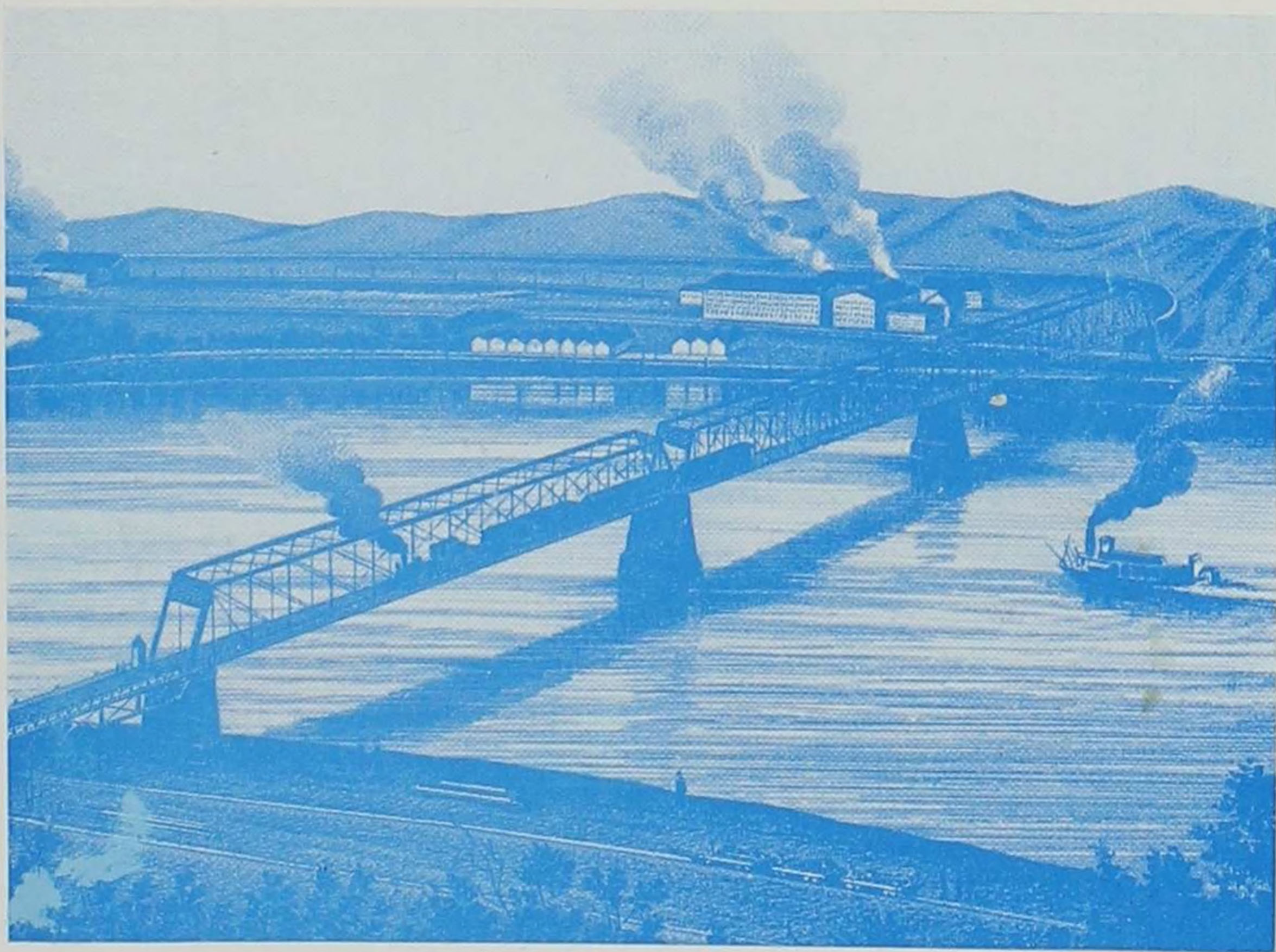


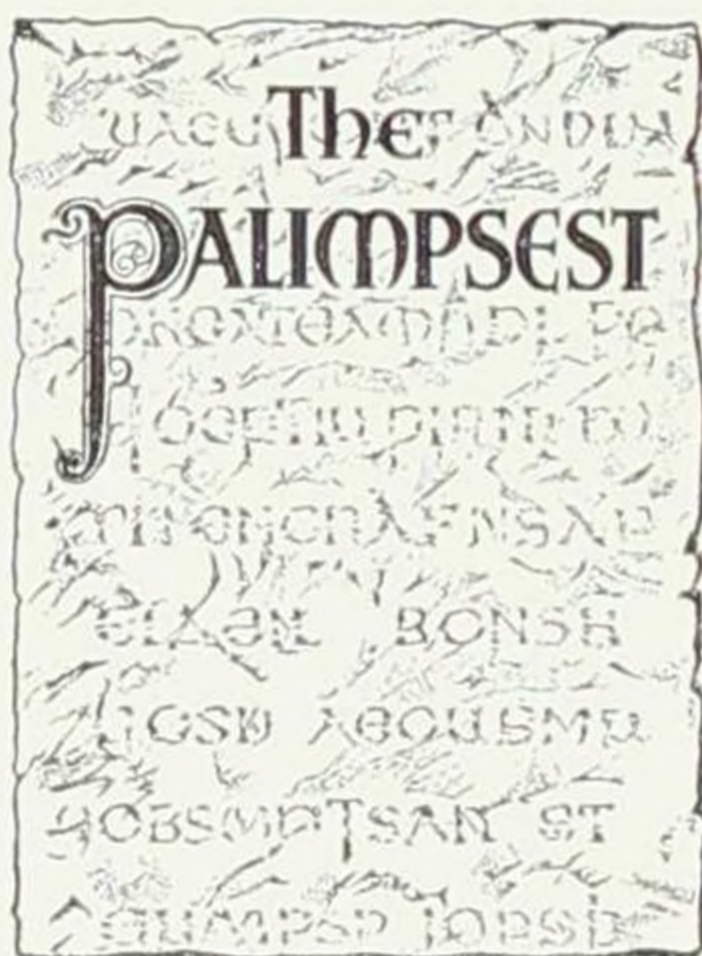
*The*  
**PALIMPSEST**



UNION BRIDGE AT SIOUX CITY

Published Monthly by  
**The State Historical Society of Iowa**  
Iowa City Iowa

DECEMBER 1951



## *The Meaning of Palimpsest*

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

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THOMAS E. TWEITO

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*Front* — Union Bridge over the Missouri River at Sioux City.

*Back — Inside:* Sioux City *Iowa Eagle*, Vol. I, No. 1, July 4, 1857.  
(Credit Morningside College Library)

*Outside:* The Sioux City *Register*, Vol. I, No. 1, July 22, 1858.  
(Credit Morningside College Library)

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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT  
IOWA CITY IOWA UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

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# THE PALIMPSEST

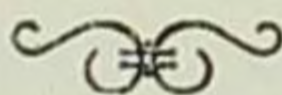
EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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## Frontier Journalism

The Sioux City *Iowa Eagle*, launched by Seth W. Swiggett on July 4, 1857, was the first newspaper published in the young frontier metropolis on the Missouri River. Publication of the first issue was an auspicious event, and the "office was thronged with patrons," who were eager to watch the proceedings as well as to "devour" the first *Eagle*. The newspaper had been produced under several handicaps. Swiggett had brought his printing outfit from Cincinnati, Ohio, by steamboat. On the voyage up the Missouri River, a part of his equipment and materials was sunk and recovered in a damaged condition, while some was completely lost.

Despite these handicaps, two thousand copies of the first issue were published. The *Eagle*, which was a seven-column folio, was completely hand set and printed on a Washington hand press. It was described as a "marvel both typographically and editorially." For this its "brilliant" editor was responsible. It was his opinion that no comparable

newspaper ever had its first issue more widely circulated. Copies were sent to every state of the Union, to some of the European nations, and to some of the islands. Indeed, "Our circulation abroad will be large and valuable to advertisers," the editor wrote.

