

Some Prominent Editors

"Let us only suffer any person to tell his story, morning and evening, but for a twelvemonth, and he will become our master", wrote Edmund Burke concerning the influence of journalists on public opinion. If newspapers were powerful factors in formulating public opinion during the American and French revolutions, Iowa editors have been no less influential in our crises. Prior to the Civil War, editors were not only bitterly partisan in their politics, but they frequently became the self-appointed protagonists of a score of social, religious, and educational ideas.

At least three men among the early journalists of Iowa served their constituents faithfully and well, without making political preferment their principal object. One of these, James G. Edwards, founded the *Fort Madison Patriot*, which was the first Whig paper in Iowa. It was Edwards who suggested that residents of the new Territory adopt the cognomen "Hawk-Eyes" as suggested by David Rorer. Later he moved to Burlington where he established the Burlington "Hawk-Eye". For twelve years Edwards continued his strenuous editorial life in Burlington, dying

of cholera in 1851 before he had attained the age of fifty. Just before his death Edwards declared: "We do not say that a political editor can not be useful, as such, but we do say that he can not be as much as the one who has not the prejudice of party opposition to contend with".

Another notable pioneer journalist was Alfred Sanders who came from Ohio to Davenport in 1841 and established the *Davenport Gazette*, a weekly Whig newspaper. For more than twenty years his paper was one of the "most potential forces" in the growth of Davenport and Iowa. The size of the nine-column page was enormous — large enough to "accommodate the Mississippi River that flowed under its nameplate." Publication of a tri-weekly edition began on September 3, 1853, and the first daily appeared about a year later. Addison H. Sanders, brother of Alfred, became editor of the *Daily Davenport Gazette* in October, 1856. It is said that no newspaper in Iowa had a wider influence.

Few men have wielded greater power than John Mahin of Muscatine who entered the printers' trade in 1847. Five years later he became editor of the Muscatine "Journal", a position he held, with a few short intermissions, for fifty years. A firm, unflinching advocate of temperance, Mahin was one of the most fearless and uncompromising

foes of saloons. His house was dynamited by conspirators of the liquor interests, but such violence did not silence his criticism of the liquor scofflaws.

"RET" CLARKSON

Most prominent among Iowa editors after the Civil War were James S. Clarkson and Richard P. Clarkson. Born in Indiana, the Clarksons came to Iowa in 1855 with their father, Coker F. Clarkson. Following the war, James and his brother Richard drifted to Des Moines where they found employment on the *Iowa State Register*, Richard as a typesetter and James as a reporter. In 1870 the Clarksons with their father bought the "Register" and made it a great State paper. James S. Clarkson, or "Ret" as he was familiarly known, had a reputation for being able to write three-fourths of the paper in one evening. He wrote with a pencil, furnishing an almost interminable amount of copy.

"Ret" Clarkson attracted State-wide attention in 1872 when he bitterly attacked Senator James Harlan. This unjust criticism resulted in the election of William B. Allison to the Senate. From that time on Clarkson was in control of State politics. But there were two men whom he could not manage — Senator Allison and Governor John H. Gear. He dominated some of the lesser papers,

which allowed him to do their thinking in return for State printing, post offices, and similar favors. The legislators subscribed for many copies of the "Register" to send to their constituents at public expense. Always active in Republican campaigns, "Ret" was rewarded in 1889 with the position of First Assistant Postmaster General, in control of the appointment of thousands of postmasters. He sold his interest in the "Register" to his brother and dropped out of Iowa journalism.

GEORGE DOUGLAS PERKINS

High among the pioneer editors stands George D. Perkins who, during forty-five years, made *The Sioux City Journal* one of the best papers in the State. Though a conservative in politics, he was unusually progressive in journalism. Among the Iowa "firsts" claimed by the "Journal" are: the first perfecting press in the State, the first photo-engraving plant, the first linotype machine, the first newspaper employing a cartoonist, the first Monday morning edition, the first newspaper publishing morning and evening editions.

Perkins was a rigorous taskmaster, severe in all his requirements. He had always been obliged to work hard and he made everybody in the office work hard. He read the "Journal" carefully every morning and evening: not the slightest er-

ror escaped his vigilant eyes. He had an aversion to upper-case style in newspaper printing. Once he is said to have stalked out of his office roaring, "I want it distinctly understood that nothing is to be capitalized in this paper except God and George D. Perkins!" Nevertheless, his insistence upon high standards made the "Journal" a splendid training school for journalists.

In 1890, Perkins was elected Representative in Congress from the eleventh Iowa district. From 1891 to 1899 he spent practically all of his time in Washington but he regarded this merely as a leave of absence and was glad to get back to journalism. His experience in Washington gave him a wider knowledge of national and international problems. When he returned to his editorial desk, he wrote with unsurpassed clarity and confidence. Having earned a reputation for sound judgment, keen insight, and absolute integrity, he exerted a profound influence upon public opinion through his editorials and lay sermons.

