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# Newspaper History

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# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN C. PARISH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

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## Newspaper History

What is the value of yesterday's newspaper? In a bygone day it served the thrifty housewife as a cover for the kitchen table, or in company with its fellows of the days before as a lining for the ingrain carpet; and if the good husband was handy, it might on a winter evening be cut into strips and deftly rolled into the long slender tapers that stood in the tumbler on the shelf beside the Seth Thomas clock to be used in carrying the necessary flame from the briskly burning hickory wood fire in the air-tight stove to the wick of the kerosene oil lamp.

But in these ultra-modern days of steam heat, electric light and power, enamel topped tables, and hardwood floors, the newspaper, like the grass, "to-day is in the field and tomorrow is cast into the oven"; or it may find its way to the baler in the basement and presently it is returned to the paper mills from whence it came in the endless round of pulp and paper and print.

The average subscriber to that "largest circulation", which is the daily boast of every newspaper of any standing, would probably scoff at the suggestion that there is anything of real value from the standpoint of scientific history in the newspaper; and yet we know that the leading historical institutions of the country are piling up literally tons and tons of newspapers. Although their rapid accumulation presents a very real problem, if not a genuine embarrassment to every great historical library, thousands of dollars are spent annually in binding and properly shelving the newspapers of the day — for the use of the historian of the future.

That there is trouble ahead for the historian we will admit. In his endeavors to retrace the footprints of this present age of black-face type, what is to be the criterion of the relative importance of news? Does the 120 point headline set forth public information that is twice as consequential as the 60 point, and four times the public concern of that of the 30 point? Is he to believe as he turns the yellowing pages of the Iowa newspapers that the news "Ames Defeats Iowa" was, in the public mind of the period, of twice the importance of the news that "Wartime Coal Regime Begins", while the news that "2¾ Beer Gets Hearing" and "Mary Pickford Divorced" was of twice the importance of the Ames-Iowa game and of six times the public concern of the war time coal regime?

How will the historian winnow out the pregnant

facts that lie buried "under bushel-heaps of worthless assertion" in an age of censored dispatches, "doctored stuff", "prepared dope", private propaganda, camouflaged news, and extravagant advertising? How will he distinguish the work of the competent, independent, investigating reporter in the record of current topics and passing events from the manipulated news of the clever press agent attorney? How will he treat the deliberately scraped and sponged and overlaid palimpsests of this newspaper epoch that they may tell the true story that is there recorded?

With due allowance for the extravagant use of 120 point type, for the insidious press agent and the organized manipulation of public opinion and for all the "fecundity and fallibility which are peculiar to journalism", what is there in these great library files of daily newspapers that justifies their preservation and proper classification? Almost everything that the student of history wants. For in spite of "slang-whanging" and editorial vituperation, and the sometimes startling results of "the carelessness of the compositors and the absent mindedness of the readers of proof", in spite of its double rôle of "universal advertiser and universal purveyor of knowledge", the daily newspaper is the best reflector of the times that the student of history can find.

In our own day it has become something of a vogue to speak contemptuously of the "lurid press",

the "scandalous gossip" of the "brazen-faced reporter", the "incurable lying habit of the newspapers", "the millionaire-owned press", and of the "A. P." as "the damndest, meanest, monopoly on the face of the earth". Nevertheless, the daily newspaper holds the mirror up to modern society and reflects with unflattering faithfulness the life and psychology of the times. Old records, official reports of events, and the more carefully written and leisurely revised monographic and book literature give us the "cabinet picture" of the times, with head clamped in place "a little more to the right, please, and chin up", with the "pleasant expression" patiently held while the photographer counts off the requisite number of seconds, and with perhaps a final smoothing out of wrinkles in the retouching.

The newspaper, on the other hand, gives us all unconsciously the natural record of the every-day life of a community, and the snapshots of the times in working clothes — which are always the best pictures. These pictures with all their incongruities, vulgarities, and blemishes may not always be pleasing; but they are, for the most part, "speaking likenesses" of the community, with all of its "roughness, pimples, and warts".

