

HENRY WALLACE

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Iowa Homestead

There were two rather unusual things about the first of Iowa's three most important farm journals: it had its origin in Wisconsin; and its founder was one of the few pioneer experimenter-editors who conducted their own little experiment stations and wrote up the results of their investigations. Much that Mark Miller wrote for his farm journal was the result of research in his own back yard.

Miller was born on a New Hampshire farm. There he followed the usual farm routine until he was eighteen years old, when he became interested in the printing trade. Before moving to Wisconsin he had published papers in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. In 1855 at Racine, Mark Miller, bookseller, publisher, and experimental agriculturalist, established the farm journal which had the unwieldy title of the *Wisconsin and Iowa Farmer and Northwestern Cultivator*, forerunner of *The Iowa Homestead*,

which for more than seventy years was a leading influence in Iowa and midwestern education.

After a short time at Racine, Miller decided that Madison would be a better place for publication and moved the plant and paper there, from whence it was issued in monthly pamphlet form. Later, in 1856, realizing that there was a heavy tide of emigration from eastern States, Miller decided that Iowa was a better field and moved his plant again, this time to Dubuque where he re-christened the paper the *Northwestern Farmer and Horticultural Journal*. The paper was issued weekly from Dubuque until 1861. As Iowa seemed to be the heart of the new western agricultural region Miller decided that the State capital was the logical location for the publication of his farm journal. Late in 1861 he moved his equipment overland by horse and wagon to Des Moines and established an office in the basement of a building on the site of the old Kirkwood Hotel.

In January, 1862, appeared the first issue of *The Iowa Homestead and Weekly Northwestern Farmer*. That Miller intended the paper to be devoted to Iowa is indicated by an editorial comment in which he said: "It is generally conceded that Iowa needs and will have a paper devoted to farming and horticultural interests within her borders, and that shall be adapted to her interests."

During the first year of its founding the *Homestead* urged better grades of wheat, eradication of

Canada thistles, drainage, and irrigation. As early as January, 1863, the editor was emphasizing and upholding agricultural schools. In an article, "Agricultural Schools and Agricultural Journals", he emphasized the need and value of agricultural journals and agricultural colleges in elevating agriculture to the same plane that was occupied by the legal, divine, and medical professions. "There are no institutions more important to an agricultural people", the article stated, "than agricultural schools and colleges."

In 1863 the paper passed into the hands of H. W. Pettitt, as business manager, but Miller continued as agricultural and horticultural editor. When Pettitt died in the summer of 1864 the heirs sold a half interest to Frank Palmer, who had recently sold the *Iowa State Register*. In 1869 Palmer sold his interest to Dr. Sprague and William Duane Wilson, who became editor and publisher. J. M. Snyder, a son-in-law of Wilson, was also admitted to the firm.

During this year the paper published articles on steam plowing and purebred live stock, and urged farmers to form mutual organizations for improvement. General Wilson devoted his energy to organizing the Grangers throughout the State, a movement which was then in full swing.

Sprague, Wilson, and Snyder kept the paper until May, 1872, when they sold out to Governor B. F. Gue, who invested \$5000 for the purchase of a new press and other necessary equipment and material.

In December of that year, Governor Gue, then one of the leading Republicans in Iowa, was appointed pension agent, and resold the paper to Dr. Sprague and General Wilson.

For a time the paper was published under the name, *The Western Farm Journal*, shriveling meanwhile until it was only a small leaflet seven by nine inches in size. In 1880 Governor Gue re-purchased the journal and plant for \$1500, the paper then having a circulation of not more than four hundred copies. Having decided to devote his life to publishing, Gue improved and enlarged the plant. He revived the former title of "Homestead". As an inducement for subscriptions he prepared a "Farmers Manual", which he issued as a premium. This manual contained a varied selection of agricultural information. Indicative of the vigor with which Governor Gue revived the paper were the five thousand new subscribers who were added within a year. Three years after he had regained control of the property, Gue estimated its value at \$25,000.

Changes in ownership and management during the next few years tended to reverse the fortunes of the journal. In 1883, J. H. Duffus, then publisher of the *Daily Iowa Capital*, bought the *Homestead* and chose as editor-in-chief, Henry Wallace, a man who was to become one of Iowa's most colorful and influential agricultural journalists. A short time before, when B. F. Gue was editor, Wallace relates, he was invited to the home of C. F. Clarkson, publisher

of the *Iowa State Register*, where an Agricultural Editors' Association was formed, and plans were made for the formation of the Farmer's Protective Association, which he says successfully routed the barbed wire trust from Iowa.

