

Fairs and Anniversaries

Shenandoah was a progressive town always seeking ways to draw attention to itself. The Fair Association eagerly leaped to the front and soon claimed to have the best fair in Iowa except the State Fair. The *Sentinel* published a daily during the three big days of its run. The *Sentinel's* great claim to distinction was the Baby Show. That was Marvin's idea.

It was no ordinary Baby Show. It had uniformed nurses to measure and weigh the young hopefuls. On the day of the widely advertised show, visitors thronged the enclosure, shoving each other around to get a better view of the three old bachelors selecting the prettiest baby between six months and two years. The names of the bachelor judges were not revealed in advance. That was part of the surprise.

Fifty or 60 infants were usually entered, each proudly held by his fond mother. They sat on benches within a roped-off enclosure beneath tall shade trees. Each baby wore a numbered registration tag. There were babies bright and smiling with flower faces beaming from pink organdy or white lace dresses; babies tired and hot, crying in spite of mothers' efforts to bring back the smiles;

and bright and shining colored babies among the white. Once a cross-eyed baby cooed happily.

The reward was a five dollar gold piece, and the winner was made known only after the judges had fled the scene. The judges were fast putting distance behind them when Editor Marvin pinned the big pink ribbon bow on their bewildered choice. It was often difficult to persuade three bachelors who had not previously served to agree to enter the arena. A lawyer, a doctor, and a merchant made a capable group, but they would be embarrassed for weeks thereafter.

The Baby Show was not the editor's only fair week activity. He was in charge of the concessions. For 10 days before the fair began, the newspaper office was host to a series of weird visitors seeking the choicest spots for their stands. Lemonade vendors, fortune tellers, the dog-faced lady, hot dog and candy vendors followed one another through the portals and were assigned by Marvin to their proper spots.

As there was no reason to assume they would stay in their assigned locations, Marvin would get up in the mornings and race to the fairgrounds on his bicycle to see who had moved his stand during the night. Then the arguments followed, with Marvin threatening to call the police. Muttering angrily, the concessionaires moved back, but the next day the procedure was repeated.

The fair was not the only exciting event of the

year. There was the annual Firemen's Tournament. Fourth of July was a great day for the firemen. It was not because of the danger of fire, though they took that in stride when necessary. It was tournament day. There were no powerful motor-operated fire wagons to race around the track. These wagons were drawn by horses — the best the cities could afford.

Towns such as Shenandoah had only one salaried fireman. It was his duty to look after the fire horses and drive them to the fires. The rest of the department was composed of volunteers. Larger cities had more teams, more money, and more men.

The horses achieved great distinction. They were the heroes and received the adulation of the populace. It was all because of their speed. They were trained and admired as our derby horses are today. Soon it was beneath their station in life to race to fires. Their duty was to compete in the tournament held each Fourth of July, really a two-day event with the final races held on July 5. Winning teams received prize money and medals. Back home a lively team of farm horses took over the plebian task of pulling the red engine to the fires.

Shenandoah had a crack team, Prince and Boli, for tournament use. They were a handsome, spirited pair, that had been purchased after much investigation, discussion, and dickering. The Des Moines Fire Department had a prize team, Jack

and Jack, a handsome pair, that had formed the habit of winning most of the honors, but Prince and Boli gave them some bad days.

One year the tournament came to Shenandoah, and the populace turned out en masse to watch the races. On the second day after the final events had been run, tired men and horses headed home by train or overland. The merchants in Shenandoah, who had invested heavily in fireworks, were disappointed. They offered the left-over racket-making material at reduced prices. Within an hour the town was bedlam. Residents who had gone home wearily to supper hurried back. Young people, and many not so young, emerged from stores with arms full of fireworks. Cautious souls fled from the streets. Fireworks went off in every direction in a blaze of light and thunderous noise. It did not stop until the last firecracker and Roman candle were gone.

Editor Marvin, the next day, sat down in his Easy Chair at the *Sentinel* office to ponder why the firemen and their crack teams were out of town on the most dangerous days of the year — fire-wise. Of course, a few stalwart volunteers remained behind, along with the stand-in farm horses. With the coming of motor-driven fire engines, years later, Firemen's Tournaments vanished from the calendar of events.

The editor's mail was one of the highlights of his day. He never knew what to expect. Some-

times there were checks and subscription renewals. The next letter might complain that the paper was no good and was not wanted any more. Marvin got one letter which said, "You're a great man. I like your editorials. You should run for president. I'll vote for you." He framed that one.

Some editors grew scraggly whiskers and worried frowns. Others stayed young in heart and kept their sense of humor. Charley Marvin had imagination.

Marvin's flight into fancy was the series known as the Aunt Belinda letters. They discussed local and national affairs in a folksy, misspelled way and became the most popular feature of the paper. Marvin wrote the letters at home, on unfamiliar scratch paper and addressed and mailed them to himself. Even the fellow members of the *Sentinel* staff were unable to solve the puzzle of Aunt Belinda's identity. The letters continued to arrive, sporadically, for several years. No one ever discovered the identity of the author.

