

The Press

Decorah-Posten

Two small wagons loaded with a printing press and some household belongings jogged into Decorah one day in 1868. Atop one of the wagons was the printer and his assistant, young Brynild Anundsen and his wife. Thus the Norwegian press arrived in Iowa. Trained as a printer in Norway, Anundsen first carried on his trade in Wisconsin. Then the Norwegian Synod offered him the job of printing its publications.

He brought with him a monthly paper, *Ved Arnen* (By the Fireside). Very soon, too, he began to publish a local newspaper, *Fra Fjaernt og Naer* (From Far and Near). Readers were not lacking in the settlements thereabouts, but insufficient subscribers forced him to discontinue them in 1870. His determination did not weaken, however, and in 1874 he ventured again, this time with a 4-page weekly, *Decorah-Posten*, which sold for 50 cents a year. Little did he know that he had brought into existence a paper that was to become one of the giants in the Norwegian American press.

For a decade the paper struggled for life. The growing Norwegian Synod established its own

printing office, thereby depriving Anundsen of the financial cushion on which he had relied. Instead of folding up, he took a bold step. Deciding to make the *Decorah-Posten* more than a local paper, he increased its size and scope, raised its price to \$1.10 a year. A shrewd business man, he gave new subscribers illustrated copies of the Lord's Prayer and as a sideline sold Waterbury watches which, he told readers, could be wound by "pressing the stem down on the top of a board fence and then running about two rods." By 1882 subscriptions had risen to 7,000, but Anundsen and his family were not getting fat on the meager profits. Then in 1884 he bought the manuscript of a novel, *Husmand's-Gutten* (The Cotter's Boy), written by a Norwegian American, Hans Foss, and began publishing it serially. In a few months 6,000 new names were on the subscribers' list. The *Decorah-Posten* was on its feet.

The Norwegian American press was a powerful influence during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decade or so of the twentieth. Not infrequently the editors were men of some intellectual stature. Most of the papers took a partisan stand in national politics. They were equally partisan in the intra- and inter-synodical church disputes that bedevilled Norwegian Americans. From all this the *Decorah-Posten* remained aloof. It did not enter into squabbles, either secular or ecclesiastical. A family-

