

Comment by the Editor

WHAT OF THE NEWS?

The editors of Iowa wrote of politics in February, 1873. They filled their newspaper columns with long reports of legislative bickering over a new compilation of laws. Governor Carpenter's policies were praised and blamed. National politics occupied an inordinate amount of space. Speculation was rife concerning the speculation of Credit Mobilier.

Whole pages were devoted to telegraphic items of no conceivable significance to any subscriber. The price of bread in Persia fell to "six shahis the batman". Rain fell in California!

To satisfy romantic readers, the front page was filled with sweet poems and sentimental stories. Gruesome calamities in far-off places and horrible crimes nearer home were related with an air of righteous disapproval.

A column of Iowa items contained such intriguing announcements as a young lady fulfilling her promise to kiss the editor once a month for four years because Grant was elected, and the remarkable information that the original cost of Davenport was \$200. But seldom was printed a

notice of churches, schools, business, farming, or fun. The daily substance of Iowa life was sadly neglected. Personal doings were apparently rated as gossip and left for neighborly dissemination. Anything local was discounted — at least in terms of space.

The winter months of 1873 were probably crowded with lyceum meetings, lectures, plays, concerts, and balls. Famous speakers like Frederick Douglass came to Iowa. Ole Bull played in several cities; stock companies kept the theaters well filled; and literary societies stimulated good taste in literature.

Of all this evidence of cultural activity there are only fugitive references in the newspapers. If Rubinstein and his troupe played elsewhere in Iowa than Burlington, their concerts left no trace in the news. Though the musical season in Burlington was extraordinary, the weekly *Hawk-Eye* sedulously avoided the subject.

Such reticence is amazing. It suggests that the historian can not rely upon the apportionment of newspaper attention as an exact measure of contemporary social values. Editorial prejudice, reading habits, popular interests, and journalistic fashions distort the picture of the times. True perspective should be sought in further sources.

J. E. B.