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A Journalist of Purpose

George Douglas Perkins was born at Holley, New York, February 29, 1840, and died at Sioux City, Iowa, February 3, 1914. Forty-five years before the later date he had founded the daily Sioux City *Journal* of which to the day of his death he was the soul and directing mind as owner, editor, and publisher. From the outset of his career as editor of the *Journal* he took his place as a marked man, to be heeded in his city, in his State, and in the Northwest. His newspaper, reflecting the genuine quality of leadership, was recognized as representative of the spirit and activities of the people who were taking possession of the Upper Missouri Valley. His death was the occasion of a demonstration of public appreciation remarkable for its unanimity and sincerity. In Iowa and in the States bordering the Missouri River west and north he occupies an honorable place among the elect of our public men

the memory of whose personalities and careers will long be cherished.

George D. Perkins was the youngest of four children of John Douglas Perkins of Rochester, New York, and Lucy Forsyth Perkins whose family resided at Albany. The father was a man of strictest moral principles and recognized ability as a lawyer: the mother was a woman of remarkable character. The Perkinses, the Forsyths, and the Douglasses, originally residents of Massachusetts and Connecticut, were of the genuine stock that made New England and had so potent an influence in fixing the type of westward moving civilization. They were of the sort who came to the fore in their communities. They had joined the movement into eastern New York following the Revolution, and in the early part of the last century they were prominent there in business, society, and the professions — substantial people. As population was hurrying to the richer lands of central and western New York, it was natural for the father, still a young man, to move on and establish himself in the neighborhood of Buffalo. His health failing he moved farther west in search of a better climate, first for a year at Indianapolis and then to Baraboo, Wisconsin, where he died prematurely in 1852.

Besides George, who was then twelve years of age, there was an older brother, still in apprenticeship to the printer's trade, and two sisters. As the family then faced the future the sum of its material

possessions, depleted by the father's long illness, consisted of a little home in a frontier county seat town and less than five dollars in ready money. But there was limitless spiritual resource. The mother was resolved to keep the family together and to see them fitted for good lives. With what heroic effort and sacrifice she struggled with the problem and won triumphantly would in detail make an appealing story which can only be cited here, but with all its implications it explains the kind of man her son became. His real education began at home.

The earliest actions of the boy disclose those mental faculties which see things as they are, and that moral quality which responds to duty. At twelve years of age he rented a plot of ground and cultivated vegetables which, outside of school hours, he peddled about town. His first ambition was to be a farmer. When fourteen years old he worked six months on a farm at \$10 a month; and at the end "he had \$60 coming to him", every dollar of which he turned into the family purse. In the meantime he had been granted two half holidays which he employed in work for his widowed mother in her garden. Not one minute did he waste, then or ever. A year later he seized the chance for apprenticeship to the printer's trade in the office of the *Baraboo Republic*, a weekly paper on which his brother was then employed and later became a partner. His pay was one dollar a week, without lodging or board. In due time he became a competent compositor and

four years later qualified as a journeyman printer, working in the same office at one dollar a day, the ruling wage then paid.

Except for the time he worked on a farm, George regularly attended the town schools until he was sixteen. As a school boy he was acquisitive, incessantly laborious, and serious far beyond the average. He continued his studies in the essential branches taught in the academies and small colleges of that day during the whole period of his apprenticeship. Especially thorough was his study of English literature and drill in English composition. History, particularly that of our own country, he explored with great zest and success. It is noteworthy that during these years he systematically disciplined himself in the principles of formal logic in the light of every available authority, persistently and rigidly applying them in practice and criticism. It is no wonder therefore that the old-time printing office became for him, as it did for Benjamin Franklin, Horace Greeley, and so many others of our celebrities, an incomparable means for the development of mental faculties, of culture, and of insight into the world of actions and ideas. He had not been long in apprenticeship before he resolved to make journalism his life work. This course of preparation which he pursued with such systematic thoroughness and relentless purpose is revelatory of the character of the boy who was so truly father to the man.

