

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN C. PARISH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

VOL. II

ISSUED IN AUGUST 1921

NO. 8

COPYRIGHT 1921 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

Perils of a Pioneer Editor

The Old Stone Capitol at Iowa City seems to have been, in the forties, a dangerous place for Democratic newspaper men to frequent. For within its halls three successive editors of the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* became involved in physical encounters with irate legislators.

The editor in 1841 was Ver Planck Van Antwerp. Because of a West Point training he was dubbed "General", and among his enemies he received the titles of "Old Growler" and "My Lord Pomposity". He was a man of high dignity and pretentious dress, an aristocrat in tastes, but a Democrat in politics.

Van Antwerp was an early comer to the West and had held several political positions. In 1838 while Receiver of the Land Office in Burlington he experienced a bit of real frontier life. He and Stephen Whicher were walking arm in arm down the street one day when pistol shots startled them and a bullet whizzed past apparently between their heads. Van

Antwerp's account of the affair is not to be had, but Whicher in a letter written at the time said that the General "ran like an affrighted deer about ten rods, when he stopped, turned, and called to me to follow him".

Whicher stood his ground, however, and there came running up to him a man "without a hat, with a broken head, and an empty pistol". The man was a prominent lawyer of Burlington who had just shot and fatally wounded Cyrus S. Jacobs, a member-elect of the Territorial legislature, following an attempt of the latter to cane him.

Van Antwerp lost his office in 1841 and moved to Iowa City, the new capital of the Territory, where he began, in partnership with Thomas Hughes, the publication of a Democratic journal known as the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*.

In the session of 1841-1842 a considerable discussion arose at Iowa City over the bestowal of the legislative printing—a matter in which the *Reporter* was vitally interested. The Democrats in the Council were not unanimous in favoring the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, and one of them—Mr. Bainbridge—evoked much wrath and condemnation from Van Antwerp, who denounced him in his paper as a "hybrid politician". Whereupon Bainbridge is reported to have remarked that "if Van had any friends they had better advise him to be cautious in taking liberties with his name, or he would get his face slapped."

Further difference of opinion arose over the Miners' Bank of Dubuque, at that time the only bank in Iowa. The *Iowa Capitol Reporter* and the Democrats generally were trying to force an immediate resumption of specie payments by the bank, which was — in the minds of its friends — equivalent to bankrupting the concern. Bainbridge, representing Dubuque County, endeavored to save the institution. Van Antwerp again attacked him in the columns of his paper with language that completed the dissolution of Bainbridge's patience.

With the stage thus set, Van Antwerp repaired one morning in early February to the Council Chamber in the Old Stone Capitol. When he left the room Bainbridge followed him into the hall and there occurred the incident upon which witnesses and near witnesses have failed to agree.

A writer in the *Iowa City Standard* reports that Bainbridge, looking Van sternly in the face said "the 'hybrid politician' . . . conceives you to be a d——d scoundrel and a puppy" and added that if he ever misrepresented him again he would traverse the Territory from one end to the other to kick him. After some parleying Van Antwerp, to use his own expression, "retorted his offensive language, and the scuffle between us ensued".

According to the *Standard*, Bainbridge struck Van Antwerp over the hat and head with his cane, seized a pistol which Van Antwerp tried to draw, and smote him upon his be-spectacled face with his fist so vigorously as to draw blood.

"It is false that we were struck at all", said Van Antwerp. "Our assailant raised a stick which he held in his hand, as if intending to strike us — but we threw up our arm and seized it, endeavoring at the same time to draw a pistol with which to defend ourself in case he did strike. . . . the weapon which we carried was wrested from us. *An exchange of weapons* thus took place between us in the affray; and when other persons came forward to interfere between us, we held the stick of our assailant in our left hand, with our right grappled upon the collar of his coat." About this time Mr. Stull, the Secretary of the Territory, appeared in the doorway, and seeing the pistol in the possession of Bainbridge, is said to have roared out "to the victors belong the spoils".

During the same year Van Antwerp dropped out of the firm of publishers and was succeeded by Jesse Williams. The Territorial legislature met and again took up the question of the Miners' Bank of Dubuque. Charges were made by the *Iowa Capitol Reporter* that members had been influenced by the offer of bribes to support the bank. An investigating committee was appointed with George H. Walworth as its chairman. The committee reported that although improper advances had actually been made, no legislator had been influenced in his vote, and the report closed with a recommendation that the editors of the *Reporter* justly deserved the censure of the House.

The report was laid upon the table, but Editor Williams was not satisfied to let the matter drop, and wielded an acid pen in criticism of Walworth, the chairman of the committee. One day Walworth came upon Jesse Williams in the library of the capitol and took the opportunity to vent his wrath upon the editor in a personal assault. Being a powerful man Walworth soon had his opponent upon the floor where he proceeded to give him so thorough a beating that blood flowed freely and began to form a pool on the carpet. It seems that the carpet was one which the Secretary of the Territory had but recently purchased. The fight was on in full swing when the ubiquitous Stull burst into the room and fell upon the combatants.

"You d——d scoundrels!" he cried. "What are you spoiling my carpet for?" And he threw them both out of the room.

Bout number three occurred at the first session of the legislature of the new State of Iowa. Jesse Williams had been succeeded on the editorial staff of the *Reporter* by a man named Palmer. Another case of attempted bribery came before the legislature, this time in connection with the choice of Iowa's first United States Senators. The close division between Democrats and Whigs and the uncertainty as to how several of the members would vote made an exciting situation when one of the doubtful men, Mr. Nelson King from Keokuk County, rose and stated that he had been approached by several

persons and offered money and other rewards if he would cast his vote for the Democratic candidates.

A committee was appointed to investigate the case. Mr. King gave testimony: "Finally, about that time," he said, "me and him was in that path between the House of Representatives and the brick tavern . . . he offered me a hundred dollars, and gave me to understand if I would vote for Dodge I should have it."

But Mr. King in turn found his character questioned by the legal counsel of his reputed briber. Allusions were made to charges of assault with intent to kill and of stealing bacon. These charges were taken up by the press, and the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, among other remarks, made the facetious observation that, whereas King was supposed to be deficient in literature, he was "evidently familiar with *Lock* and *Bacon*".

King was disposed to ignore these personal remarks of Palmer, but was led by his wife — so said this modern Adam — to believe that he should chastise his maligner. So he encountered Palmer one day in the Capitol and with true backwoods spirit undertook to thrash the editor. Palmer was small and unequal to the struggle but presented a plucky resistance. The affair assumed serious aspects when King drew a loaded pistol. Mr. Stull was not this time upon the scene of conflict but there were others who intervened and prevented a possible tragedy.

These three episodes, wherein the editors found their pens mightier than their swords, are characteristic of the times. Freedom of speech and of the press was limited not by the libel court but by the more summary physical vengeance of the libeled. Formal duelling was rare but informal encounters upon the streets and in public buildings were not uncommon. Canings often led to the use of the pistol and not always was the outcome so free from tragedy as in the attacks upon the editors of the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*.

JOHN C. PARISH