

Washington's Newspapers

According to Ralph Shannon, a good newspaper and a good town go together; and it is hard to have one and not have the other. This philosophy was formed out of Ralph Shannon's own experience in Washington, of course, but the idea has special significance there. For there were many newspapers competing for the favor of Washington subscribers long before Ralph Shannon joined the old Washington *Morning Gazette* back in 1906. Three generations were to pass before the economic law best expressed as "the survival of the fittest" permitted the town to settle down with one solidly-supported newspaper in 1931.

Newspapers in early Iowa were often ephemeral in character, meager in resources, and generally suffering from "circulatory ailments." Editors needed only a box of type, a makeshift press, and a small quantity of paper to launch their enterprise. Subscription and advertising rates were low, sometimes paid in cash but more often "in kind" — with eggs, poultry, or even a haircut. Political campaigns saw the birth of many newspapers, while the closing of the polls on election day also signaled the demise of the struggling experiment in journalism.

Similar circumstances probably existed in Washington in 1854 when Lewis F. Waldin and J. S. Rice put their money and energy into the town's first newspaper, the *Washington Argus*. Editor Rice espoused the cause of the Democratic party in this weekly at a time when the whole nation was embroiled in the Kansas-Nebraska Act quarrel. Old party loyalties dissolved under the strain of growing tensions. After two years of attempts to coax readers into paying one dollar for a subscription, Waldin and Rice sold their assets — good will and a rather short list of subscribers — to A. R. Wickersham.

Wickersham promptly dropped the old name, re-christened the newspaper, and enlisted in the cause of the new Republican party. From April, 1856, until October, 1918, the *Washington Press* reached readers despite changes in ownership, hard times, and stiff competition. A. S. Bailey joined Wickersham briefly in 1857, then retired in favor of T. H. Stanton. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Stanton left the editor's chair for the battlefield, leaving an opening which Bailey returned to fill until 1866. Howard A. Burrell, a young graduate of Oberlin College who had been serving as city editor of the Cleveland, Ohio, *Daily Leader*, moved to Washington and bought the *Press* in 1866.

Before Wickersham sold the *Press* he had been confronted with sporadic but noticeable local op-

position from the Washington *Democrat*, founded by E. B. Bolens shortly after Lincoln's triumph in the 1860 election. "Republicanism or the Union, one or the other must be abandoned by our people," Editor Bolens declared in his first issue. Bolens was a loyal Union man, although his opponents called him a "Secessionist" and "Copperhead" until his October 11, 1862, issue noted: "No paper next week." The lapse proved permanent, consigning the *Democrat* to journalism's graveyard for the time, leaving Washington with only the *Press*.

For over six years Burrell published the *Press* without local competition. Then, in December, 1868, John Wiseman started the Washington *Gazette*. Wiseman was a lawyer who liked to throw a dash of political ginger into his newspaper brew despite his claim that the *Gazette* was an independent journal. Republican Burrell later recalled that Wiseman's words "felt like a sliver in a finger." L. H. Gowdy and the Rev. Alexander Story bought the paper in 1877, but three years later D. H. Logan took over Story's interest. S. Wake Neal then became Logan's partner. The two men published the *Gazette* for over a generation; they bought out competition and eventually converted the newspaper into a daily in 1904.

Shortly after Wiseman left the *Gazette*, a local printer, Joseph Biles, revived the name and politics of the Washington *Democrat*. Captain J. J. Kel-

logg joined Biles as a partner in November, 1878; but a few months later they sold the *Democrat* to P. S. Kell and George L. McCracken. Kell and McCracken soon disposed of their newspaper by interesting Lobana Waters and William N. Hood in the enterprise. Waters and Hood purchased the *Democrat*; when Waters died in 1881 George Rodman bought his share and assisted Hood until a postmastership beckoned him. This opening permitted Alex R. Miller to become Hood's partner in 1893. One of Miller's competitors admitted the lawyer-journalist's ability to give the *Democrat* an "individual flavor like horse-radish, and makes a lively, racy, readable paper. . . ." Miller also carried on a popular lecture course, spoke at Chautauqua meetings, and still found time to take over the *Democrat's* management completely when Hood died.

Meanwhile, Howard Burrell had been laboring with his *Press* for thirty-seven years in a relatively calm atmosphere ruffled only by the infrequent apostasy of enough party faithfuls to permit the election of Grover Cleveland as President. Burrell finally sold his interest to Ralph L. Livingston in 1903 after he decided to "quit lying," as he put it, and retire "to lead an honest life." Livingston soon bought the weekly subscription list of the *Gazette*, then sold the *Press* to Charles K. Needham of the *Sigourney News*. Needham installed a new linotype machine, bought other new equip-

ment, and apparently was giving competitors stiff bucking when he sold the paper in 1911.

At about the same time that Alex Miller began his venture in journalism, Washington got its first daily newspaper. The *Daily Hustler* made its debut on February 15, 1893, on a small sheet of newsprint measuring 11 by 14 inches. The editor, Harry Keister, told his readers it was "better to start small and grow larger, than to start in an overgrown manner." William McCausland helped Keister along until 1894, when Narris "Nate" Black and William Fitzwilliams joined the editor-in-chief. They changed the name to the Washington *Evening Journal* immediately, but were unable to stay solvent; within a year's time the newspaper was in receivership. It was sold to G. Logan Payne, who hired Ida Roberts and Hugh H. McCleery as assistants, and somehow managed to publish the *Journal* even though the subscription list was alarmingly small.