Swiggett had been born in Connersville, Indiana. There he had worked as a practical printer and had launched "a semi-political journal" while still a young man. Meeting with "many checks and opposition," he went to Cincinnati where he gained further experience. Democrats of Woodbury County were eager to have a newspaper; they purchased the printing equipment for him as an inducement to start his journal in Sioux City.

The *Eagle* was to be a journal devoted to the interests of the "great North West," according to the editor. While it would pay particular attention to Iowa, it also intended to carry news from Minnesota, Nebraska, and Kansas. Eventually it contained considerable news from Dakota, as well as providing limited national coverage. Subscriptions were two dollars per year, "always in advance," which was "very low, considering the high price we have to pay for everything."

Swiggett sincerely believed that it was the obligation of any journal which asked the public for support to state "the principles it professed to advocate — the moral compass whose direction it proposes to follow." He believed a newspaper

might either be a potent factor in behalf of religion, sound morality, correct political doctrine, the advancement of science and social happiness, or it might be "the blighting vehicle of Impiety, Vice, Error, Perversion and Obloquy." The *Eagle* pledged itself to "Bearing upon its bosom the divine principles of truth . . . breathing only a beneficial desire to interest and instruct — to elevate and purify." To this end it was necessary to encourage freedom of thought and to speak it boldly, the editor believed. Moreover, the *Eagle* pledged itself not to "puff" Sioux City nor to become the hireling of paper-town proprietors. Above all it resolved to be independent in all matters, especially in politics.

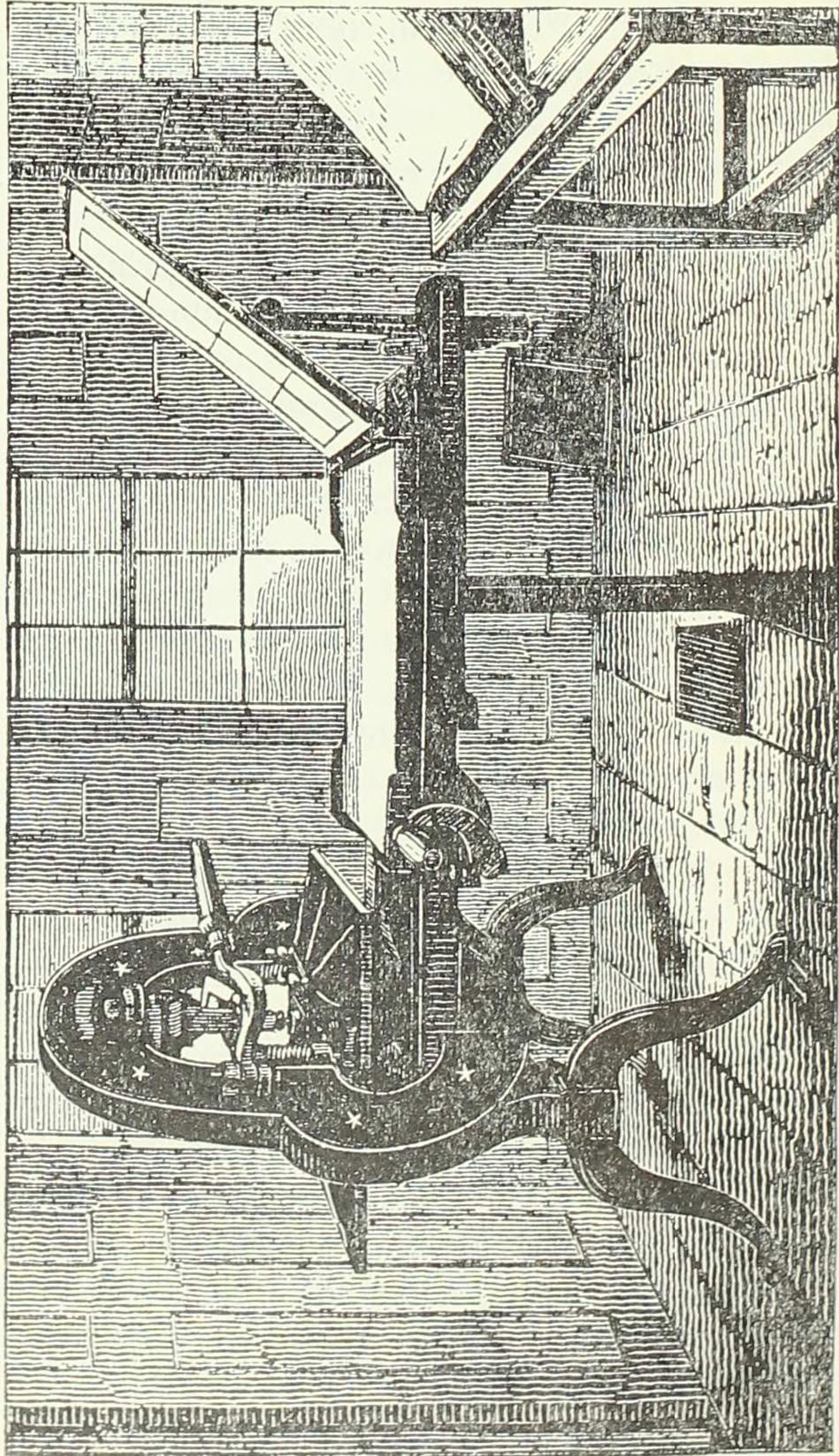
Early issues commonly included, on page one, several poems, a column of jokes, a chapter from some story, and discourses for the family circle. On the second page were found the editorials and exchanges, especially pertaining to land, emigration, railroads, or matters of frontier interest. More of the same material appeared on page three, together with vital statistics about marriages, births, deaths, markets, and steamboat arrivals and departures. More than half of the third page was devoted to advertising, with real estate, mercantile, and attorneys' announcements predominating. The final page commonly had lengthy articles on the advantages of the West or on matters of interest to "farm, kitchen, and shop." Of special inter-