Nor can his education be justly estimated without including the cultural influence of home — of such a home as the mother of George D. Perkins made for him. She was a woman of culture, of polite manners, and high mental endowment — one of those mothers who rule by divine right from the throne of the home. The exterior of that home might not be imposing, but within there was true living and thinking; pure Queen Anne's English was spoken, good literature read, the amenities of a high social plane observed, worthy citizens and real gentlemen and ladies produced. In the intricate artificiality of our present State educational system we are forgetting the solid cultural potency of such a home as blessed the fortune of George D. Perkins. The elder brother, Henry A., with whom he was associated as partner nearly continuously until the death of the latter in 1884, was also a man of unusual ability and an accomplished editor and business man. One sister — the other died in young womanhood — Mrs. Elizabeth H. Boehmler, became a leading teacher in the Sioux City public schools and for a quarter of a century was in charge of one of the most popular departments of the *Journal*.

Becoming thus a thoroughly competent printer, coming up through the public schools with earned progressive benefit, inspired by the ideals of a heroic mother's home — with all this severe and persistent discipline, though so largely self-directed, George D. Perkins was at the threshold of inde-

pendent life an educated man, if preparedness of head and hand and right spirit for life's realities be education. He at once entered upon his newspaper career. When just twenty years of age he came to Iowa and in conjunction with his brother founded the Cedar Falls *Gazette*. For six years they made it a model among Iowa newspapers for typographical excellence, literary style, completeness of news, and business success, but in 1866 they sold this property and went to Chicago, where George D. became for three years an agent of the Northwestern Associated Press (later merged in the Associated Press), his duty being to cover the local news field of Chicago — an invaluable experience. At the same time he and his brother operated a specialty printing office of their own. Chicago was only just entering upon its marvellous destiny, but strong-willed men had already forged to the front and become famous in journalism. Contact with these men in the thick of things meant much.

It was in the spring of 1869, however, when he came to Sioux City and purchased the *Sioux City Journal*, that the wide field opened in which he was to run his notable career. True, the *Journal* was only a small four-page weekly paper issued from an old Washington hand press. Sioux City had scarcely three thousand inhabitants and the first railroad had reached the town only a year before. Within a fortnight after George D. Perkins became editor of the *Journal* the last rail was laid on the

transcontinental railroad, joining the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific lines which for five years had been building west from Omaha and east from Sacramento. Between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean lay a vast expanse of wilderness in which there were only a few mining camps, army posts, the Mormon community in Utah, and the motley settlements of those who had made the arduous trek overland to Oregon and California. Even the major part of western Iowa was virgin prairie, much of it still open under the homestead law.

But Sioux City occupied a strategic point at the confluence of the Missouri and Big Sioux rivers where the boundaries of Iowa, Nebraska, and the Dakotas met. Thence transport of supplies for soldier and Indian, for settler, trader, and fur trapper proceeded by steamboat up the Missouri River. Farmers in the rich converging valleys came there to trade. During the ensuing two decades the prodigious rush of settlers was to be carried into the Northwest by railroads built in feverish haste along those converging valleys, making Sioux City a railroad center, a market and supply depot of increasing importance as those highways were carried farther and farther west.

This expansion of our race through the Upper Missouri Valley and across the mountains was merely a continuation of the epochal movement from the eastern seaboard into the Northwest Territory acquired from Great Britain after the Revolution.

We know the kind of men and women who made that historic conquest. The authentic document transcribing upon paper what was deepest in their minds and hearts as they thrust the frontier three thousand miles westward across the continent is the immortal Ordinance of 1787 — in brief, ordaining these things: virgin but rich land for the individual's very own almost for the taking; equal division of the property of intestates; freedom of worship; the writ of habeas corpus; bail, trial by jury, and moderate fines and punishments; proportionate representation; freedom of speech; public education; inviolability of property and private contracts; most significantly, slavery forever prohibited; and finally, the right to organize speedily into commonwealths, self-governing on republican fundamentals.