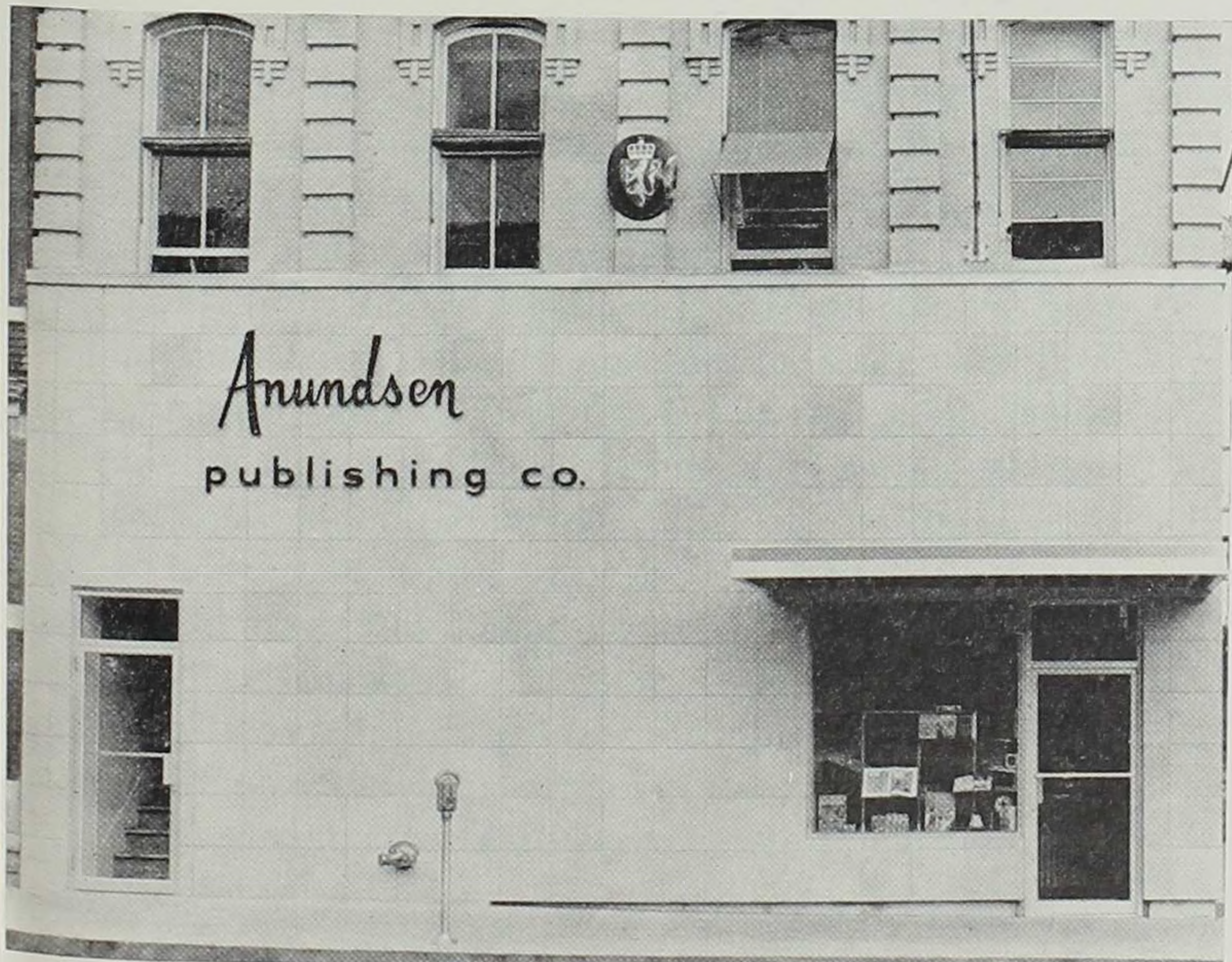
style newspaper, it appealed to all ages and was more literary than the other newspapers in the field. (After 1885 *Ved Arnen* was again published as a literary supplement.) Not only did it carry news from correspondents in America and Norway, but it encouraged readers to write letters to the paper. These letters, soon a popular feature, were chatty messages from people scattered far and wide in the Norwegian American settlements.

This homespun style is what made the *Decorah-Posten* the most widely read Norwegian paper in America and why it maintained itself long after other papers ceased publication. During the 1920's it reached its peak with 46,000 subscribers. As the older generations thinned out, subscribers decreased naturally; but the economic position of the *Posten* was so strong that it continued to flourish, purchasing in the 1930's, '40's, and '50's several of the declining papers in the Middle West. Today, with 25,000 subscribers, it is by far the largest Norwegian paper in America, the second being Brooklyn's *Nordisk Tidende* with 9,000 subscribers. Three thousand of the *Posten's* subscribers live in Norway. The *Posten* is still published by the Anundsen family, headed by B. B. Anundsen, son of the founder. A grandson, Jack Anundsen, is treasurer of the company, which, as in olden times, carries on other printing and business enterprises including a book store.



B. Anundsen

Througout its history the *Posten's* staff of editors, managers, and typesetters has been recruited from Norway for the most part, several of them serving for three to four decades in their posts. When Robert B. Bergeson retired in 1946 he had been with the paper for 46 years, starting as a bookkeeper, rising to the position of office manager, finally becoming general manager after B. Anundsen's death in 1913.



Photos courtesy Anundsen Publishing Co.

From the 1870's until the turn of the century a Luther College professor, Lyder Siewers, was editor of the paper. During the next two decades editorial matters were in the hands of Johannes B. Wist and his co-editor, Kristian Prestgard, leaders of a flourishing literary circle. Under their editorship a literary journal, *Symra*, was published from 1905 to 1914, certainly the best of its kind to appear among the Norwegians in America. In 1923 Prestgard became editor-in-chief, continuing until his death in 1946. Since that time Einar Lund has guided the editorial course of *Decorah-Posten*, retaining its conservative format and the flavor of a bygone era in its language and contents. In 1956 Arne C. Myhre, from Oslo, Norway, formerly freelance journalist and editor of a trade union paper, was named associate editor.