est in the first issue was a list of 412 names of people who had letters remaining in the post office at the termination of the June 30, 1857, quarter. A bounty of \$150 was offered for the return of a stolen sorrel horse. The arrival of twenty-eight steamboats, and the departure of twenty-seven, from April 6 to July 1 was also noted.

The *Eagle* was well received at once and drew many favorable editorial comments in newspapers published near and far. The Muncie (Indiana) *Messenger*, the Florence (Nebraska Territory) *Courier*, the Dakota *Herald*, published in the same territory, the Council Bluffs *Bugle*, and the *Nonpareil* of the same city, as well as the *Chronotype*, welcomed the *Eagle* in eulogistic terms within a few weeks. So did the Des Moines *Citizen*, the *Flag* and the *Pantagraph*, both Bloomington (Illinois) publications, the White Cloud (Kansas) *Chief*, the Connersville (Indiana) *Telegraph*, and the Davenport *Gazette*. The Cincinnati *Gazette* characterized the *Eagle* as the product of "a gentleman of great energy and tact. It is a model paper . . . full of information in regard to that section of the union, . . . and not a rehash of stale clippings from Eastern papers." While the *Eagle* appreciated this comment "from the oldest, best and most influential commercial paper west of the seaboard," the editor modestly attributed his success to his excellent type and equipment, which had been purchased from the Franklin Foundry of

Cincinnati. The "beautiful type" enabled the *Eagle* also to operate "the best job printing office in Northwestern Iowa." With two presses, jobs could be executed "in the very best style of the art . . . with great dispatch." Indeed, the *Eagle* was prepared to handle "every description of printing" not for Sioux City alone, but "for hundreds of miles around."

On August 1, 1857, the *Eagle* announced that it was ready and willing to employ a special carrier to deliver the paper to its city subscribers. This service was offered in response to many requests for delivery and was to cost fifty cents per year extra. The next week the *Eagle* advertised for an apprentice. "We are willing to take an industrious, intelligent lad and learn him the printing business," it stated. Moreover, before the end of August it became necessary to build an addition to the printing office "to keep pace with our increasing business. . . . At this rate, before the year is out we will have to build a three story block to accommodate ourselves and customers." By the middle of September the *Eagle* reported that additions had been completed to give it a "model printing office," considered "the handsomest . . . in Western Iowa." While apparently prospering, the editor expressed appreciation for frequent gifts of roasting ears, apples, and edibles. If people believed the editor had an easy time of it, they were "sadly mistaken."