It is the every-day newspaper snapshot that gives us the local color in the description of passing events, the dominant passions and prejudices in the discussion of current topics, the sudden disclosure of popular temper and sentiment in the acceptance or

rejection of political issues, and that "preserves imperishably the fashion prevailing for posterity to look upon with reverence or a smile". The testimony of gossipy letters and memoirs no longer goes unchallenged and the critical reviewer of historical monographs now scrutinizes the footnotes to see whether the writer has made use of the newspapers of the period.

For a concrete illustration, let us take the newspapers not of the present day nor of the remote past, but of eighty years ago in our own Commonwealth. The Iowa newspaper of 1840 was a very modest affair — innocent of the glaring headlines of the "extras", innocent of cartoons, half-tones, the wondrous depiction of "Wilson's Boiled Ham" and "Sunshine Biscuits", or the adventures of Mr. Jiggs; but we find abundant material in every four-page issue concerning the three chief phases of the life of the people which constitute their history — the social life, the political life, and the industrial life.

Eighty years ago Iowa City was the capital of the Territory of Iowa, and the two leading newspapers of the early forties were the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, the Democratic "organ", and the *Iowa Standard*, the Whig journal — the *Reporter* being referred to, by the *Standard*, as the "Locofoco Rag", and the *Standard* being referred to, by the *Reporter*, as the "Whiggery Humbug". These old files of the "Rag" and the "Humbug" fairly bristle with information

concerning the life of the period — the beginnings of church life, the character of the schools, the amusements, the reading matter, the follies, hopes, ambitions, and ideals of the people of the community.

We read, for example, that on two Sundays, in January, 1841, the Methodists held services with frontier camp meeting fervor in the open air near the post-office on some lumber belonging to John Horner. The Baptists with equal fervor “buried in baptism” two candidates for membership beneath the “limpid waters of the Iowa River”.

The opening of a private school is noted: “Tuition per Quarter of 12 weeks \$3.50. House rent, fuel, etc. 1.00 additional.” There is mention of a school for Young Ladies with special emphasis on instruction in “Reading, Writing, and Mental Arithmetic. History — Sacred, Profane, Ecclesiastical and Natural. Natural, Moral and Intellectual Philosophy.”

We note the laying of the corner stone of Mechanics’ Academy, which afterwards became the first home of the State University. Both Democratic and Whig papers urge special training for agricultural and mechanical employment. “Agriculture”, says the editor of the *Reporter*, “is the noblest pursuit of man and we deplore the fact that so large a part of our new country has given itself up to visionary projects of speculation.”

“A course of lessons in Music” is announced “according to the Pestalozzian system of instruction.” A Glee Club, it is said, “will bring out a new set of

glees for the approaching election." A lecture in the Legislative Council Chamber on "Astronomy" is reported. "The lecturer's remarks", we are told, "were within the comprehension of the humblest intellect." There are notices of camp meetings, and lyceum and literary association meetings which the ladies of Iowa City and its vicinity are especially requested to attend.

The citizens are requested "to turn out and attend a meeting of the Temperance Society in the school house at early candle light". The cause of temperance was popular in the pioneer days of the forties, and there are many notices of meetings of the Washingtonians and the Total Abstinence Society.

Public dinners were given to honor public men, and Fourth of July celebrations held with the ladies four abreast taking their place behind the officer of the day. Cotillion figures are described and balls recorded. One comes upon many newspaper apostrophes "To the Ladies" (who were scarce on the frontier); and there was much writing of poetry.

There are records of marriages and deaths, elopements and house-raisings, and a list of river accidents and steamboat disasters. A citizen announces he will no longer be responsible for his wife Hulda's debts. There are notices of claim sales, of petitions for bankruptcy, and of the foreclosures of mortgages. In short, bits of the sunshine and shadows of the every day life of the period are recorded with an unconsciousness that gives them special value.