His employees, says A. F. Allen, "cherish with pride the recollection of his eminence in statesmanship and his achievements in journalism, but they esteem him more as a friend, and the recollection most highly prized concerns their daily contact with him in the labor of making the newspaper. It was in that contact that his fellow workers not

only learned to know him, but also to respect, admire and love him."

DAVID BRANT

Still another pioneer editor was David Brant, who has been described as the "standpatter of the standpats". Contemptuous of reformers, he exposed their weaknesses mercilessly, for he was a masterly editorial writer. His approach to politics was that of a critic, not an office seeker. He was not selfish enough to make a good politician, nor for that matter, to make a good business man.

"The personal element in politics counted tremendously with my father", explained his son Irving. "He hated a trimmer or a hypocrite with all his heart, and an aristocratic manner stirred his wrath. A cold personality chilled him. The result of this was that he was more inclined to test an issue by the personality of the man involved than by impersonal consideration of the issue itself. Often, to my mind, he went wrong on issues; he seldom went wrong on men, except to praise those he liked. He had a great faculty for making friends and a keen memory of names. Once when asked for a list of voters along a Linn County highway, he recited off hand the names of every farmer on the road."

David Brant began to attend political conven-

tions in 1875. He served in the press gallery at Des Moines, representing the Cedar Rapids "Gazette", Sioux City "Tribune", Muscatine "Journal", and Chicago "Record". Next he published the Walker "News" for seven years and for five years was city editor of the Cedar Rapids "Gazette". He was elected to the Twenty-sixth General Assembly and served through the regular session and the code-revision session in 1897. Too plain spoken to please the railroad bosses, he was defeated for re-election. After editing the Clinton "Herald" for three years he bought the Iowa City "Republican" in 1901 and published it for eighteen years, until his death in 1919.

SAMUEL MERCER CLARK

Newspaper men during the three decades from 1870 to 1900 will agree that "Sam Clark", editor of the Keokuk "Gate City" for thirty years, was one of the first-magnitude stars in the galaxy of those who have glorified the editorial pages of Iowa newspapers. Some of them have publicly recorded that he was the most brilliant of them all. He wrote at a time when the editorial page was at its zenith. It was highly charged with the personality of the editor, and commanded the highest respect of the readers.

Clark made the most of his opportunity. Read-

ers of the "Gate City" would not make up their minds about any question until they had read what he had to say about it. The inexorable honesty of nature thrilled him as a boy and made him despise deception all the remainder of his life. Hours spent alone out of doors taught him to think clearly and profoundly and helped him to attain a serene philosophy.

In June, 1864, he was admitted to the bar, but it was manna to his soul when, less than a week after his admission, James B. Howell offered him the associate editorship of the "Gate City". Soon he became the editor. Able and always interested in the discussion of politics, economics, education, science, art, poetry, philosophy, and mythology, he made his page a banquet of food for the mind. He was bold, original, and independent in his thinking. Some of his editorial admirers called him the master stylist of the Iowa press. Many of his sentences were vividly beautiful. At least one young editorial writer during those years used to think that he would gladly give five years of his life to be able to think and write like Sam Clark.

ALBERT WINFIELD SWALM

Among the best known editors in Iowa a generation ago, says David C. Mott, was Albert Winfield Swalm. "For twenty years no im-

portant gathering of Iowa people seemed quite complete without the colorful figure of Al Swalm." In an interview he explained, "You see I belonged to the pre-historic period. To prove this I have only to tell you that when first I worked in a printing office down at Oskaloosa, it was part of my regular duty to mould the candles with which the office was lighted. The office couldn't afford illuminating oil in those days."

On returning from the war, Swalm secured a position as printer with the "Iowa Visitor" at Indianola. His pay at first was four dollars a week and board. "Ret" Clarkson of the Des Moines "Register" was attracted by the free, easy, and racy style of his writing, with the result that Swalm accepted Clarkson's offer of the position as city reporter on the "Register". When Clarkson advanced to the editorship of the paper, Swalm became city editor.

At the age of twenty-four, he started the Grand Junction "Head-Light" in Greene County. The town was three months old and had three hundred inhabitants. Only about one-fourth of the four-page, eight-column, hand-printed sheet was filled with advertising. A year or so later he was found working on the Jefferson "Bee".

In October, 1872, he and Miss Pauline Given of Des Moines were married. They purchased the

Fort Dodge "Messenger" in 1874 and edited it for four years. Having spent two years in Europe, they returned to Iowa, bought the Oskaloosa "Herald" in 1881, and published it until 1897 when Mr. Swalm became consul at Montevideo, Uruguay. In 1903 he was sent to the consulate at Southampton, England. Failing health led to his transfer to the consulate at Hamilton, Bermuda, in 1919. There he died three years later.

Al Swalm was a genial, cheerful man with a boyishness that clung to him until late in life. His was a picturesque personality; a little over six feet tall, slender, dark, and with straight black hair worn to his shoulders, which helped give him a peculiar appearance. He was often mistaken by strangers for an American Indian. In his newspaper career, says Mr. Mott, he was "a mingling of the editor and the politician, a brilliant paragrapher, a pungent and original writer, a strong partisan, and an intense patriot and a lovable man."

FRED J. LAZELL