

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. XXXI

ISSUED IN OCTOBER 1950

No. 10

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Iowa and the Lee Papers

The story of the Lee papers is more than the history of a century of journalism in Iowa. It is the record of the growth of an idea, born in the mind of the founder of what was for many years known as the Lee Syndicate, that a newspaper should be a community institution, so operated as to be financially independent of all influences other than the good will of the people who support it.

In the day when Alfred Wilson Lee formulated that creed, the press in the smaller cities and towns was often so servilely dependent upon outside interests, banks, contending factions, and political parties, as, in the words of William Allen White, to be "beggary at the best and mendacious at the worst."

Alfred W. Lee was born on a farm in Johnson County on the outskirts of West Branch on July 8, 1858. His father was John B. Lee and his mother Elvira Branson Lee, a Hicksite Quaker. Young Alfred attended sub-freshmen classes at the University of Iowa from 1871 to 1873, and was listed

as a freshman from 1873 to 1874. In 1874 he moved to Muscatine where he was employed in the bookkeeping department of the *Muscatine Journal*. His observations of business methods on the *Journal* soon led him to a conviction which became the cornerstone of a journalistic enterprise, whose associated papers formed one of the larger and more colorful groups in the publishing business of the Middle West. It was given expression in 1899 when Lee acquired the *Davenport Times* and informed its readers:

“The *Times* will be subservient to no faction or clique, nor will it depend upon political favor or influence.

“We believe that a newspaper is a commercial enterprise and should be conducted on strictly business principles, seeking patronage solely on its merits. We pledge the best newspaper that can be published at a profit.”

It was upon this revolutionary journalistic doctrine that the Lee Syndicate was founded in Iowa. Today it embraces five flourishing Iowa papers — the *Ottumwa Courier*; the *Daily Times* and the *Democrat* in Davenport; the *Muscatine Journal*; and the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*. In addition to these it includes five papers published outside the Hawkeye State — the *Wisconsin State Journal* at Madison and the *La Crosse Tribune* in Wisconsin; the *Kewanee Star-Courier* in Illinois; the *Lincoln Star* in Nebraska; and the *Hannibal*

Courier-Post in Missouri; as well as several radio stations.

The storybook pattern of the Lee papers is a record of achievement of many men and the courage and business sagacity of several women. It is a record of loyalties, of small beginnings, of great dreams fulfilled. Sometimes the episodes recorded reach Homeric proportions.

Alfred W. Lee was the architect of the structure that bears his name. Emanuel P. Adler, who at the time of his death was president of ten companies, was the builder. It was from John Mahin, who for more than fifty years edited the *Muscatine Journal*, that Lee received the early training that inspired the philosophy which was to become the lodestar of this group of newspaper enterprises.

There were less than a dozen newspapers in newly-born Iowa when John Mahin took up the tools of his craft on the Bloomington *Herald* in 1847. Eleven years previously — on May 11, 1836 — John King had established the first newspaper in Iowa, the *Du Buque Visitor*. Montrose and Burlington had their first newspapers in 1837. James G. Edwards started the Fort Madison *Patriot* on March 24, 1838, and Andrew Logan issued Davenport's first paper — the *Iowa Sun* — on August 4, 1838. With an enthusiasm not unlike that of Lee editors for their home state and community, Andrew Logan proclaimed in his first issue: "We are for Iowa, for all Iowa, but of all

places in this territory, or the world, for the loveliest of all the cities of which we write, Davenport is beyond comparison the most beautiful."

No newspapers were started in Iowa in 1839, but two were established at Muscatine in 1840 — the *Iowa Standard* on October 23rd, and the *Bloomington Herald* on October 27th. It was on the *Herald* that young John Mahin began his apprenticeship in 1847.

Iowa editors, such as John Mahin, have played a dramatic role in Iowa history from pioneer days to the present. The frontier editor helped determine townsites, led in community affairs, wrote vigorous editorials on state and national politics, and shaped opinions and decisions on many important matters. With little more than an old font of type, a hand press, intense partisan zeal, and irrepressible confidence, these editors became the self-appointed guardians of the social, spiritual, and cultural growth of their neighborhoods. Their clarion voice was heard in every Iowa community.