The political life of eighty years ago is reflected far more than it is to-day on the editorial page. This page has, as it no doubt will ever have, its problems for the student of history. In these early newspapers of the first capital he finds the Whig editor variously referred to by his esteemed contemporary as "that miserable caricature of his species", "the contemptible slang-whanger of the *Standard*", and "that biped of the neuter gender whose name stands at the mast head of that servile truckling organ of Whig skullduggery". He finds numerous references in the *Standard* to the "Bombastes Furioso" and to the "red hair and spectacles of the Loco-foco scribbler", to the "hybrid politician who furnishes the wind for the *Reporter*", and to "the thing which says it edits that filthy and demagogical sluice of Loco-focoism, the *Reporter*". He finds national as well as local issues treated with uncompromising thoroughness and partisanship. He finds scorching editorials on "The Tottering Fabric of Federalism" on the one hand, and bitter denunciation of "Loco-foco Black-guardism" on the other. "Iowa" is referred to by the *Reporter* as "the apex of the Noble Pyramid of Democracy"; and the *Standard* replies, "Whew dont we blow a shrill horn". The *Standard* declares that Democracy leads logically to a dissolution of the Union, to which the *Reporter* replies:

Bow wow wow  
Whose dog are thou?  
I'm Henry Clay's Dog  
Bow wow wow.

The Legislative Assembly meets, and the *Standard* calls attention to the fact that the "Committee on Public Printing is composed of only four members and every one of them most bitter and uncompromising Locos". "Nothing good", it adds, "was anticipated from them and the result has precisely answered the expectations." To which the *Reporter* replies that "the people of Iowa have had enough of the yelps and whines of the *Standard* puppy on the subject of Extravagance in Public Printing".

A Whig leader in the Council makes a speech and the *Reporter* remarks that "it is the poorest wheel of a wagon that always creaks the loudest."

There are editorials and communications on Abolition, Tariff and Free Trade, The Right of Petition, The Preëmption Law, State Banks, Retrenchment and Reform, Bribery and Corruption, Resumption of Specie Payment, Cider Barrels and Coon Skins. One correspondent thinks too much pressure is being brought upon him to vote. "I do not like to be drove", he explains with genuine Iowa independence, "I can be led but can not be drove."

What is there here for the student of political history? A mine of information. No miner expects to find his gold ready for the jeweler's hands. Much labor is required to free it from base metal. And so the student of political history will clear away vituperation and partisanship, personalities, and "the shorter and uglier words", and find nuggets of valuable material in this collection.

In like manner advertisements reflect something of the industrial life of the period. The rise, and yea the fall, of infant industries in the Territory, the occupations of the early settlers, the degree of specialization in the trades, labor organizations, wages — all these and more one is able to portray from the paid advertisements. Either space was more valuable in those days or there was less money to pay for it, for with very few exceptions these advertisements consist of from five to eight line notices to the public signed by the merchant or mechanic himself.

The public is informed that “a ferry across the Mississippi River at Bloomington, Iowa Territory, has been established and as soon as the river is free from ice next spring a boat will be in operation.” There are proposals for carrying the “mail of the United States from Bloomington to Iowa City thirty miles and back once a week.” Territorial scrip is taken in payment (at par) for all articles at a certain store. Elsewhere Dubuque money will be accepted at five per cent discount. “Just received per Steamer Rapids the following Groceries”, reads one advertisement, “6 Boxes Tobacco. 40 bbls. New Orleans Molasses. 30 Sacks Rio & Havana Coffee 13 bbls. Rum, Gin & Whiskey. 25 Sacks Ground Alum Salt & 16 Kegs Pittsburg White Lead.” A variety of “spring goods” is advertised as received by the “Steam Boats Mermaid, Agnes & Illinois”, including “2 Bales of Buffalo Robes, Jeans & Linseys, Merinoes & Bombazines, Fancy and Mourning

Calicoes, Boots & Brogans, Salaratus, Tobacco, Loaf & Brown Sugar. Fashionable Hats & Crockery." "A Raft of Hewed Oak Timber" is offered for sale. A remedy for fever and ague is recommended. A hotel with the "best of table and stables" offers its services. So does a "Portrait & Miniature Painter". A bricklayer announces that he has arrived in the Territory. A partnership is formed in the plastering business. Eight lawyers and nine doctors respectfully call the attention of a community of six hundred souls to their existence; and we note the beginnings of the "Doctors' Trust" in the following published rate of charges as adopted at a meeting of the physicians held in Bloomington on the fifth of February, 1841:

First visit in town in the daytime	1.00
Every succeeding visit	.50
Visit in the night time	1.50
Bleeding	1.00
Tooth extracting	1.00
Attention on a patient all day or night by request	5.00

In addition to the "Doctors' Trust" there were those who practiced the "healing art"; and one Botanic Physician advertises that "the remedial agents employed for the removal of disease will be innocuous vegetables."