*From An Abridgement of Johnson's Typographia*

Washington Hand Press



Like so many other frontier newspapers, the *Eagle* soon became involved in journalistic battles which eventually descended to name calling. The first and perhaps most protracted encounter was with editor F. M. Ziebach of the Sergeant Bluff *Independent*. In August, 1857, the *Eagle* described the former journal as "a very handsome, well arranged and readable seven column paper. . . . We wish the *Independent* the most unbounded success — being (the *Eagle* excepted, of course), the handsomest paper on the Missouri slope." Editor Ziebach called on Swiggett, and the latter wrote: "He is an agreeable, social fellow, and we were glad to learn is doing well with his paper." But the Sioux City editor commonly referred to the "rural" community of Sergeant Bluff. Or it was "a stage station a few miles below this city . . ." where "a little stern-wheel paper" was published. Little wonder that Ziebach was quoted as saying that "Swiggett was a d——d liar and a thief." When Ziebach expressed gratitude in his columns for fresh vegetables brought him, Swiggett could not refrain from asking: "Are you taking in boarders, Ziebach?" The Bluff's editor denied the name calling. "But until convinced that he did not, we decline his acquaintance, as any gentleman would," Swiggett wrote. One week later the Sioux City editor wrote that Ziebach had not made the remark although the two never became friendly again.

Nor was the Sergeant Bluff *Independent* the only newspaper that attacked the *Eagle*. But Swiggett demonstrated that he had some of the fortitude which has enabled real journalists to overcome a multitude of obstacles since theirs became a profession, for he wrote:

We want no better evidence that the influence of the Sioux City *Eagle* is *felt*, and its high standing abroad acknowledged, than the fact that every little stern-wheel flutter mill newspaper within a hundred miles, and numberless sap-head writers are "pitching into" us with all the vigor of a full-grown mosquito in August. Now we only desire to say once for all, that we do not *intend* to do any one injustice, knowingly, in our paper. But we do intend to tell the *truth*, let it hit where it will. Having told the truth quite too often for some persons, is the cause of the great fluttering. Just "go it," small fry; it don't disturb us a particle.

On October 31, 1857, after the *Eagle* was four months old, Swiggett announced that he had to return to Cincinnati to straighten out some business affairs. He also hoped to bring his family to Iowa. Charles G. Warren, "a practical printer, and a gentleman in every way reliable," was left in complete charge. Unfortunately, it became necessary to suspend publication, temporarily, after the issue of December 26, because the paper stock was exhausted. Sufficient paper for the winter months had been ordered from St. Louis, but had not been forwarded before navigation of the Missouri River ceased. More than eighty individuals or firms ex-

pressed satisfaction with the *Eagle*, which had been "so ably and satisfactorily conducted," and expressed a desire to have it resume. Publication remained irregular through the winter with issues on January 16 and 30; February 20, March 6, 20, and 25; April 3 and 24. Paper for these issues was obtained from Council Bluffs. Regular weekly publication was resumed at the end of April.

Swiggett returned on the *Omaha* to Sioux City in time to help edit the issue of May 1. He had been gone longer than expected, because of illness in his family. Immediately upon his return, he advertised for "a comfortable residence of five or six rooms pleasantly located." His patrons were assured that the *Eagle* would henceforth be published regularly. Moreover, he pledged his journal to present the advantages and attractions of Sioux City to those seeking homes in the West, and to promote the best interests of the city. The columns of the *Eagle* were declared open for brief articles from men of all parties "on all subjects except slavery where 'it is shielded by the Constitution.'" The editor denied partiality and invited one and all to use "just as severe language as you please in regard to any party, so long as you stick to your subjects, and treat men and things decently." However, he warned that "slang abuse" was banned. "A question that requires abuse and vituperation to sustain it, is not suitable for discussion," he philosophized.