A typical Aunt Belinda letter started out like this:

Deer Editur Marven: The other da Abner caim hoam carrin a tipe wrighter, the masheen I meen, not the gurl. The gurl wuz wauking along bi his side an He sed, Belinda, I've brot you a stenografter so you can wright moar for yure litery pusutes. I askt her whare she had grafted befoar an she sed she had rote letturs for Henery Field an Jim Doaty. She wear noaz glasses an dimond rings

an chude gum. I wuz suspishus uv the gurl, but I sed I wood giv her a trile. I toald her to copi a letur I rote onto the tipe wrighter. She sez to me, Miz Slocum, du yu ob-jeck if I currekt yure spelling? I sez to her, when I wuz a gurl I red the spellin buk thru fore times an wunst I speled the hole skule down, an I aint goin to hav no red heded upstart az chuse gum tell me how to spel.

Belinda went on to discuss her opinions on local affairs.

Subscribers grew enthusiastic over Aunt Belinda. If she failed to send a letter every week, it was almost a calamity. Marvin was sometimes sorry he had invented her. He tried every way short of having her die to dispose of her. Finally, very slowly, like an old soldier, she faded away.

Rivalry developed among some letter writers. The Democrats of southwestern Iowa clamored for a mouthpiece. The answer was the *Shenandoah World*, with W. D. Jamieson, commonly called Billy, as its editor. He had a desk by the front window and called his editorial column "The Window Seat." There he commented on who and what he saw on the street. It was the candid camera of the day and some of the people wrote letters of violent protest. But the feud was all good natured. Billy Jamieson called his wife the Squaw and his house the Wigwam. He competed against Colonel William Peters Hepburn for Congress and won an upset victory. He held office for one term and then Republicans regained the seat.

Boys grew from short to long pants, young ladies came out in society, and papers grew from weeklies to semi-weeklies and tri-weeklies. While Editor Marvin had raised a few gray hairs the *Sentinel* had been growing up.

July 1893 was a great year in the *Sentinel's* career. After weeks of discussion and figuring, it became a semi-weekly, publishing four pages on Tuesday and eight on Friday. When the paper was 12 years old and feeling in fine fettle, Marvin called his force together and they decided to celebrate. They would publish a special edition. The employees went to work with vim and Marvin scarcely took time out to eat and sleep.

On June 20, 1899, it appeared — the first anniversary special edition of the *Sentinel*. There were 50 pages of feature articles, especially of local history, with pictures and advertising. The production was a tremendous undertaking for the little staff of 14 people, including the editor, office boy, and devil.

As the *Sentinel* grew, more help was needed. Compositors were hard to find and space was at a premium. Then automation got a foot in the door. After much head scratching and pouring over the budget, Marvin bought a Linotype.

It was a great day in the *Sentinel* office when that first Linotype machine arrived. It could set more type than several girl compositors. It was the most expensive machine in the *Sentinel* plant,

and every day visitors came to see it in operation. Farm visitors were frequently spellbound spectators. Marvin was especially thrilled with the young westerner who was visiting an uncle and came in to see "that there machine you got." After watching for a long time he took off his big hat and said respectfully, "Wall, now, Mr. Machine, you do be almost human. I'm mighty proud to meet yuh."

Presently the *Sentinel* was 18 years old and had united with its ancient rival — the *Post*. The *Sentinel* and the *Post* consolidated April 1, 1905. A new corporation took over the stock, equipment, and subscription lists of both papers. It now became the *Sentinel-Post*. It was still a semi-weekly and was published Tuesday and Friday. Henry Deater, former editor of the *Post*, became secretary and assistant manager of the new company.

Equipment and business increased till the publishing plant bulged at the seams. A new building was needed. Marvin built one. His salary as postmaster contributed largely to the financing of the plant.

The new home was completed in February 1906. After moving into the new quarters, the *Sentinel-Post* had "open house." The public was invited and thousands of subscribers and friends from the *Sentinel* territory thronged the building to see the machines at work. A 24-page souvenir booklet was given to each visitor.

The opening had much publicity and even a Chicago machine factory tried to get into the act. They shipped a surprise folding machine to attach to the press. "We thought you would like to include this in your new equipment," they explained. The bill had not been allowed in the *Sentinel* budget, but the new convenience found itself quite at home, and no one could think of sending it back.

Editor Marvin and his assistant, Henry Deater, spent hours studying the situation. Was the *Sentinel* ready to blossom out as a full-fledged daily, or should she play safe and continue to appear three times a week. After many conferences the daily won.

The *Sentinel-Post* was growing social minded as the years added up. When it was 28 years old, the staff decided to celebrate once more. They would entertain all the employees, especially the country correspondents from other towns, at a big party to add spark to their enthusiasm. Fancy invitations went out to everyone on the payroll, big or little, for the gala event — *Sentinel-Post* Day, Shenandoah, June 26, 1915.

They came. They saw everything. They ate everything — everything on the menu, that is. The word "banquet" was a slight misnomer, but there was plenty of ice cream and cake and no one went away hungry. They talked about the big party for weeks.