

Three Men and a Press

On the west bank of the Mississippi where Julien Dubuque, lead miner of the "Mines of Spain", had lived and died there grew up about 1830 a settlement known as the Dubuque Lead Mines. In the midst of miners' cabins and saloons appeared stores and churches, and finally one enterprising citizen decided that the town needed a newspaper.

So this man, John King, went back to Ohio, whence he had come, and bought a printing press. And he hired two assistants. One was William Cary Jones, a Whig, who was to help him edit the paper. The other was Andrew Keesecker, a typesetter and a Democrat.

The three men and the press mobilized in a two-story log-house, and on May 11, 1836, they issued the first newspaper in what is now Iowa. It bore the name of *The Dubuque Visitor* and carried the heading "Dubuque Lead Mines, Wisconsin Territory", — which announcement was more progressive than truthful for Wisconsin Territory had not yet been born. The little settlement was still a part of the Territory of Michigan, although a bill to create the Territory of Wisconsin was before Congress when the sheet appeared.

History, however, soon vindicated their prophecy and the heading stood. Being the only paper in the

region it served all factions. King himself was a Democrat, while both parties were represented by his assistants. In the columns of the *Visitor* appeared the announcements of rival candidates for office, long-winded and labored. "A Voter" and "A Candidate" took opposite stands on the question of holding a nominating convention. "Incognito" and "Curtius" and "Hawk-Eye" and other less modest contributors ran the gamut of newspaper eulogy and denunciation. Altogether this four page sheet was a unique and interesting organ and a worthy pioneer in the field of newspaperdom. In 1837 the name was changed to the *Iowa News* and it became a Democratic journal. Later it was succeeded by the *Miners' Express*, whose lineal descendant is the *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald*.

But let us follow a little further the fortunes of the three men and their faithful servant, the press. John King remained in Dubuque, a newspaper man, a judge, and later a retired and prosperous burger.

William Cary Jones, who had been hired by King at three hundred and fifty dollars, "with suitable board and lodging during one year", passed on to other fields. He edited and published a paper in New Orleans, and later practiced law in San Francisco. He served in the Civil War as a captain in the Union Army and was captured and held in prison for some time at Selma, Alabama. He and his fellow prisoners, not content with the *Selma Reporter*, which was smuggled in to them nearly every

day by a friendly cook's assistant, decided to edit a paper of their own, which they printed by hand upon the walls of one of the rooms. Jones was the editor and he was assisted by talented artists among his fellow officers. The paper had an elaborate vignette, composed of a Southerner, a slave, King Cotton, and numerous reptiles. Each number had an illustration, articles, and advertisements, all of which furnished much amusement to men who were punished more by ennui than by their captors.

Andrew Keesecker, like his patron John King, remained in Dubuque. He served on various newspapers, setting type for over a third of a century. He was one of those rare individuals who could compose an editorial as he set it up in type, without reducing it to manuscript; and he acquired a great reputation as a rapid typesetter. Once he engaged in a typesetting contest with A. P. Wood, another Dubuque printer and publisher.

With a printer's devil as umpire they began at a signal to set up the words of the Lord's Prayer. Keesecker finished first and according to arrangements, started to announce his success by calling out the last word. Unfortunately he had a curious habit of stuttering which seemed to increase under excitement. So while he was vainly endeavoring to bring out the triumphant word, Wood also finished and cut into his stumbling efforts with an incisive "Amen"; whereupon Keesecker, recovering his voice, insisted that he had been trying to say that

word for half an hour. The perplexed referee finally gave the award to Keesecker.

There remains the story of the press itself. It was a Washington hand press, made in Cincinnati by Charles Mallet. For about six years it did yeoman service in Dubuque. Then it was removed to Lancaster in western Wisconsin where H. A. Wiltse used it in printing the *Grant County Herald*. A few years later, J. N. Goodhue determined to print the first newspaper in Minnesota, and he bought the press, carried it by ox team up the Mississippi on the ice to St. Paul and used it to print the *Minnesota Pioneer*.

From this point on, the press seems to have had a dual personality. In two different States its remains are reverently guarded, and two State Historical Societies cling firmly, each to its own story of the later career of the old iron pioneer.

In accordance with one story the press had in its varied life acquired a wanderlust and leaving the haunts of comparative civilization it went westward in 1858, by ox team again, across the prairies and through the woods to the settlement at Sioux Falls on the Big Sioux River where it printed the *Dakota Democrat*, the first newspaper in Dakota. But its end came in 1862. In that year the Sioux Indians were on the war path. They raided and burned the town, and the deserted old press, warped and twisted by the fire, found its career of a quarter of a century ended in a typically pioneer fashion. And to-day in the Masonic Museum at Sioux Falls can be seen the

remnants of an old hand press that Dakotans point to with pride as the one which printed the first newspaper in three different Commonwealths.

But the Minnesota Historical Society maintains that the press which migrated to South Dakota was an altogether different press from the one which printed the *Dubuque Visitor* and the *Minnesota Pioneer*, and that John King's old iron servant remained to the end of its days in Minnesota. According to this version, when the *Pioneer* became a daily, the hand press was supplanted by a power press; and it moved, in 1855, from St. Paul to Sauk Rapids, Minnesota, where it produced the *Sauk Rapids Frontiersman*, and later the *New Era*. In after years it printed the *St. Cloud Union*, the *Sauk Center Herald*, and various other papers of central Minnesota. From 1897 to 1899 it served the publishers of a Swedish paper at Lindstrom, Minnesota. Finally, in 1905 the old press was purchased by the Pioneer Press Company and presented to the Minnesota Historical Society, where it can be seen by those who love historic antiques.

Whichever may be the correct version of the later years of this veteran press, its career is a notable one; and the fact remains undisputed that the journalism of at least two different States, Iowa and Minnesota, began with the movement of the lever of the old hand press that John King brought out from Ohio in 1836 to the lead mines on the west bank of the Mississippi.

JOHN C. PARISH.