In June, 1858, Swiggett made another trip to Cincinnati to bring his family to Sioux City where "We have pitched our tent." Ezra Millard, a gentleman "fully competent to fill the editorial chair with credit and ability," was left in charge during his absence. J. W. Thornburgh took care of business matters in the meantime, but the mechanical department was "short of 'help.' "

Before his departure, Swiggett took stock of the *Eagle's* first year of endeavor in an editorial. The paper had been issued during approximately ten of the first twelve months. The editor had "labored assiduously and to the best of our ability," especially to forward the interests of Sioux City. Nor had his labors "been entirely in vain," he believed. Indeed, almost daily Swiggett was informed of some new settler "whose attention has been drawn . . . through the columns of the *Eagle*." The paper expressed a hope that it would prosper with the community. The *Eagle* did not expect to please everybody, since it was both independent and honest. It expected to do its duty faithfully and fearlessly and to merit encouragement from good men of all parties and creeds on that basis. "If indomitable energy, industry and perseverance is worthy of and will insure success, we are bound to win it." On hand was a stock of paper sufficient to last a year. "Our patrons may therefore look for the regular issue of the *Eagle* for the next year, with the same assurance that they do for the rising

of the sun," the editor wrote confidently, although he was aware of a "vile effort making to push us to the wall."

In the meantime, a second newspaper, the *Sioux City Register*, made its debut on July 22, 1858. Since it was an independent Democratic journal it was a natural competitor. Moreover, the proprietors were A. S. Cummings and F. M. Ziebach, which did not portend journalistic peace, since the latter had earlier engaged in editorial strife with Swiggett. Nor was it very long till ill feeling was again manifested. A communication, ostensibly from a reader, but probably written by the *Eagle* editor, declared that the *Register*, "the organ of the half-breeds," was without "wit, originality or argument in anything it has said. . . . For one, my advice is, if the two Doctors, with all the other stub-tail writers cannot do any better than they have thus far, they had better quit. So far the Organ has been a perfect failure, and if it continues to decline, as it must, the 'Buzzard' [*Eagle*] will soon have an awful piece of carrion to gloat over." The two editors engaged in many editorial bouts during the campaign of 1858. Probably both produced more heat than light, "But for ourself, we disclaim any feeling in the matter other than our desire to do our duty as a public journalist, and to forward the interests of our adopted home."

A more pleasant and optimistic note was sounded in a long editorial entitled, "The Good Time

Coming," in the *Eagle* on New Year's Day, 1859. In tune with the title, the editor was exceedingly optimistic. "Everything now transpiring in the world indicates the approach of a time of universal prosperity," he wrote. He noted that the nation was recovering from the panic of 1857 and that the "vaults of the banks at all the commercial centers are full of money." Expansion of foreign trade, a transcontinental mail service, and extensive railroad construction were other hopeful factors, he asserted. Peculiarly, he wrote not a word about the bitter slavery controversy, nor an impending civil war. But the *Eagle* was almost always conspicuously silent on the troublesome national political issues of the day.

However, the *Eagle* carried considerable advertising. But while merchants advertised freely, they were not prompt in settlement of accounts. The *Eagle* complained: "We do not now propose to *dun* our patrons; but allow us to say that there are quite a number who have been advertising with us for two years, with whom we have had no settlement during that time." Indeed, no representative of the newspaper had ever called on anyone for settlement during its existence. Now the *Eagle* proposed to do so unless accounts were squared voluntarily. Despite its publication "during a period of deepest financial gloom," the *Eagle* had "continued to prosper and increase in popularity, both at home and abroad." It declared itself to be

the oldest paper in Northwest Iowa. Moreover, it was esteemed as "a faithful chronicler of events" and, therefore, "largely quoted from by Eastern journals."