George D. Perkins belonged to these people. He knew their temper. His blood was of their blood, for his own family had marched with their movement from the day it started westward. The same spirit which dominated them all the way brought him to Sioux City in his young manhood. It filled his mind when he promised in his initial utterance in the *Journal* "faithful and impartial labor in the local interests of Sioux City and that large portion of the Northwest tributary thereto."

He had to be a strong man, strong in brain and balance of judgment, devoted to his task, of perdurable energy, of courage and integrity, and competent by special skill in his profession, to grow

apace with a people who so rapidly occupied and developed their new realm and to seize and hold the place of acknowledged leadership in the all-important function of their journalism. Those were the qualities which gave form and meaning to the *Journal* from its first issue as a daily newspaper, April 19, 1870. Within a twelvemonth from his arrival in Sioux City, Mr. Perkins had assembled the machinery and organized the news service — including a substantial telegraphic report which was a formidable undertaking under the circumstances — necessary to transform a petty weekly into an ambitious daily. The unflagging industry with which he collected the news of his territory, utilizing every resource to the uttermost, immediately attracted attention. It was a herculean labor, for there were few of the facilities of to-day. Equally notable was the neatness of typography and the discrimination in arrangement and display of matter — characteristics which made the *Journal* individual and conspicuous among western newspapers and fixed it as a model.

But that which stood out most distinctly and impressively was the intellectual and moral quality of his editorship. The journalist of this age can not be a mere annalist. He deals at closest quarters with the verities of every day life — with all interests, moral and intellectual as well as material. So the *Journal* under Mr. Perkins came to be looked to trustfully, not merely as a chronicle of events, but

also for conscience and sure judgment in their interpretation. The people of the surrounding region of sixty thousand square miles and more, in northwestern Iowa, northern Nebraska, and South Dakota, found it identified with them in interest, in hope, in purpose. Those of South Dakota and northern Nebraska felt its editor to be as much their loyal and intelligent champion as those of northwest Iowa. State lines were erased by the value of his service and the catholicity of his spirit. There was need of such service. These were young and growing communities, struggling with the difficulties of pioneer life and confronted with all the questions which rise up confusedly when governmental and institutional arrangements must be forthwith improvised and adjusted.

Illustration must perforce be limited here to two instances — Mr. Perkins's advocacy of sound money and government control of railroads, on both of which questions grave political agitations arose in various successive phases through three decades in the West. The rush for cheap land had of course been impulsive and precipitous. Tens of thousands had swarmed upon the land ill provided for the emergencies inevitable in pioneer conditions. The Civil War had left the country with a depreciated currency and other abnormal conditions, leavening all business with the poison of speculation. The unescapable reaction gripped western settlers with special severity. They had to borrow, often at high

rates, for part of the land price, for improvements thereon, and sometimes for maintenance. Prices fell, crops would fail, and the people demanded more paper money. Popular discontent in such distress always cries out for relief by legislative nostrum — for quick relief where quick relief by any means is inherently impossible.

Against all of the passionate demonstrations Mr. Perkins in his editorial point of vantage stood immovably for sound financial policy. The series of editorial discussions, logical, thorough in elucidation of basic economic principle, instinct with sincerity, and calm in tone as all his utterances were, would if collected make a library of interesting and instructive matter. To him more than to any other one man was due the restraint which prevented incalculable damage. This salutary agency was universally recognized at home. It commanded attention and respect throughout the country, giving the *Journal* a distinctive national reputation, no less for the moral courage than for the mental force behind it.

It is not easy for us to-day to sense the seriousness of the threat embodied in those formidable popular movements culminating at length in the crusade led by William Jennings Bryan in 1896. In the decade after 1875 the victims of hard times, under the energetic leadership of James B. Weaver, threatened to carry even Iowa off its feet. A large part of the Democratic party, yielding to tempta-

tion, federated with the discontented elements. Timorous and demagogic counsels beguiled the Republican party into enactment of vicious monetary laws, and the utter financial and industrial collapse of the country was in fact ultimately prevented largely by the manhood and patriotism of President Grover Cleveland in bringing the long fought question to direct issue and summary settlement. A grave danger of the situation lurked in the circumstance that the West and the Northwest so nearly held the balance of power. From beginning to end Mr. Perkins, both through his great newspaper and through his personal influence in his party, was conspicuous and effective in advocacy of sound principles.