Although filled with the enthusiasm and confidence of the pioneers, few men were subjected to more heartaches and financial reverses than were these courageous frontier editors. Of the 222 newspapers established in Iowa between 1836 and 1860, fully 118 had slipped out of existence before the census of 1860 was taken. It is doubtful if any pioneer enterprise encountered so many pitfalls.

Courageous and strong men like John Mahin,

when buoyed up by their idealism and high principles, left an indelible impression on their community as well as the state. Mahin's war against the liquor traffic which flourished in the river cities, led his foes to dynamite his home and those of two other prominent citizens associated with him in this crusade. But sturdy John Mahin never flinched. To him the battle had just begun. Small wonder that A. W. Lee idolized him.

The purchase of the *Ottumwa Courier* by a company of which Alfred W. Lee was president, marked the beginning of what was for many years known in the newspaper fraternity as the Lee Syndicate, although each paper was an independent corporation. The story of its growth is that of many men and women who have carried forward the heritage left them by its founder. The names of Emanuel P. Adler, James F. Powell, Lee P. Loomis, and Frank Throop loom large in such a tale. Most of all it is a record of loyalty of man to man, to ideals, and to trusts imposed in them, and the confidence which a woman placed in her husband's judgment of Emanuel P. Adler.

When A. W. Lee with his wife and daughter, Laura, sailed to England in May, 1907, the Lee Syndicate had already expanded to include the *Hannibal Courier-Post* and the *La Crosse Tribune*. The latter was so weak that had it not been taken over by the Syndicate at the time it might not have survived the year.

When word came of the sudden death of A. W. Lee at Frank Mahin's home in Nottingham, England, on July 15, 1907, those who had been most closely associated with him in the management of the properties received it with forebodings as disturbing as their grief was profound. The captain of the ship had fallen and it was for the moment rudderless in rough waters. When Mrs. Lee returned she revealed what her husband had told her in his illness: "If Adler and Powell will stay with you, you should go ahead as if nothing had happened." Adler asked, "Is that what you want to do, Mrs. Lee?" Upon her affirmative reply, he said:

"If you are certain that is what you want to do, I can assure you now and solemnly promise you that both Jim and I will stay with you as long as you live, unless you fire us in the meantime."

There was never any contract or written agreement as to the conduct of the papers. Powell died in the fulfillment of his pledge. For many years E. P. Adler, as president of the various papers, brought to the organization an application of Lee's ideals in terms of initiative and resourcefulness which carried the Syndicate to heights far beyond the founder's dreams.

For three-score years, or since Alfred W. Lee purchased the *Ottumwa Courier* in 1890, the Lee papers have been a distinctive segment of the American press. They grew up as an Iowa institu-

tion, spreading to four adjoining states. The Muscatine *Journal* is older than the state of Iowa. Three papers of the group in Iowa look back on a century of publishing. All have prospered across the years because their first loyalty was to their subscribers and their communities. The record of the Lee papers is one answer to those who doubt the sturdiness of a free press. Teamwork between the Lee newspapers and their communities carried them through crisis after crisis.

The uniqueness of the Lee papers lies not only in the fidelity to the precepts upon which the group was founded, but in the close family ties that exist within the organization. It would be difficult to find a similar organization which for sixty years has worked together without any corporate connecting ties. There is no holding company to consolidate the interests of the papers. As a matter of form, the group found it advantageous to set up a chain of command which today begins with Lee P. Loomis of Mason City as president; Philip D. Adler of Davenport, vice-president; and Walter W. White of Lincoln, Nebraska, as secretary. But the bonding cement of the "Syndicate" structure is the men and women composing the Lee newspaper family who have holdings in each other's properties and who mutually share the traditions and trust of the founder.

As a group, the Lee papers serve a considerable section of the Midwest empire: five are published

on the banks of the Mississippi; two in state capital and university cities. Collectively, the Lee papers have more than 300,000 subscribers and serve a combined population of almost a half-million. Thousands of readers are familiar with the Lee mastheads on the five Iowa newspapers.



Individually, the papers are independent in their editorial views. Two speak for the Democratic party, including the Davenport *Democrat*, the only Democratic daily newspaper in Iowa. The others roughly classify as "independent Republican," but have not hesitated to support worthy Democratic candidates on occasion in much the same manner as the New York *Times* supported Thomas E. Dewey in 1948.

RALPH J. LEYSEN