"Uncle Henry" Wallace had been a United Presbyterian minister for twenty-five years, but broken health forced him to give up his chosen profession. After he had regained his health the old preaching instinct reasserted itself, but this time it was to preach the gospel of better agriculture, first in the Winterset *Madisonian* at the request of its editor, later in his own paper, the Winterset *Chronicle*.

Wallace was appointed editor of the *Homestead* without being consulted. Duffus, the new publisher, wrote Wallace: "I have bought all the stock of the *Homestead* and have elected you editor. Send on your copy." Wallace, supposing that his editorship was only a temporary matter, sent in what he thought was suitable editorial matter for the *Homestead*. After two or three weeks he decided to go to Des Moines to find out whether or not the appointment was temporary. Here Duffus and Wallace agreed on a salary of five hundred dollars a year. Under Wallace's editorship the paper flourished. Duffus, thus encouraged with the success of one enterprise, went deeply into debt to buy the Des Moines *Capital*, which turned out to be such a bad investment that he finally had to turn over half of his *Homestead* stock, and later sold the paper.

It was in the winter of 1884-1885 that J. L. Brown, then Auditor of State, invited James M. Pierce to come to Des Moines and look over the *Homestead* plant with a prospect of buying. The account of his father's assumption of control of the *Homestead* is given by Dante M. Pierce, who eventually succeeded his father as publisher of the *Homestead*. "At that time my father was owner and publisher of three country newspapers in southern Iowa and northern Missouri. . . . These three papers were the Hopkins (Missouri) *Journal*, the Taylor County *Republican*, of Bedford, Iowa, and the Osceola (Iowa) *Sentinel*.

"Despite the condition in which he found the property, my father became imbued with the belief that the *Homestead* could be revived and could be made of invaluable service to Iowa farmers. Accordingly, he invested every penny he had in the property, using his credit to the limit also." Brown was associated with Pierce in the enterprise.

Pierce had asked Wallace if he would continue his services to the paper, and the remuneration was discussed. "Uncle Henry" Wallace relates that before stating his salary requirements he asked Pierce how much he had paid for the *Homestead*. When Pierce replied, "twenty thousand dollars", Wallace said, "That's eight or ten thousand too much. You can't afford to pay very much salary under those circumstances; so I will continue to do the editing at \$10 a week; but in case you make it a success I shall

want the privilege of buying stock when the time comes.”

Dante Pierce tells the story of his father's hard struggle to revive the *Homestead* after the purchase in 1885. “The property was greatly run down. The paper had been conducted by various men, in various places, under various names; yet through it all, in all these vicissitudes, ran the warp and woof of service to the farmers of Iowa and adjoining states.

