

Merger and Monument

Standing at the brink of economic chaos in 1932, the American people somewhat revived their tired spirits with that greatest of spectacles, a presidential election. "Perhaps never in peace times were the newspapers more vital and exciting than in 1932, their columns flooded with news of a nation and world shaken to its foundations by the impact of deflation," the *Editor & Publisher Yearbook* recorded. With millions jobless, bankruptcies commonplace, and soup-kitchens springing up to feed the hungry, the contest between Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt probably provided a healthy method for Americans to "let off steam."

True to their traditions, the *Gazette* supported Roosevelt, the Democratic nominee, while Hoover was favored by the *Hawk-Eye*. The Roosevelt landslide took Iowa into the Democratic camp for only the second time since 1860. After Roosevelt's inaugural in 1933 there followed the famous "one hundred days," with a corps of economists and bright young men swarming into the capital to help find a solution to the nation's woes. The new Congress took up the matter of prohibition, which the Democrats had promised to repeal. The

two Burlington papers seemed to favor following the people's mandate on this touchy issue. Years of racketeerism and lawlessness probably forced the *Hawk-Eye* to abandon its old anti-liquor stand. Iowa voters went along with most of the nation in balloting for legalized liquor with state-controlled sales.

Newspaper circulation scarcely declined, but the big drop came in advertising revenues on the *Hawk-Eye* and *Gazette*. Both papers were paying off mortgages on buildings erected during the prosperous mid-twenties. Now payments were hard to meet, while income seemed to shrink unbelievably. After over one hundred years of journalistic plenty, it seemed that Burlington could no longer afford the luxury of several newspapers. Already the colorful *Saturday Evening Post* had suspended publication.

In these circumstances the trend toward merger appeared to be the only solution to further financial losses. Thus, on June 28, 1933, Omer N. Custer of Galesburg, Illinois, stepped into the Burlington picture. Long a successful publisher in Illinois, Custer joined with Galesburg banker Sidney Nirdlinger to purchase both the *Hawk-Eye* and the *Gazette*. Then Custer consolidated the two old-time rivals under one roof in the *Gazette's* building, and the *Hawk-Eye* structure became a mortuary. Howard T. Custer, son of the new owner, became general manager of proper-

ties, while Garrett remained as editor. Charles M. Morgan (from the *Gazette*) took over as business manager and Tom Green, long time *Gazette* managing editor, remained in an editorial capacity until his retirement in 1948. Henceforth the paper was known as the *Daily Hawk-Eye Gazette*.

Although the consolidation brought the two papers into the former *Gazette* building, it was the spirit of the *Hawk-Eye* which prevailed. O. N. Custer had been a leading Republican publisher in Illinois, inclined toward conservatism, and while he was not active on the local scene his influence was decisive. A year after the merger the newspaper was taking on a healthier glow, with circulation reaching 17,768 copies. When Howard Custer died in 1934 the management of the *Daily Hawk-Eye Gazette* was placed in the hands of Garrett and Morgan.

Slowly the nation recovered from the Great Depression. Unemployment was still high in 1936, however, when the Republican national convention chose Alfred M. Landon to oppose President Roosevelt. The spirited campaign fooled the poll-takers, some of whom had predicted an easy Landon victory. Garrett did not expect a stroll for the Republicans; thus he labored prodigiously for the GOP. Roosevelt won overwhelmingly, despite the support of few newspapers, and many editors and historians asked themselves if the press was still a moulder of public opinion.

Foreign news furnished a good share of the headlines during the 1930's. The Spanish civil war, Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany, and the Soviet army purges in Russia arrested the attention of Burlington readers. On the domestic scene there was the Hindenburg dirigible crash, the Senate investigation on war profits, and the congressional fight over Roosevelt's plan to enlarge the Supreme Court. This arose after the Court had declared invalid the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 and other key "New Deal" legislation. Public response to the proposal was decidedly unfavorable, including the *Daily Hawk-Eye Gazette* comment —

This is no longer a partisan matter. The whole country wants to see harmony restored and see the three divisions of the government return to their constitutional functions and duties and the grave danger of "one-man rule" put down for all time.

Late in July, 1937, Senate opposition stiffened and the idea was abandoned.

Meanwhile, reckless forces were loose in the world, with hardly a check on their power. Germany and her allies formed an "Axis" with military and political implications. After the outbreak of the war in 1939 America sought neutrality, but her sympathies were with Great Britain and the western democracies. The 1940 presidential campaign was carried on with war clouds as a backdrop, a factor which perhaps led to FDR's un-

precedented third term nomination. J. Tracy Garrett went to Philadelphia as a delegate to the Republican convention which nominated Wendell Willkie; then returned to Burlington and was able to report in November that Willkie carried Iowa despite his national defeat. Garrett was delighted to see Iowa back in the Republican fold. He had fought his last political war, however, for on April 14, 1941, Garrett died while "on duty" at the news office.

