

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Burlington Newspaper Feud

The Burlington *Hawk-Eye Gazette* of 1955 does not claim to be the first, but it is the oldest newspaper in Iowa still publishing. The first newspaper printed in the Iowa Territory was the brief-lived Dubuque *Visitor* of 1836-1837. Many publishing efforts blossomed in those early days, but few survived. Burlington was peculiarly appealing to an aspiring newspaper editor, however, because in 1837 it became the new capital of the Wisconsin Territory.

No cosmopolitan atmosphere with spacious offices and luxurious living quarters was held out to the territorial delegates as inducements for the capital of the Wisconsin Territory. The decision to move from Belmont, Territory of Wisconsin, to the frontier town of Burlington was more a matter of expediency. For all its disadvantages, Burlington was located on the Mississippi River, in a somewhat milder climate. When delegates came to the new capital they found a settlement of rude cabins, a few brick structures, and about

300 inhabitants. Accommodations were scarce. It was difficult to find a meeting place for the legislature, where official business could be transacted.

Like many other towns which had so recently been part of the wilderness, however, Burlington soon possessed that harbinger of progress, the newspaper. The same expediency which had brought the capital to Burlington had motivated James Clarke and Cyrus Jacobs to move there. As official printers for the Territory of Wisconsin, they had packed up the presses, paper stocks, and type lately used for the *Belmont Gazette*. The partners migrated south, and on July 10, 1837, they published the first issue of the *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*. At first Jacobs was "the man with the pencil," while Clarke did the printing chores. Jacobs' death in November of 1837 climaxed a quarrel with attorney David Rorer. Angered by political charges, Jacobs attempted to cane Rorer and was shot — as the coroner said — in self defense. The tragedy thrust both duties on the surviving partner.

Clarke had not long been at the helm of the *Gazette* when a fire swept away part of Burlington. Editor Clarke had his hands full on December 12, 1837, and for many days thereafter. "Wednesday last was a sad day for Burlington, and long will it be remembered in sorrow," he lamented. "Its matin light opened upon the ruins of the fairest portion of our village; and now the

Capitol, and five of our best store houses, and two groceries, are piles of smouldering ruins." The Territorial Council moved into the *Gazette* building. The loss of \$20,000 in property and goods was a blow to the young community.

While Clarke served as editor of the *Gazette* and turned out the official printing for the Territory, a neighboring newsman was having difficulties. James G. Edwards, a handsome young printer, had purchased Dr. Isaac Galland's printing equipment early in 1838 and moved it from Montrose to Fort Madison. There he launched the Fort Madison *Patriot*, a Whig journal, and awaited popular approbation in the form of subscriptions. Within a few months it was apparent to Edwards that the territorial capital offered more promise as a site for his journalistic labors, a fact which prompted him to transfer his press. He cautiously offered the Burlington *Patriot* to would-be patrons on December 13, 1838.

Edwards apparently did not immediately lock verbal horns with Clarke, even though Clarke espoused the cause of the Democratic party, which was in control of the legislature. Edwards actually waited until June 6, 1839, to begin continuous publication. Nevertheless, such careful historians as Burlington-born Philip Jordan have considered the earlier date as the proper one for the beginning of the *Patriot*, which in time became the Burlington *Hawk-Eye*. "The *Patriot* continued to run

along, advocating the Whig cause and decrying the influence of liquor, until September 5, 1839, when the editor changed the name of his paper to the *Hawk-Eye and Iowa Patriot*," Jordan noted in his manuscript history of the two rival newspapers. Possibly at the prompting of Judge David Rorer, Edwards had earlier suggested in his Fort Madison paper that Iowans take "Hawk-Eye" as a nickname. The hyphenated "Hawk-Eye" was and remains unique to the newspaper, while the nickname became an unhyphenated "Hawkeye."

Political discussion formed the warp and woof of these early newspapers. Edwards lashed the policies of the territorial land office when it was operated by Democrats, while Clarke defended the territorial administration as well as the president, Martin Van Buren. Edwards did defend Governor Robert Lucas when the border controversy with Missouri flared, however. "He has seen too much service, and his heart is too stout to be driven from his purpose by *sickly* proclamations or personal intimidations," Edwards warned Missourians.