Perhaps even more potent was his leadership for public control of the railroads at a time when the chief newspapers of Iowa were in opposition. Mr. Perkins had joined the movement in the early seventies which eventuated in the famous "Granger laws" to regulate railroad rates. The struggle came to a climax during the administration of Governor William Larrabee. Correspondence covering several years is extant in which the Governor reiterates the strongest expressions of gratitude for the loyalty and efficacy of the support of the *Journal* throughout. The Granger movement by reason of its radicalism was abortive, so far as its immediate concrete aims were concerned, in spite of enlightened efforts to guide it into a practicable course.

But the principle of rate regulation was sound and Mr. Perkins went straight forward with undiminished zeal and force in the great effort to abolish, by State and national control, rebates, excessive and unjustly discriminatory rates, and like abuses of transportation corporation absolutism — an all-important reform which it took twenty years of strenuous struggle to achieve.

Throughout that period his paper stood apart as the one great Iowa daily to champion this cause and its influence was contemporaneously far-reaching on public opinion in the younger States to the west. It was noted to his honor that he maintained his convictions of public duty in the face of the adverse sentiment of his own home community. The business of Sioux City as a jobbing and distributing center was adjusted to the rebate system. Its commercial classes saw their own interest in more, not in less, rebate favoritism in competition with rival cities. But the powerful forces identified with the existing system failed with all this leverage to move him from the line marked out by his honest conviction and progressive spirit. It is one of the ironies of politics, one however which is not rare, that after the main battle had been won so many public men who, while the battle was on, fought him inch by inch, in the open or by stealth, should appear, their eyes in a fine frenzy rolling, their voices sonorous, as the "progressive" champions of the rights of the common people.

These instances are typical of his attitude toward all public and political concerns. The editor was the honest man, the dutiful citizen, to whom life had a real and serious, not a merely academic meaning, to whom government was business and not "a game". It has been seen how in his case, and inevitably in his epoch, journalism overlapped the field of politics. This was not because of any personal hankering for political preferment, for his life, by preference and set purpose, was devoted to journalism as his paramount work. In those unofficial services which in democracies as in all other forms of government constitute its most important though not its most obtrusive part, his prestige as a great editor, his sure judgment and constructive faculty made him pervasively influential. It was no accident that he early in his career came to be so relied upon for the enlightening suggestion, for the solving plan, for the conclusive summing up in all those common concerns on which men confer and coalesce. He was punctual to meet all such requirements in his own community, where nothing of importance was decided without consulting him. For a full third of a century he was chosen regularly a delegate to the State conventions of his party and was invariably called to serve in important places, many times on the resolutions committee in which capacity he often drafted the platform or its most important planks. He was among those few of approved discretion whose counsel was taken in the

preliminaries to important decisions. He was five times a delegate to Republican national conventions — in 1876, 1880, 1888, 1896, and 1912. His part in all these and like functions was not merely formal; he was among those, and heeded by them, to whom it falls to make the final analysis of situations and bring decision to the right point. In the Chicago convention of 1888, when William B. Allison missed the Presidency by a fraction of a hair's breadth, Mr. Perkins was a confidential medium of conference.

The public character that as an ideal inspired his whole career in journalism and politics was Abraham Lincoln. And that ideal was not the product of the mischievous mythology which later grew up around that great man. It was espoused in youth and young manhood during the time when the real Lincoln was actually winning leadership, and later when he had to pass painfully through the supreme tests which that leadership brought to him in a great national crisis, when he was calumniated as no other President has been, by abolition radicalism on one hand and by pro-slavery radicalism on the other, both reckless of national unity. It was the sagacity and high moral purpose of Lincoln, his honesty, patience, modesty, and tenacity in the main point that commanded the homage of the young editor — Lincoln, the perfect conservative, with strength and will and skill to blend the heritage of good with progressive betterment. The influence of this ideal,

cherished through life, is apparent in every detail of the editor's career. It must indeed be allowed that he lacked the aptitudes that made Lincoln one of the most skillful politicians in our history, but that Lincoln ideal unifies the activities of Mr. Perkins in journalism and in politics. It bares the secret of the power that lifted him to eminence and during a long lifetime so widely affected men's minds and actions.

