

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XLVIII

ISSUED IN JANUARY 1967

No. 1

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Birth of a Paper

Charley Marvin always wanted to be an editor. He was born on a farm in Ohio in 1857. Farming did not appeal to him, and he never got much farther than learning how to hitch old Dobbin to the farm wagon. He attended country school on Alum Creek but much preferred to go quail hunting or fishing. He was dreaming of a newspaper. Charley came to Iowa and taught school in Marshall and Union counties for several years. Then he edited the *Iowa Teacher* and for a time was a reporter on the *Marshalltown Times-Republican*. He still dreamed of having his own newspaper.

Shenandoah, in 1887, wanted a new paper. The young community, whose Indian name meant Daughter of the Stars, had been transplanted from Manti, which had become a ghost town. Its residents had put their homes and shops on wheels and moved to meet the new C.B.&Q. Railroad when it came through Shenandoah in 1870.

Now Shenandoah was 17 years old and beginning to demand her rights. She wanted a news-

paper that would express her views on this and that — chiefly politics. There had been other papers. In fact, there was one — the *Post* — still on the job. But Shenandoah, like many young ladies, was fickle. She wanted a new one.

So Charley Marvin came because he thought it was a golden opportunity. But he did not know that the birth of a newspaper would bring so many labor pains.

A few days after his arrival, Charley Marvin was down on all fours peering at the underside of his secondhand press. His budget for starting the new paper was small. Cheap presses are temperamental. Charley knew nothing at all about machines of any kind. Driving old Dobbin on the farm and teaching an assortment of country school pupils how to read McGuffey's masterpieces had not prepared him for this.

An exploratory poke with a grease-stained finger here and there produced no results. McUllough, the printer Marvin had brought with him from Union, Iowa, did not know what to do either. He stood looking on hopefully.

"Probably busted something when they moved it up the stairs," McUllough suggested. "Pity you couldn't afford a better place than this old room over the drugstore."

That did not help the situation. Marvin was tempted to swear, but boyhood training in the home of his Methodist circuit-riding grandfather

prevailed. The thing would have to work. He had invested his last dollar in his dream of being a country editor in Shenandoah.

Then Hammond walked in. "C. D. Hammond is my name," the newcomer announced with a bow, "and I'm looking for a job."

Hammond looked like a millionaire hobo. He wore a tall silk hat, spike-toed shoes, and a fancy shirt. His mustache was smartly waxed. A disheveled Marvin crawled from behind the balky press and hired the newcomer.

Hammond threw his hat on the table, stood his gold-headed cane behind the door, gave his mustache a tweak, and said, pompously, as though still declaiming to his road show audience, "Now let me see what ails yon press."

In 30 minutes he had it working. Hammond was a magician with machinery and type. He could perform miracles with the *Sentinel's* meager equipment. When type was lacking for sale bills or advertisements, he substituted wooden carved blocks or toothpicks and turned out bills or letterheads to compare with fine city printing shops.

Visitors usually mistook Hammond for the proprietor. There was the curious resident who plodded laboriously up the stairs and looked around the cluttered room until he spotted Hammond. He marched right past Marvin, toiling arduously in his worn shirt.

"What's going on here?"

Marvin emerged from behind a type case saying, "We're starting a paper. Hadn't you heard?"

"Heard rumors. What do you call it?"

"The *Sentinel*. It's just a dollar a year. Big bargain."

"What's your politics?"

"Republican."

"Well, I might try it as long as you stay on the right side of the fence. Here's your dollar."

He was the first subscriber, C. H. Gurney. Right after Gurney came H. I. Foskett, H. P. Duffield, I. C. Preston, and the next day, S. A. Thomas, William Bute, and Charles Grafton. Marvin gloated. His dreams were rosy again.

Getting out the paper brought nightmares. There was only type enough for two pages, so these were set up and printed. Then the type was distributed before the other two pages could be run. The Washington hand press had a top speed of 200 an hour, and each paper had to go through the press twice. It took 10 hours to print the first issue. Hammond stayed until the new paper was on its feet. Then he moved on to greener pastures as the manager of a traveling road show.