Clarke had changed the name of his newspaper to the *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser* in July, 1838, and promised that it would not be "a *partizan* paper." This pledge proved to be a chimera when the rival editors became engrossed in the election campaign that culminated in a Whig victory. Before this intense

1840 campaign Clarke had acquired a partner in John H. McKenny. While Clarke and McKenny termed William Henry Harrison's platformless campaign the "great pageant of the log cabin," Van Buren and "Locofocism" were denounced by Edwards. A Whig parade through Burlington was mocked by the *Gazette* in a petulant tone: "The editor of the *Hawk-Eye*, as usual, played *Mr. Monkey* to the caravan of whiggery that was exhibited here on the 6th."

Although politics and the territorial statutes, printed column after column, were the main dish of most editors, other items supplied readers with news of steamboat landings, recipes, advice on crops, and "the latest foreign intelligence" — a term usually reserved for clipped stories from eastern newspapers with European news at least two or three months old. The rival Burlington editors were no exception to this rule. Until the telegraph reached Iowa, they depended on the exchanges received in every mail delivery for news of the outside world. Local news items were infrequent, with steamboat disasters, fires, births, deaths, and marriages providing much of the Iowa offerings.

McKenny acquired Clarke's interest in the *Gazette*, probably late in 1840, and continued the pro-Democratic tone of the newspaper when the territorial capital was removed to Iowa City. Late in the summer of 1842 Bernhart Henn and James M. Morgan became joint editors and publishers

of the newspapers without altering its political complexion. Henn later moved to Fairfield and was elected to Congress in 1850 and 1852. Morgan, known to friends as "Little Red," was a clever writer and astute politician who also held a seat in the state legislature. To these men "whiggery" was a blasphemous word, particularly around election time. After acting as gentlemen of the press for a year, they returned the reins to Clarke in the midst of a bitter campaign for delegate to Congress which ended in the election of Augustus C. Dodge.

Both the *Gazette* and *Hawk-Eye* charged a flat two dollars per year subscription rate during these early years, with the provision that either the cash or its equivalent in produce be paid in advance. This charge must have seemed high to some readers, for both papers found collections difficult. "We are in great need of money," Edwards once confessed. "We must have it to secure our winter's stock of paper. Will delinquent subscribers help us out?" The complaint was a common one for frontier editors, who realized that most of their subscribers saw precious little cash during the entire year.

Edwards had a dual allegiance during his editorship. He shared his deepest loyalty with the Whig party and the temperance cause. He had formerly edited a temperance newspaper in Illinois, and now he frequently used the columns of

the *Hawk-Eye* to announce temperance meetings and print columns denouncing the demon rum.

Gradually the town of Burlington gathered more of the trappings of an advanced society. Frequent news items in both the *Hawk-Eye* and the *Gazette* told of church buildings being raised, of scheduled theatrical performances, of the arrival from eastern factories of such fancy goods as artificial flowers, cut glass, or ladies' hats. The columns contained advertisements for the inevitable hair restorers, patent medicines, lawyers' cards, list of letters at the post office, and occasionally the announcement that a St. Louis dentist was in town for a brief stay.

Sports events also found their way into these early issues. Hunters headed toward the western buffalo country often stopped in Burlington for their accoutrements, and their feats found space under captions of "The Buffalo Hunt." News of trotting matches was appreciated by Burlington citizens, with track conditions, times, and breeding charts a feature of such items.

While the *Gazette* passed through a succession of owners and editors, Edwards clung to the *Hawk-Eye* by himself until 1844, when Fitz Henry Warren joined him, and 1845, when J. M. Broadwell became his partner. For his loyalty and support to the Democratic party, Clarke was rewarded by appointment from James K. Polk as territorial governor in November, 1845. This

placed him in the background of the *Gazette* leadership for several years while less experienced men took over.

The coming of statehood late in 1846 was hailed by both papers as a propitious event. Amidst other changes, the *Gazette* became the *Iowa State Gazette*. Other events — the war with Mexico, the Texas question, and the settlement of Oregon — also left their mark on the community. Indeed, it seemed that a new order was about to take over when the first telegraphic news dispatches reached the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* in August of 1848. The capital had been moved to Iowa City, but the rising commerce on the river front kept Burlington bustling. The population had grown to over 3,000, sustained by more than 14,000 tons of farm products shipped out in 1847. Only the dreaded ravages of disease and the foibles of weather seemed to stand in the way of greater progress.

When a cholera epidemic struck Burlington in 1850, James Clarke fell among the first victims. During another outbreak of the cholera a year later Edwards died. The two men who had founded the keen rivalry between the *Hawk-Eye* and the *Gazette* were dead, but the political basis for their controversy soon brought the entire nation to the brink of self-destruction, and was carried forward by their zealous successors.

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