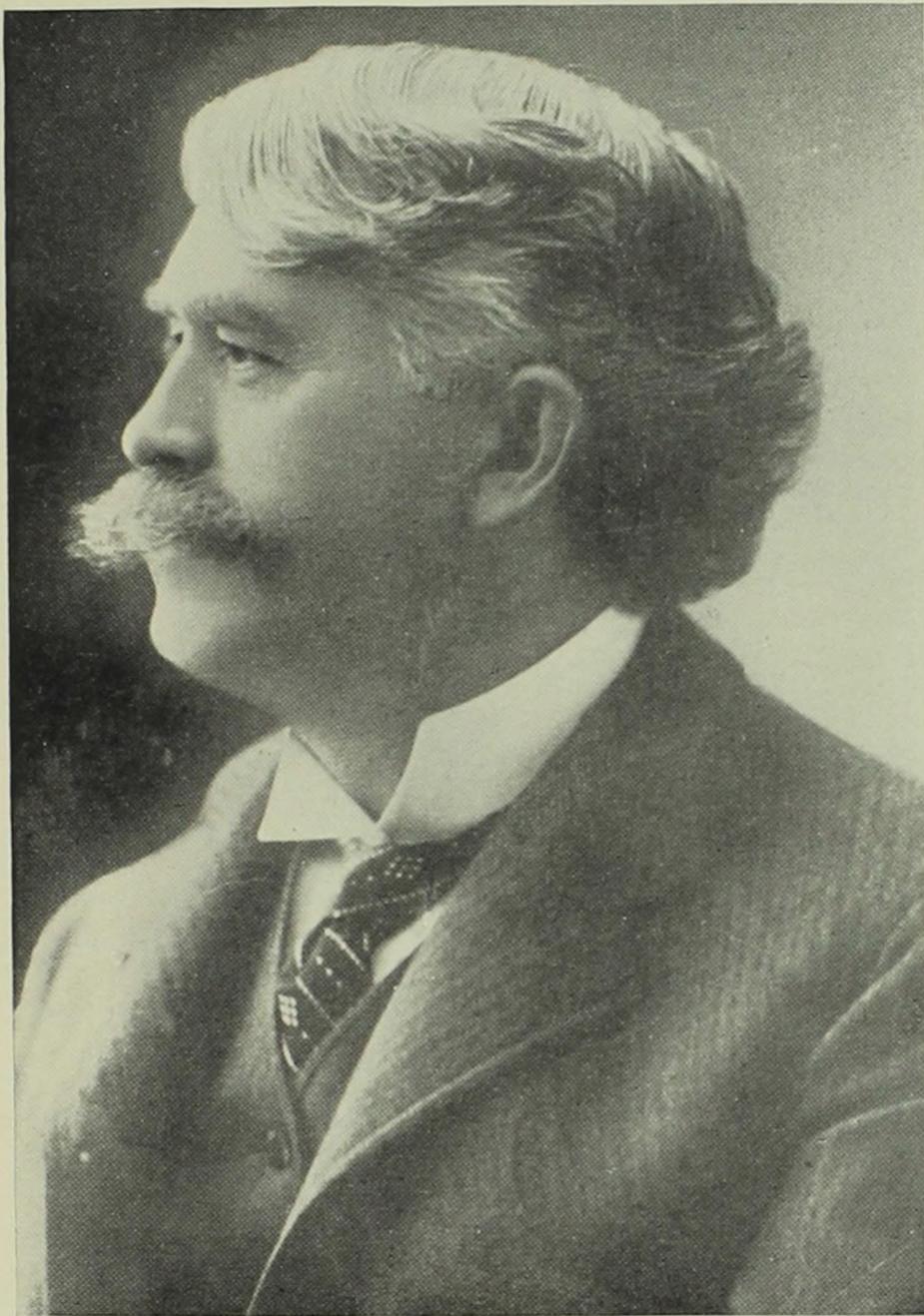
“There was little that was visible to the naked eye of the casual onlooker in *The Iowa Homestead* of March 23, 1885. . . . The type was set in the office of one of the daily newspapers of Des Moines, the paper was printed there. The condition of the finances of the new owner did not admit of the ownership of a desk, a safe or even the usual office furniture of a printing plant. The purchase price went for the ‘good will’.

“For the first few years my father did all manner of labor. He assisted in preparing much of the ‘copy’, writing the words out slowly (the ‘hunt and peck’ system it is facetiously called now) on an old decrepit typewriter. Afterwards, he set the ‘copy’ up in type, by hand. . . . At night he kept the books. When the time came to go to press, my father fed the papers through it and oftentimes ran the folding machine. When this was done, it was no unusual thing for him to mail the entire issue of the paper himself, unaided. . . . I can remember my father (he was a large man, towering six feet two

inches) kissing my mother goodbye in the early morning, to work all day and often well into the night, then to come home and tell the family of the day's struggle to make the paper bill, the weekly pay roll. . . . They must have been hard and, often bitter days for him, but he was cheerful and full of service to others always."

For ten years the *Homestead* was under the leadership of Pierce and Wallace, with Pierce looking after the business and Wallace doing the editorial work. During this time Wallace bought stock in the company until he owned approximately one-third interest. Wallace had a comparatively free reign with the editorial policies of the paper for a number of years. He took a particularly active interest in getting sound agricultural courses started at Iowa State College. When offered a professorship himself, he declined and helped to get James Wilson for the position.

For several years the *Homestead* prospered, and the company acquired the *Wisconsin Farmer* and the *Live Stock Indicator*. Everything seemed bright, until the coöperative creamery controversy began to cause a rift among the partners. Along about 1890 coöperative creameries were being established in many communities, and the *Homestead* received many inquiries regarding the advisability of starting more. After investigating the matter, Wallace became convinced that many of the coöperative projects were being promoted by unscrupulous sales-



JAMES MELVILLE PIERCE

men who had creamery equipment to sell, and that these salesmen were promoting coöperatives that never could succeed. Wallace then wrote a strong article exposing and condemning these practices, which brought a sharp disagreement with Pierce, who, according to Wallace, contended that he was hurting the advertisers in the *Homestead*. Wallace was finally forced to modify his editorial policy.

In 1894, while Wallace was in Europe for his health's sake, there was considerable discussion about a proposed increase in freight rates. From a chance conversation he learned that, while Iowa newspapers were protesting against the increase, the silence of the *Homestead* was being considered an asset by the railroad officials. Upon his return to the United States, Wallace proposed to take up the cudgels to fight the proposed increase, but his partners would not permit it. Rankled by the restriction, Wallace realized that it was time for him to "get out", but he decided to wait until he was fired — as he was in 1895, to become editor of the paper which for years was a powerful rival to the *Homestead* and in 1929 absorbed it.