The first issue appeared November 25, 1887. Much sport was made of it by the older papers in the field it hoped to fill. The *Sentinel* kept growing, occasionally adding a font of type or a new piece of machinery. In two years it was named one of the official papers of Page County.

The new paper had four pages, each seven columns wide, all home print. One page was devoted to Shenandoah local news. The other three were filled with editorial matter and comments. That was the age of personal journalism, when editorial policies were much more important than news. Editorials in that first issue advocated prohibition and women's suffrage. Marvin urged the legislature to submit the prohibition amendment to a direct vote of the people in order to take the question out of politics as soon as possible. He endorsed Allison for the Republican presidential candidate and predicted the nomination of Cleveland by the Democrats. He criticized anarchists and demanded anti-monopoly laws and lower freight rates.

Another member of the *Sentinel* force was the printer's first devil, Joseph O'Day, nicknamed "Roxy." He was a treasure. He stood stripped to the waist, except for a pair of overalls, beside an old tombstone, which had been borrowed from the monument works, and spread a great dipper of printer's ink over it. He passed a printer's roller over it and then over the type forms. The forms were ready for taking proofs or for printing. Presently his body, arms, and face were covered with ink. He looked like a true devil — but how he enjoyed it. He sang at the top of his voice as he worked. Being young and strong, he was promoted to the lever of the press where he could print four papers a minute, a real speed record.

The *Sentinel* moved to a room over the First National Bank. With a growing circulation, the old Washington hand press proved too slow. As soon as the budget would stand the strain, Marvin purchased an ancient Campbell cylinder press. It had more speed but no springs. When four pages of lead type were jerked through the press, the action resembled a battering ram. There was constant danger that the 500 pounds of lead would keep right on going — out through the front window. The old Campbell, which was cranked by hand, required two strong men with plenty of muscle. Even though there was a depression, idle men would disappear up an alley or around a corner whenever Marvin came downstairs with a job offer.

There was no electric power, and taking a horse upstairs to furnish power was out of the question. The only solution seemed to be a rickety, upright steam engine being offered for sale cheap. A foundryman set it in the corner just above the bank's vault. That, Banker Read figured, was the safest place. A brick foundation was built for the boiler. It was covered with sand so a fire could be built under the boiler to heat the water. It was summer and there was lots of work. The press was running night and day.

Then it happened! Heat from the sun and heat from the boiler combined to start a fire in the floor. Banker Read, wildly excited, dashed up and down

yelling orders. He visioned the bank's money burning up. Helpers from the nearby blacksmith shop moved machinery and tore out the floor. Members of the Volunteer Fire Department arrived breathlessly and began pouring water. The blaze was soon extinguished.

Even very young towns have exciting times. Shenandoah was usually very peaceful, with no saloons and no fights. There were loud-voiced arguments over political views or emphatic disagreements about free trade and such things. Nobody was knocked down. There was not much for the marshal to do. He had lots of time to sit and whittle while he discussed candidates with his cronies.

Then the lid blew off. Just a few weeks after Charley Marvin arrived and got the infant *Sentinel* into swaddling clothes, calls for help disturbed the evening peace and quiet. Someone called Marvin. "It's that wild drayman," the caller reported. "Must have got some liquor from Omaha."

Merchant Pine was shouting, "I'll get him. I'll get him. He assaulted my little girl."

The little girl was six — a sweet little miss liked by everyone. The men who had come to see what the commotion was about were off like a pack of hounds after a scared rabbit. They captured the drayman. Then the marshal, in charge of the prisoner, had a new problem. The Shenandoah jail was not very substantial; it was seldom used.

The county jail at Clarinda was too far away to reach on a dark, murky night. The prisoner was locked in the not-too-secure jail to stay until he could be taken to Clarinda.

The marshal was optimistic. The culprit was not. Hearing threatening voices outside, the prisoner tried to crawl out through a window. Angry men were there to grab him. One had tar and another emptied the feathers from a pillow tick. The father of the little girl pursued the feathered culprit with a whip. The marshal plunged into the melee, rescued the prisoner, and took him back to jail.