

THE PALIMPSEST

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Newspapers - - Chroniclers of History

Newspapers are the richest single source of Iowa history. Within the columns of the average Iowa newspaper one can find valuable clues to the political, economic, religious, educational, social, and cultural life of Iowans from the date when the first newspaper was printed at Dubuque in 1836 down to the present.

Births, marriages, and deaths are frequently (although not regularly) recorded by the pioneer editor. The arrival of steamboats and stagecoaches, the coming of the telegraph and railroad, the construction of roads and bridges, the building of churches, schools, manufacturing plants, and homes, the advent of the telephone, the gas light, the fire department, the county fair, all are faithfully chronicled. Circuses and carnivals, theaters and lyceums, spelling bees and sleighriding parties, wolf hunts and fishing parties, these and a host of others clearly reveal the life of the people.

Prior to the Civil War the average well-established 4-page Iowa newspaper devoted about one-

half of its columns to advertising, about one-fourth of its space to filler (short stories, essays, and poems taken from other newspapers and periodicals), and the remaining one-fourth to editorials and national, state, and local news items. The latter varied considerably, depending upon whether or not a political campaign was in progress, or some other great event of national or international significance was clamoring for editorial attention.

While a good deal of this news material found in the typical pioneer newspaper came from straight reporting, some of it was highly colored, particularly when the political pot was brewing. At such times it would be necessary for the historian to view both sides of a newspaper account objectively, whether it was a description of an Iowa farm by "Maggie May" or a rejoinder by some irate farm wife. The same would be equally true in recording the political campaigns of 1860 in Iowa. One would not get a true picture of Samuel Ryan Curtis by reading only Democratic papers. Nor would one form a fair opinion of Chester C. Cole by reading the Republican papers. Somewhere in between these Republican and Democratic accounts one might find a fairly accurate appraisal of these men. Both, history later proves, were destined to become great personalities in Iowa history.

A famous Greek scholar was accustomed to say

that a single newspaper published in the age of Pericles (had that age produced any such phenomenon) would, if handed down to us, be a better index to Athenian life and manners than can now be found in any existing memorials of the Grecian civilization. This remarkable observation was made in the Census of 1860. It is still true today.

Of the 222 newspapers established in Iowa prior to 1860, only 104 remained when the census was taken that year. Partisan politics during the 1850's was an important factor in this high mortality rate. The time which most editors devoted to politics, public printing, and county seat fights diverted their attention from their writing and led them to invite capable local citizens to make contributions. The letters of "Sojourner," "Maggie May," and "Farmer's Wife" illustrate a form of writing which often was more important than the editorials. The two combined, however, are rich sources of Iowa history.

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