Journalism was his real vocation. To hold political office was incidental — how incidental few of his contemporaries fully realized. The daily *Journal* was only fairly established when in 1873 he was, without himself lifting a hand, elected a member of the State Senate. He was not an applicant when he was appointed State Commissioner of Immigration by Governor John H. Gear in 1880, nor when President Chester A. Arthur appointed him United States Marshal for the Northern Judicial District of Iowa. He was chosen because it was deemed desirable to select a man other than the actual contestants for the office.

The nomination of Mr. Perkins for Congress in 1890 was wholly unexpected. He had not been a candidate and had reluctantly consented at the last moment to permit his name to go before the convention at the urgency of friends — an unwise insistence on their part and ill advised yielding on his part, from the standpoint of his personal political interest. The real conditions in and back of the

convention rendered almost certain the renomination of Isaac S. Struble of LeMars, then serving his fourth term as Representative of the Eleventh Congressional District. With Perkins not a candidate, Struble's nomination would have been a foregone conclusion. How far the thought of being a candidate had been from Mr. Perkins's mind is shown by the fact that he had been a member of the committee, the other members all being his intimate friends, which selected the Woodbury County delegates to the Congressional convention, and four of the delegates so selected actually were holding office by Mr. Struble's appointment. Three of them voted steadily for their patron, and one never could be persuaded to vote for Mr. Perkins, even in the crisis of the contest. At last, after the struggle had consumed a whole day, an agreement among the delegates opposed to Mr. Struble was reached which was effective to give Mr. Perkins one vote more than the forty-nine required to nominate. The powerful element of Struble's following, however, remained in a large part unreconciled and was the main cause of Mr. Perkins's defeat at the end of his fourth term.

The service of Representative Perkins in Congress, as in the State Senate, during a period altogether of twelve years, was notable for the same characteristics of sincerity and ability that distinguished him as an editor. One sample only of his work in the State Senate need be cited here — the

feat of securing a special act authorizing the bonding of the heavy floating debt of a number of northwestern counties. Perkins accomplished this by sheer power of logic, by persistent urgency of the truth and necessity of the case in the face of an overwhelming original adverse majority in both houses led by Senator Larrabee, then and long justly the most influential man in the legislature. In the end he won the assent of Senator Larrabee himself and a sufficient majority to pass the measure which proved to be of great importance in the progress of northwestern Iowa. At Washington he was the same man merely transferred to the national Congress, adequate to its responsibilities, indefatigable, thorough, and so acquitting himself as to be relied upon there also for support and counsel.

He was an effective public speaker. His spoken, like his written word, was the purest English, terse, pregnant. As his own conclusions were reached by deliberation, so he addressed himself to the reason of his hearers and readers. Not a stentorian orator, he spoke in good voice with power of emphasis. His discussions were luminous and logical, pointed by a ready wit, always impressive by sincerity and solidity of substance. He was averse to the theatrical and the sensational. It is impossible to imagine him laboriously confectioning metaphors and polishing epigrams for mere rhetorical display in a legislative hall or other forum where men were met for real business. Reason and conscience were the lights

which guided him, and his way in private and in public was to hold up those lights to other men.

The power of George D. Perkins was the power of character, the influence of the strong-minded, true-hearted man of whom other men know that he will never do or say a thing unless he believes it to be true. He had the vision to see and the force within him to open the door of opportunity in a wide theater of the Northwest during an era of unrivalled human interest. In journalism he rose to a high place of leadership in his own State and in the West. There and in a still broader field he won his way by worth to permanent public approval and confidence in the not overcrowded ranks of those strong men who by right and by necessity always have constituted, and always will constitute, the power behind the throne greater than the throne itself.

E. P. HEIZER