

An Iowa Anecdote

A TELEGRAPHIC SCOOP

Iowa editors were prompt in using the telegraph to obtain the latest news for their readers. From 1860 to 1865 the enterprising Perkins brothers made the Cedar Falls *Gazette* a dynamic influence upon the thought of the upper valley of the Red Cedar River. In that area they recognized only one nearby rival, W. H. Hartman of the *Waterloo Courier*. Both papers took advantage of telegraphic communication as soon as possible.

The presidential election in the crucial war year of 1864 brought politics to the foreground of all Iowa newspapers. As a delegate to the National Union Convention (Republican) held in Baltimore in June of that year, Peter Melendy of Cedar Falls was instructed to promote the nomination of Lincoln. From the time the *Gazette* was founded, Peter Melendy had contributed generously to its columns. Besides editing an agricultural department called "Field and Garden", he supplied the paper with abundant news from the Iowa State Fair Board, about the Iowa Farm College, and of construction progress on the Iowa Central Railroad. Always a reliable observer of crops, im-

provements, and politics, it was tacitly assumed that whenever he was away from home he would assume the rôle of newspaper correspondent.

Just before Melendy left for Baltimore to attend the convention he dropped in at the *Gazette* office for his customary farewell chat with the editor. As usual H. A. Perkins proffered his customary request for special correspondence. Partly in jest, but more in earnest, Peter Melendy and "Hank" Perkins planned a ruse that would permit the *Gazette* to scoop the news of the presidential nomination before the *Waterloo Courier* could learn the results of the convention.

According to a prearranged plan, Melendy was to telegraph the names of the nominees for the Presidency and Vice-Presidency to H. A. Perkins in a personal message instead of a press report. Strategically they prepared an innocent-appearing code: if Lincoln should receive the nomination, Melendy was to direct an emergency message to H. A. Perkins signed with the name of the successful candidate for the Vice-Presidency.

At the close of a sensational session of the convention in which Lincoln received the unanimous endorsement of the delegates, Melendy sought the "telegraphing department" at convention headquarters. Pushing his way through the dense crowd anxiously waiting to wire the news, he

called for a blank for an emergency message and dashed off the following telegram:

Baltimore, Md.
June 8th, 1864

Henry A. Perkins
Cedar Falls, Iowa

Your mother is very sick. Come at once.
Johnson

With as sad an expression as he could muster in the face of his jubilation over the victory of Lincoln, Peter Melendy handed the blank to the operator. Because of the urgency suggested by "sick" and "mother", the agent preëmptorily brushed aside the accumulated political telegrams and unsuspectingly gave precedence to Melendy's coded message.

Off it went. Within half an hour after H. A. Perkins received this "near-death" message, the *Gazette* issued a one-page broadside displaying in large letters the names of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson as the Union (Republican) candidates for the offices of President and Vice-President. Local newsboys hawked this "extra" through the streets of Cedar Falls and messengers on horseback carried it to the countryside and to Waterloo.

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