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# The First Five Years

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## The First Five Years

"Where is the Wilderness that once was wide around thee!"

With this exclamation of prophetic optimism *The Western Adventurer and Herald of the Upper Mississippi* was presented on June 28, 1837, to the inhabitants of the little settlement at the head of the Des Moines Rapids. The potential subscription list could not have been long. According to the first issue, Fort Des Moines "has ceased to exist; the United States troops, formerly stationed here, have been ordered elsewhere by the Government". The Des Moines Land Company had taken possession of the fort and was busy planning a new town "to be called Montrose". It was in the office of the land company that publication of the newspaper was begun. Both in spirit and scope the title of this four-page, seven-column sheet was indicative of the hopes of Iowa pioneers, particularly the editors.

With nothing more than an old font of type, a hand press, partisan zeal, and irrepressible confidence, the early printers in Iowa boldly assumed the position of oracles and purveyors of news. They wrote vigorous editorials, clipped items from

other papers, mentioned a few local happenings, copied stories and poems from current books and magazines, gathered advertisements, and begged for subscriptions. In most instances the glowing prospects soon faded. Weeks when no paper appeared became more frequent. Hope flickered and went out. But the editor only gathered up his meager equipment, moved to another town, and began all over again.

During the decade between the publication of the first issue of the *Du Buque Visitor* on May 11, 1836, and the admission of Iowa into the Union on December 28, 1846, approximately two dozen newspapers were started. Ten of them still survived at the end of the Territorial period. They lived and died on politics. The agitation for statehood prompted the establishment of several papers, and public printing nurtured the organ of the dominant party at the capital. Though a few of the present Iowa newspapers trace their origin to Territorial times, most of the pioneer sheets were short lived.

The *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Burlington Advertiser*, the third paper to be published in Iowa, drew its life blood from the legislative proceedings of Wisconsin Territory. Founded at Belmont in 1836, it followed the government when the capital was moved to Burlington in 1837.

Some idea of the benefit of political patronage can be gathered from the item of \$2568.41 paid to the proprietors as printers for the first Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Wisconsin. James Clarke, the brilliant and aggressive editor, kept in political favor. Beneath the name plate of the "Gazette" after it was moved to Burlington appeared the line: "In this paper the Laws, Resolves, and Public Treaties of the United States are Published by authority." Clarke became Secretary of Iowa Territory in 1839 and in 1845 he was appointed Governor.

If the *Iowa News*, which was first issued on June 3, 1837, is considered the direct successor of the *Du Buque Visitor* with only the name and volume number changed, then only two new papers were started in Iowa in 1837. The following year witnessed the beginning of two more. James G. Edwards bought the press and type of the Montrose "Western Adventurer", whose bold exploit in frontier journalism had already ended in disaster, and started the *Fort Madison Patriot* on March 24, 1838. But the "Patriot" lived only five months. At the behest of zealous Whigs, Editor Edwards moved his press and type to Burlington, the capital, and began publishing the *Iowa Patriot* on June 6, 1839. Three months later the name was changed to *Hawk-Eye and Iowa*

*Patriot*. The "Iowa Patriot" part was dropped on October 17, 1839.

With a sweeping bow the *Iowa Sun and Davenport and Rock Island News* appeared upon the scene of Iowa journalism on August 4, 1838. It was the first to be printed in Davenport and the fifth in the Territory. "Like the Sun which distributes light and heat over the beautiful prairies of Iowa on a broad and liberal and impartial scale," announced Editor A. Logan with ecstatic gusto, "Our paper (observing this instructive economy of Nature) will cast its rays over the moral and political landscape, regardless of those petty interests and local considerations which might contract its beams."

Whatever else it lacked, the "Sun and News" was not deficient in ambition. For four years it disseminated orthodox Democratic doctrine, extending its influence as far west as the capital at Iowa City. At last, however, the editor gave heed to his motto: "And Man Went Forth to Till the Ground". Having decided to forsake the pen and follow the plow, Logan allowed the "Sun" to set. His equipment was sold to some Mormons who started a paper at Buffalo a few miles down the river. They called it *The Bride and the Lamb's Wife*, a title that was later changed to the *Buffalo Ensign*.