Swiggett could not resist the temptation to strike out at his competitor. Ziebach was referred to as "the Zebra," who lacked "the manliness to 'speak out,' . . . but like any other contemptible cur barks only when he feels that he is out of reach of our lash." The "mighty intellect" of the "astute author" was openly ridiculed: "Profound Zebra; learned Zebra; witty Zebra; when shall we see your like again"

Not only Ziebach and delinquent debtors troubled the *Eagle*. The issue of September 24, 1859, was presented in an apologetic tone, because it was reduced to "a half sheet." This it was compelled to do, because one of the hands had left, and it had proved impossible to find a replacement. Thus, labor problems were added to other tribulations of the frontier editor. To add further to Swiggett's distress, the *Sioux City Register* reported that on October 14, 1858, the *Eagle* "was sold under the hammer" to Isaac Pendleton for "the sum of \$510" which was "about one-third the amount of the bonus" originally paid to start the journal. The sale was promptly denied by Swiggett. The *Register's* report was denounced as "untrue" and "calculated to do me injury in my business." In a scathing editorial in the December

4, 1858, issue of the *Eagle*, Swiggett denounced editor Ziebach of the *Register* in a manner that almost defied comparison:

During the heat and excitement of the political campaign recently passed . . . the ostensible editor of the *Register*, . . . published a notorious, mean and uncalled for falsehood, by stating that the *Sioux City Eagle* had been sold to Isaac Pendleton, Esq., a Republican. The writer of the article *knew* he was penning a deliberate lie, and at this moment this, with other falsehoods equally notorious and unmitigated, are burning deep down upon his conscience, if he has any, the knowledge of which would cause any one possessed of the least spark of manhood or honor to bow his head in shame when among honorable men. We paid no attention whatever to the malicious libel at the time, knowing full well that the miserable concocter thereof was duly appreciated here where he is known, and that his influence . . . was contemptible in the extreme.

. . . .  
This disgrace to the profession . . . being bankrupt in reputation, principle, and purse, can with impunity slander whomsoever he will, and the object of his libels has no recourse.

Moreover, the "*Register* man" was characterized as an "itinerant time-server and toady, who is remarkable only for his brazen impudence, political knavery and mercenary prostitution." He was a "newspaperial ragpicker," who left nothing behind him where he worked, except "accounts." Indeed, he was a "filthy biped." Swiggett, therefore, asked for "a correction in a public manner." The *Register* subsequently explained that the



*Eagle* had been "auctioned off," but that it was "probably a hoax," though "to the looker-on everything about the transaction had the semblance of being *bona fide*."

Perhaps a fatal step in Swiggett's editorial career was his decision not to support the Democratic candidate, N. G. Wyatt, for judge in the fourth judicial district, in the fall of 1858. Instead, he supported the Republican candidate, A. W. Hubbard. This brought a storm of criticism upon a man who had been supported by the Democrats, "when gloom and despondency hung darkly over his enterprise in starting a paper." He was openly branded a traitor who had "gone over to the enemy" and "Arnold! Arnold!" would be "his epithet to bear."

In October, 1859, the *Eagle* was sold to William Freney, a young man employed at the *Register* office. Thus Sioux City was left with one newspaper — "which, by the way is quite enough," Swiggett concluded. Nor had the *Eagle* trod "a pathway of flowers," for editing a newspaper on the frontier was less pleasant "than digging a cellar by moonlight." For these were the tasks of an editor:

We are aware that some people expect an editor to know everything, and if he does not they set him down as an ass. He must also tell all he knows, and guess at the rest; he must make oath to his own good character and establish the reputation of his neighbor's; elect all candi-

dates; blow up everybody; suit everybody; reform the world and preach to the rest of mankind.

All former subscribers of the *Eagle* now were to receive in its place "the *Sioux City Register*, or some other good paper." Swiggett thanked his patrons, asked debtors to settle up, and announced that he would henceforth be found at the Little Giant Store. Thus ended the fortunes of the pioneer editor in Sioux City and the first newspaper in northwest Iowa.

THOMAS E. TWEITO

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY  
WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOLUME XXXII  
JANUARY TO DECEMBER  
1951



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THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA  
IOWA CITY IOWA  
1951

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