The arrival of the "Steamboat Ripple", the first boat to reach Iowa City, is announced; and in an editorial it is learned that its arrival was witnessed

by a delighted throng of four hundred. The event was celebrated by "as good a dinner as has ever been gotten up in the Territory." This convincing proof of the navigability of the Iowa River was prophesied as the "turning point in the commercial life of the first Capital."

An enterprising farmer makes eighty gallons of molasses ready to sugar from corn stalks, and this is regarded as the beginning of an important industry in this new country. A "load of lead" fourteen feet below the surface is discovered on the banks of the Iowa River, and in the excitement and local enthusiasm which followed, the editor of the *Standard* declares that "Nothing better could have happened to make this section of the country and especially Iowa City, a perfect Eldorado, than the discovery which has been made in Johnson County. It has, ever since the settlement of this county, been believed, that it abounded with immense mineral of various kinds. Several townships of land west of Iowa City, we are told, were returned to the General Land Office as mineral lands. This must form a new era in the history and existence of Iowa City."

Incidentally from a survey of news items, editorials, and advertisements, one gathers something of the early history of the press itself and something of the trials and vexations of the early editor. That ye editor of eighty years ago was more than the "slang-whanger" and the "biped of the neuter gender" his contemporary would lead us to believe, we learn

from the versatility of his weekly contributions. In addition to pointing out the "skullduggery" and the "venom and impotent malignity" of the opposite party, and his weekly combat on Abolitionism, Federalism, Our Legislature, The Public Printing, and Banking, he writes of Flowers, Sympathy, The Wedding, The American Girl, Winter Evenings, Setting Out in Life, The Progress of a Hundred Years, The Bunker Hill Monument, Christmas, and New Year's Musings. He observes that "true politeness is not a matter of mere form of manner but of sentiment and heart." He maintains that "virtue and honesty are better recommendations for a husband than dollars." He deplures "the senseless rage for gentility", "the silly ambition of figuring in a higher station than that to which we belong", "the folly of sacrificing substance to show", and of "mistaking crowd for society".

The editor threatens to publish the list of delinquent subscribers; and he denounces the borrowing of a neighbor's paper as unworthy of a citizen of this promising country. The scarcity of money is reflected in the editor's offers to take produce of any and every kind in exchange for subscriptions to his paper; and he demands the delivery of the wood that "a certain gentleman not a thousand miles from a neighboring town promised him last month". "It is the height of folly", he adds, "to tell an editor to keep cool when he has to burn exchange papers to keep warm." Finally, the editor takes a bold stand

and declares that "candidates for office who wish their names announced for office will hereafter accompany such notices with two dollars cash for trouble, wear of type, etc."

In spite of times being "so hard that you can catch pike on the naked hook", the paper is "enlarged at several dollars extra expense but will be afforded at the same low price as the small one has been."

A Democratic postmaster is warned that "the packages of Whig papers (which we ourselves deliver at the post office every Friday evening at 6 o'clock) are not so minute as to be imperceptible, and are not hereafter to be delayed by party malice. If they are, just wait till the 4th of March — that's all!"

The *Iowa Farmers and Miners Journal* is announced; and *Godey's Magazine* is noted by the press of Iowa as "the only magazine intended for the perusal of females that is edited by their own sex."

Such are some of the glimpses we get of the life, of the politics, and of the industries of eighty years ago — of the hopes and ambitions, the prejudices and animosities, the plans and activities, the successes and disappointments of the early Iowan — gleaned from a file of old newspapers. And so we make our acknowledgments to the newspapers of to-day and lay them carefully away in fire-proof quarters for the student of another generation.

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