The year 1839 was unproductive of new papers. In 1840, however, two more weekly journals were started, both at Bloomington (Muscatine) and within four days of each other. With an eye to the future, *The Iowa Standard* was "printed and published simultaneously at Bloomington and Iowa City", the first issue appearing on October 23, 1840. Early in June, 1841, Editor William Crum moved his paper to Iowa City, increased the size to six columns, and changed the name to *Iowa City Standard*. By that time the Whigs were in control and Crum was soon able to announce that his paper was authorized to publish the laws.

The *Bloomington Herald* was born on October 27, 1840, in a wretched cabin no better than a stable. In those humble surroundings the progenitor of the present Muscatine "Journal" began publication. Though the birth of the paper may have been inauspicious, good fortune smiled upon it, particularly in the character of its foster parents. When the "Herald" had just passed its sixth anniversary with a circulation of about 500, a thirteen-year-old apprentice boy came to work in the shop for his board and clothes. Five years later, that boy became the editor and for half a century he, John Mahin, made his newspaper a vital force in the community it served.

During the first five years of the history of jour-

nalism in Iowa, eight newspapers were established. The first was at Dubuque, the second at Montrose, the third at Burlington, the fourth at Fort Madison, the fifth at Davenport, the sixth at Burlington, and the seventh and eighth at Bloomington. Six of them still survived at the beginning of 1841. The second half of the Territorial decade witnessed the origin of newspapers at Iowa City, Keosauqua, and Keokuk; another attempt at Fort Madison; and the rise of competitors in the other towns.

In the yellowing pages of these old papers the story of the creation of the Commonwealth of Iowa can be traced. The files are alive with political events; the blazing of westward trails; the origin of commercial enterprises; the development of transportation facilities; the initiation of cultural activities; and the controversies over such moral questions as slavery and temperance. In the life of the Territory the newspapers played a conspicuous part.

Editors had troubles aplenty. Winter blizzards whistled through the chinks of log cabins, filling type cases with snow and freezing the printer's fingers. Summer droughts, spring floods, and delinquent accounts delayed shipments of paper from Saint Louis. In such emergencies the day of publication was postponed: sometimes a week

was skipped altogether. Sudden changes in the size and shape of the sheet might be due to a fresh supply of paper as well as new management.

So-called subscribers seem to have been frozen assets. When ardent appeals for cash failed to thaw them, the editor offered to accept almost anything — wood, grain, barrels, lumber, poultry, butter, eggs, or old clothes. Democrats were as poor pay as Whigs.

Advertising began to increase about 1841. Dry goods stores used newspaper space to help sell their bonnets and worsteds. Patent medicine advertisements, telling of nostrums to cure every imaginable human ailment, kept the wolf from more than one publisher's door. In some instances such ads provided the chief source of revenue.

When snow, drifting high in the roads, kept the stagecoach from bringing in the weekly exchanges, the editors apologized for their lack of national news and substituted some literary bit such as "The Truant Beau, Caught and Caged". Apparently local items were held in low esteem. Very little space was devoted to them. The announcement that a cow had given "birth to three heifer calves"; the arrest of a woman "who stole a bolt of ribbon from I. Myler"; and even a \$10,000 damage suit, in which a "fair one sued for heart-ache sustained by a gentleman's refusal to marry

her", were relegated to page three, whereas page one was filled with clippings and the business cards of lawyers, doctors, dentists, and land agents.

Gradually, however, the emphasis shifted from borrowed stories to current happenings of the countryside. Social activities, conventions of temperance advocates, and the public quarrels of rival editors occupied more and more space. With this growing independence of exchanges, the influence and vitality of the pioneer newspapers increased. Several came of age before the war.

As the years passed, the press grew in political power. Editors were appointed postmasters. Money was actually paid for subscriptions and the number of hams proffered in lieu of currency decreased. The print shops acquired fresh paint and new doors, and steam presses replaced the temperamental makeshifts operated by hand. The itinerant printer with his "shirt-tail full of type" became more settled in his ways and more permanent in his residence. One by one the younger brothers (certainly the pioneer newspapers had no feminine characteristics) of the old *Du Buque Visitor* grew to startling proportions until in size, appearance, and advertising they little resembled their humble predecessor.

VELMA CRITZ STOUT