The really modern era of journalism in Washington began when Orville Elder, Illinois-born and somewhat inexperienced in the ways of the newspaper world, became owner of the *Journal*. A resident of Washington County since 1884, Elder was in his early thirties when he decided to tackle the unenviable job of making the *Journal* a paying success. Hugh McCleery stated in his short history of Washington newspapers that Elder had less than 300 subscribers when he took

over, but he gradually built up the circulation to 2,000 after the advent of rural free delivery.

Elder traveled the country roads seeking subscribers, edited copy, and improved equipment in the *Journal* plant, which was located near the present city library. From the start, Elder's philosophy was that a community newspaper was a public trust. He avoided partisanship, stood aloof of petty quarrels, and never indulged in the personal journalism which was slowly fading away.

Although Washington was a town of less than 4,000 population in 1904, five newspapers made their bid for public support before the year ended. In addition to the *Journal*, *Gazette*, *Press*, and *Democrat*, the *Morning Herald* appeared briefly under the aegis of Hugh McCleery. Logan of the *Gazette* approached McCleery after financial trouble threatened several of the other newspapers. He convinced McCleery the field was overcrowded, then offered to buy the subscription list of the *Herald* if its editor would "cease and desist" from further journalistic ventures in Washington. McCleery accepted, and Logan and Neal began publishing the *Gazette* as a daily.

In 1906 Ralph Shannon, who had broken into the newspaper game as a correspondent for the Washington public schools, joined the *Morning Gazette* as a newsman. From 1904 to 1906 the *Gazette* managed to stay alive, while Elder continued to "plow back" his profits on the *Journal*

into better equipment. For a time Elder hired the *Press* to set up part of his paper on the town's only linotype machine, but in 1907 Elder ended the days of handset type on the *Journal* by purchasing his own typesetter. Meanwhile, Elder made an acceptable offer to the *Gazette's* owners which ended the fight for daily circulation. In purchasing the competitor, Elder also offered to take along part of the staff. This move brought Ralph Shannon to the *Journal* for the first time in 1906. Shannon stayed with the *Journal* until 1908, when he resigned to enter the University of Chicago.

Editor Elder and Bruce Cowden, who had been working around the *Journal* since 1902, found themselves shorthanded in 1913. One result of their success was an offer, telegraphed to Shannon (who was now living at Corpus Christi, Texas), which brought young Shannon back to his hometown as co-owner of the newspaper. For the next twenty-seven years Elder, Cowden, and Shannon published the *Journal* under a triple alliance that was broken only by the death of Elder early in 1940.

While the *Journal* was constantly expanding, Washington readers also continued to support the *Press* and *Democrat*. Charles Needham had sold the *Press* to Smith W. Brookhart, James L. Brookhart, A. J. Dawson, and Anna Dawson in 1911. The Brookharts purchased Dawson's interest later and installed H. W. Walter as managing

editor until Anna Dawson was moved to that position. The Brookharts were politicians and lawyers as well as newspapermen. Smith was elected to the United States Senate in 1922, while James served Washington and Henry counties in the Iowa Senate during the same period. Long before this happened, however, the Brookharts had sold the *Press* to Elder and Shannon on the eve of the World War I armistice in 1918. The *Democrat* had by this time passed into the hands of Frank B. Appleby, who sold his interest to Don Ross and J. Ellitt Grayson in 1924. The name was changed to the Washington *Democrat-Independent*, and it was published until the summer of 1931, when Karl Melcher ended a brief career as its editor by selling out to the *Journal*.

Before the *Journal* absorbed the last of its competitors in the depression-ridden year of 1931, the newspaper had moved into its present quarters. On October 1, 1930, the two-story buff brick Journal Building was dedicated. Max Marble joined Cowden, Elder, and Shannon as a stockholder in the firm, now known as Elder, Shannon and Company. The stock market had already tumbled, farm prices were low, cash was scarce. But somehow the firm managed to "lick the depression," as the saying went, and became a symbol of community progress and stability. The entire county was saddened by the death of Orville Elder early in 1940, and hardness of the blow

was softened only by the realization that Ralph Shannon would succeed the grand old man of Washington journalism.

Elder's editorial policy continued in the front office, while the spirit of friendliness and cooperation was maintained in the press room. Although many newspapers have been plagued with labor disputes in their press rooms, the *Journal's* experience in labor relations has been enviable. Annual bonuses based on longevity, the hands-off policy of the management concerning a union or non-union printing force, and the permanent character of employment are evidence of an unusual relationship between the "boss" and his fellow workers. Added to this are the little but meaningful extras — the passed hat in time of an emergency medical bill or devastating fire, matched by the management — or the communal box of apples furnished by every worker on his or her birthday. There is no talk of the "labor problem" around the *Journal*, because such a problem can not exist in an enterprise where there is an atmosphere of mutual respect between the employer and the employees.

Since 1940 Washington has seen another war and the community has continued its remarkable program of civic building and planning. The *Journal* has had a hand in all these activities, has promoted the famous "Tall Corn" contests, and has lived up to the goal Orville Elder staked out

in 1900. No longer can an ambitious editor start a newspaper with a box of type and a fair vocabulary. Modern journalism demands far more, but it gives more to those who succeed. The era of journalistic penury has been replaced by an age of newspaper responsibility. If every newspaper editor shared this sense of responsibility as Elder and Shannon did, there would be fewer critics of the American press today.

Orville Elder's goal — a good newspaper for a good town — was shared by his partner, Ralph Shannon. Their goal has been achieved in its fullest sense. The *Journal* is a monument to them, as it is to all the Washington men and women who struggled to keep alive there that most vital asset a small city can possess — a good newspaper.

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