Special "Farmers' Institute" issues of the *Homestead* were inaugurated in 1896 and were run monthly for several years as supplements to the regular issues. These special issues of the *Homestead* contained exclusively articles on farm problems written by practical farmers. As many as a hundred to a hundred and fifty farmers participated

in these open forum discussions through the medium of the *Homestead*. Later the special issue was abandoned and the "Farmers' Institute" was made a weekly department.

In 1913 James M. Pierce began giving his personal opinions on current topics in the *Homestead*, under the title, "Publisher's Views on Topics of the Times", which, although understood not to have been written by Mr. Pierce personally, probably represented his views. This department of the paper, a rather striking revival of personal journalism, soon became one of the most prominent and widely read parts of the paper. Within a few months after it was started the department was given the most prominent position in the front section. Here the publisher championed the causes of the farmer which he deemed worthy of support, and gave his views on political, social, and economic questions. One of the first comments appearing in this department was a commendation of President Wilson's Mexican policy, a position which won praise from many Iowa readers.

During the World War, in his "Publisher's Views", Pierce favored prohibition, opposed drafting farmers, favored increasing crop production, favored government ownership of railroads, and urged farmers to buy Liberty bonds to support the war. Through the war years, however, he had the courage to stand fast against the war-time hysteria which affected so many Americans. Opposing as he

did the drafting of farmers, he pointed out many inconsistencies and injustices of the local draft boards and, while urging farmers to buy Liberty bonds, he continually decried the high-pressure methods used occasionally to sell bonds to farmers. At a time when other editors were "falling in line" with atrocity stories intended to stir up the populace with hatred of Germans, Pierce attempted to portray the fundamental human qualities of the Germans, and to show how German people were just as kind and warm natured as those with whom they fought. When a cry went up that Bremer County was a hotbed of pro-Germanism, the *Homestead* pointed out that Bremer County showed the largest per capita enlistments and purchase of Liberty bonds in the State.

In 1920, Pierce, through his personal department, began the fight for the nomination of Smith W. Brookhart for United States Senator in preference to Senator A. B. Cummins. Irked by Cummins's gradual withdrawal from the liberal ranks, his growing conservatism, and particularly his part in framing the Transportation Act of 1920, Pierce vigorously championed Brookhart as the farmers' candidate for United States Senator. When Brookhart failed to get the nomination in 1920, Pierce warned that it was but the beginning of the fight. Two years later Brookhart was nominated in the June primaries, and Pierce won a victory, although he had not lived to see it. James M. Pierce died on No-

vember 1, 1920; and Dante M. Pierce, his son, succeeded him as publisher of the *Homestead*.

James M. Pierce, who for almost forty years controlled the destinies of *The Iowa Homestead*, had begun his life work as the chore boy on a country-town newspaper. In due time, his son Dante relates, he bought the paper, paying for it with four steer calves which he had fed through the winter. During much of the time that the *Homestead* occupied the old building at Third and Locust streets in Des Moines, the elder Pierce was publishing also the *Wisconsin Farmer*, the *Farmer and Stockman*, the *Farm Gazette*, and the *Homemaker*, in addition to conducting the largest job printing plant in Iowa. After twenty-two years in the four-story home at Third and Locust streets, more space was needed, and in 1913 a fire necessitated rebuilding plans. The present seven-story home of *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead* is the result.

Men in the *Homestead* printing plant recount how the elder Pierce had a driving energy which kept the wheels of his large printing plant humming. He was what men know as a shirt-sleeve executive — one who, when emergency demanded, could take off his coat and go back into the shop to work side by side with his employees. These stories are still tradition among the men who used to work for and with him.

Dante Pierce continued the personal column, "Publisher's Views on Topics of the Times",

started by his father, and endeavored to carry out the policies of his father. Under his leadership the circulation of the *Homestead* rose approximately 15,000. Nine years after his father's death, Dante Pierce, wishing to devote his time to his other business interests, including publication of the *Wisconsin Farmer*, sold the *Homestead* to the Wallace Publishing Company, and the consolidated journal was named *Wallaces' Farmer and Iowa Homestead*. The circulation of the *Homestead* in the year before consolidation was 165,000 — a long way from the struggling farm paper with a few thousand circulation that was taken over by James M. Pierce and his associates almost half a century ago.

C. R. F. SMITH