When O. N. Custer and the other stockholders of the *Daily Hawk-Eye Gazette* decided to sell their newspaper, a short time later, several Kansas newsmen were interested. Negotiations began, and on July 21, 1941, the venerable Burlington daily was sold to Clarence W. Moody of Chanute, John P. Harris of Hutchinson, and Sidney F. Harris of Ottawa, and some of the Kansans' employee associates.

Moody left his position as publisher of the Chanute, Kansas, *Tribune* where he had spent fourteen years, to become editor and publisher of the *Hawk-Eye Gazette*. He had had earlier newspaper experience with the Ottawa, Kansas, *Herald*, where he began as a newspaper carrier and printer's devil in 1906.

The new owners had little time to become familiar with the Burlington operation before the difficulties of wartime publishing overtook them. America entered World War II late in 1941, and

for the next four years shortages of paper, metal, and manpower plagued newspapers along with other business concerns. The first experiments at radio broadcasting of news had frightened some newspapermen in the 1920's, but their fears had been dispelled by the public's desire to see the news in print, along with features, editorials, advertisements, and even crossword puzzles. Circulation of the American dailies during World War II steadily increased, while advertising revenue made gains which would have been declared impossible a decade earlier.

During the war years the *Hawk-Eye Gazette* (the word "Daily" having been dropped and "Burlington" added to the title in 1942) urged readers to save old copies for scrap paper drives, advertised war bonds, carried the glad news of victory, and the sad news of local casualties from the battlefield. After initial discouragement, the American forces began to gain the initiative. The German Juggernaut ground to a halt and finally surrendered in the spring of 1945. Thankfulness rather than exultation marked the editorial tone of the *Hawk-Eye Gazette*. Then came V-J Day, which meant that the war was over. The columns which had been giving Burlington citizens their news for over one hundred years then recorded their fifth war victory — a proud tradition dating back to the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.

In the postwar years the *Hawk-Eye Gazette*

prospered. Prices were high, but so were wages and profits. Over sixty million Americans had jobs, an all-time record of employment. Still, there was some dissatisfaction with the political administration. This feeling led Thomas E. Dewey to express calm optimism as the Republican presidential candidate in 1948. The *Hawk-Eye Gazette* had supported Dewey in 1944 and was again favoring the New York governor. President Harry S. Truman scored a tremendous political upset by defeating Dewey and, incidentally, winning Iowa's electoral votes by a slight margin. However, Dewey carried the *Hawk-Eye Gazette's* area.

The *Hawk-Eye Gazette* took these defeats philosophically, realizing that both political parties had the welfare of the nation at heart. An increasing national debt perturbed many voters, nevertheless. It was further boosted by the Korean police action which began in the summer of 1950, when inflationary curbs had been lifted. Commenting that the over-all scene demanded new leadership, the newspaper was among the first in Iowa to suggest that General Dwight D. Eisenhower should accept the presidency. With Eisenhower's nomination and triumph in 1952 the *Hawk-Eye Gazette* had supported its first winning presidential candidate.

By 1955 the Burlington *Hawk-Eye Gazette* had achieved a notable record. Typographically, the

newspaper had undergone a change of face, from the old handset type to modern make-up designed for attractiveness and readability. From a handful of readers in 1837 there had developed a circulation of 20,500. For 118 years editors Clarke, Edwards, Dunham, Waite, Stivers, Aue, Garrett, and Moody and their fellow laborers had presented eastern Iowans with that valuable commodity — the news. Managing Editor Charles W. McLaury had been a young man when he first worked for John L. Waite in 1913. An even longer service record belonged to Arthur C. Hallgren, who began printing for the Waite regime in 1912 and was still on the job. Several other employees — including F. B. Ertz and G. J. Rieckhoff — boasted twenty or thirty-year records, while those over sixty-five had retired under a profit-sharing trust plan begun in 1943.

Over the years the political leanings of the *Hawk-Eye Gazette* have tended to follow the formula which Whig James Edwards introduced in 1839. Nominally independent, the newspaper's support has traditionally gone to Republican candidates. Nevertheless the reporting staff has been instructed to handle political and other controversial matters factually and objectively. Modern editors Moody and McLaury agree that one of the most outstanding services of the newspaper today is its effort "to tell the public what use is being made of its tax money." It has constantly urged

young men and women to project themselves wholeheartedly into business and politics, and asked their elders to give them a hearing. The postwar campaign to rid Iowa of slot machines was vigorously supported by the *Hawk-Eye Gazette*. Agricultural improvements in Des Moines and surrounding counties have been continuously encouraged.

Long buried are the days of academic argument over whether the *Hawk-Eye* or the *Gazette* had the oldest service record. The consolidation erased the question of longevity and brought together two newspapers which had weathered wars, depressions, and journalistic brickbats for almost a century. The *Hawk-Eye Gazette* of 1955 is a monument to Burlington's newspaper pioneers and their predecessors. It continues to be one of Iowa's most widely quoted newspapers and has received various regional and national awards for outstanding editorial policies and community service.

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