Other Newspapers and Periodicals

Close to fifty Norwegian serial publications, both secular and religious, have appeared in Iowa, well over half originating in Decorah. Among numerous religious periodicals, *Kirketidende*, the weekly magazine of the Norwegian Synod, edited by President Larsen of Luther College, was the most significant.

The second center of press activities was Story City. About 1890 a group of Scandinavians organized the Scandia Publishing Company with an ambitious publication program of Norwegian and Swedish materials. A Swedish newspaper, *Nya*

Verlden (New World), was moved from Minneapolis to the Story City firm. The company also published a monthly journal, *Norsk-Amerikansk Musiktidende*, and choir books. By the mid-nineties the company, however, had died.

During the same period Story City had three newspapers. L. J. Tjernagel, a member of a family that did much to advance the cultural life of the community, edited and published an excellent weekly paper, *Vor Republik* (Our Republic). Less sophisticated but very popular was Gustav Amlund's weekly, *Skolen og Hjemmet* (School and Home), which appeared from 1891 to 1896. More important than either of these was *Visergutten* (The Message Boy), started by Amlund in 1893. From a small local paper he developed it into an organ of correspondence. Thousands of immigrants and their relatives in Norway used the columns of *Visergutten* for communicating with one another. For twenty-five years Story City was this newspaper's home.

For ten years, 1887-1897, the Norwegian colony in Sioux City had a weekly newspaper, although from time to time changes in its name, owners, and politics occurred. It first appeared as the *Sioux City Tilskuer* (Spectator), published by A. M. Olmen and Company, then for a time was called *Vesterheimen* (Home in the West), and lastly the *Sioux City Tidende* (Times). For two years, 1889-1891, under the management of

O. M. Levang the paper was Democratic. Bought by John Story in 1891, the paper became Republican. After 1897 Sioux Citians no longer had a paper, for in that year the *Tidende* passed into different hands, moved to Lake Mills and became *Republikaneren* (The Republican). In 1903 it died.



Ida Hansen

Cedar Rapids, by no means a Norwegian center, nevertheless is of some importance in the story of the press because of two indomitable Norwegian-born sisters, Mrs. Ida Hansen and Miss Mina Jensen. Ida's husband, Nels Frederick Hansen, was a newspaper man who in the early 1880's published a Danish paper in Davenport. The Hansens moved to Cedar Rapids and in 1884 started an illustrated monthly family magazine, *Fra alle Lande* (From all Lands), later publishing it fortnightly. They set type in the Hansen home and had it printed by an American printer. During this time Mina Jensen learned to set type; Ida wrote a woman's column for the paper. But it did not provide a living for them, and Hansen was forced to give it up in 1888.

Left with type and time on their hands, the women launched a woman's magazine, *Kvinden og Hjemmet* (Woman and Home), for Norwegian and Danish readers. Again Ida provided the contents, while Mina set type in their home. By carriage they took their magazine to the printer, a strange sight to the men in the shop who were unaccustomed to seeing women in this business.



KVINDEN OG HJEMMET

WOMAN AND HOME
SCANDINAVIAN



EN SOMMERDAG PÅ SØEN.

AR RAPIDS,
IOWA.

MAY 1947

VOLUME LVIV.
No. 5.

Soon they set up their own printing shop. In 1893 they began a Swedish edition, *Kvinnan och Hemmet*. These two, the only women's magazines in the United States published in those languages, had 80,000 subscribers in America and Scandinavia during their most flourishing period. After Ida Hansen died, her son, Warren Hansen, carried on the publishing company founded by his father. The magazines were edited by Mrs. Ida Manville, niece of the first editor. In 1948, sixty years after *Kvinden og Hjemmet* first appeared, the magazines ceased publication.

Quantitatively, Iowa's Norwegian newspapers and periodicals are far below that of neighboring states, as is her population. Although many of these publications were fugitive in character, a few emerged to take an honored place in the history of the Norwegian press in America.

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