to advertise Iowa, "the heart of the most attractive country in the world." He wrote that Iowa had "within itself all the resources necessary to sustain a dense agricultural and commercial population."

"This favored region," he added, "has settled up more rapidly than any other . . . with an intelligent, industrious and thriving people."

The state did grow rapidly. By covered wagon, by steamboat, and, after 1854, by train, tens of thousands of families moved westward across the Mississippi to the lush prairies of the Middle West. From 1860 to 1870, Iowa gained more than 500,000 population.

The Mormon migrations were in full flow when Granger slowly ground out the first copies of his paper in Fort Des Moines. The California Gold Rush was on. As the decades rolled slowly by, newspapers came and went in Des Moines. States' rights and slavery boiled over into the bloody Civil War. The railroads spread across the expanding nation. There were bumper crops and droughts, Indians and industries, wars, inventions, conquest of disease, and longer lives for human beings.

With printer's ink and paper, men like Barlow Granger chronicled this unfolding of a modern civilization in an area that was wilderness less than two lifetimes ago. The yellowed files of the old newspapers of the prairies bring these bygone years back to life more vividly than rewritten history can ever do.

As one example, history tells us that the victory of the Union armies at Fort Donnelson in the

Civil War caused great rejoicing in Iowa. But how terse and tame is the historical report of this victory when compared with this story from the *Register* of February 26, 1862:

The news of this great success was announced to the general assembly by the presiding officer of each house about noon yesterday! The effect was like an electric shock!

Cheer after cheer went up until the very rafters seemed to feel the inspiration. Adjournment for the day was moved and carried unanimously, and then calls were made for impromptu speeches in honor of the event.

All over the city, at the hotels, in the streets, everywhere — men stopped to shake each other's hands and express the joy they entertained. All this enthusiasm was, of course, clouded by the knowledge that some of our brave Iowa boys had been in the thickest of the fight and had fallen. But there are thousands yet in the state to make good their places, should the progress of the war make it necessary.