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The Biography of a Newspaper

One of my college chums was George C. Harrington, the son of a farmer near Joliet. When he left Union College, he joined a brother, a steamboat man, who lived at Davenport, Iowa. The latter was possessed of considerable means which he offered to share with his brother. George looked the ground over, and, being more or less literary in his tastes, concluded that the best investment would be an evening newspaper.

This was in the spring of 1856, and soon after young Harrington reached Davenport I received a letter from him in which he offered me a half interest in his enterprise, without cost to myself; he to furnish the plant, and sufficient capital to sustain the publication until it grew strong enough to walk alone.

I felt, of course, highly complimented by this liberal proposition; and after some further letters from Harrington, in which he painted, in richest colors, the beauty and wonderful prospects of the city and its surroundings, and more especially the certainty of immediate success and ultimate fortune in the newspaper venture, I threw up my position

[This intimate account of the melancholy career of the Davenport *Daily Evening News* is adapted for THE PALIMPSEST from Franc B. Wilkie's *Personal Reminiscences of Thirty-five Years of Journalism*.
— THE EDITOR]

on the Schenectady *Evening Star* and went to Davenport.

Davenport was then a handsome and promising town. The first railway bridge across the Mississippi had just been completed, connecting the Chicago and Rock Island Railway with Davenport. It may be said at this point that this splendid connection was an object of intense opposition — both its building and its existence long after it was completed. The river interests, which included the majority of the population of the city, saw only ruin in the bridge. It would make the town a way-station; it would annihilate the two ferry-boats which transported freight and passengers across the river, and pauperize the teamsters and all the other industries involved in the transportation business.

The opposition was furious. Threats of blowing up the bridge were common, and when some reckless pilots, in taking their vessels through the draw, would now and then wreck one against a pier, the disaffection against the structure assumed almost the dimensions of a riot. Time passed. There was a ferry-boat or two thrown out of service, but, in the end, Davenport throve under the alleged misfortune and became rich and prosperous.

Davenport was, at that time, a characteristic “river town”. The majority of the business interests were involved in the receipt and shipment of goods by the Mississippi River. Long lines of steamers lay along the “levees,” as the landings were termed.

The men connected with the river traffic were the aristocracy of the region. The captain was away up in the altitude of rank, but the pilot, when he stood at his wheel, was a greater person than the captain. The clerk of the boat was always spoken of by the newspapers as "Billy Johnson, the gentlemanly and popular clerk of the *Hawkeye*." Even the burly, big-fisted, bull-necked, blaspheming mate rose considerably above the average business man, the lawyer, and the preacher in the estimate of the elements of the population which found occupation in loafing or working on the levee.

Back of the shanties, the capacious warehouses, and the ginmills, the ground rose slowly toward the lofty bluffs, on which were scattered dwellings, a few business blocks, and the steeples of three or four churches. The sloping site of the town was a lovely one, and, to some extent, justified the ardent belief of its residents — especially those who owned and owed for real estate — that it was the future city of the great West.

Harrington, my partner, a slender young blonde, had thoroughly mastered the printing business before he entered Union College, and, as a consequence, he had no difficulty in selecting the material for the new venture. Office and composing as well as press rooms were all secured in a single apartment on the second floor of James Grant's block.

On September 20, 1856, the first number of the *Daily Evening News* was given to the public. It was

a five-column sheet, and, being printed from brand-new type and on some paper selected for a beginning, it was exceedingly handsome, and satisfactory to the publishers and a fairly large share of the community. As a matter of course, the initial number had a plethoric supply of advertisements, so that the first paper was full of promise of substantial circulation and excellent business patronage.

“Isn’t she a beauty?” asked my partner, as he picked one of the first copies from the pile and regarded its clear, distinct impressions with a warmth of admiration such as he would have extended to a masterpiece of Guido.

“Indeed she is!” was the reply of his equally enthusiastic partner. “We have got it! The future is ours, and we’ll wipe the *Democrat* out of existence!”

The Davenport *Democrat* was a morning daily which had been in circulation some months, and concerning which more anon. Suffice it that, without knowing any of the editors, publishers, or anything else concerning the paper in question, we hated it with deadly animosity.

There was also a morning Republican newspaper, the *Gazette*, which, of course, we were compelled to look upon with contempt as the organ of the opposition, the mere and mercenary instrument of fanatics and bigots. But from a personal and business standpoint there was nothing venomous in our attitude toward the *Gazette* as in the case of our Democratic rival.

Time rolled on till the holidays came, and during all this period business was satisfactory. Other newspapers sent us marked copies of their issues in which were flattering notices of the *News*, with "Please X" on the wrapper. These papers were nearly all weeklies, semi-monthlies, or monthlies, and yet they were so cordial and flattering in their allusions that we could not resist their request for an even exchange. Under the staring head-line, "What the Press Thinks of Us," we reproduced all these compliments in leaded minion and felt that we were deserving of all the outrageous flattery, and also thought that the public, perusing these notices with an untrammelled interest, would accept all as Gospel truth.

Up to the last day of the year business was flourishing, and we frequently felicitated each other on the bonanza we had found and the certainties of a grand success in the near future. So promising was this period that our enterprise attracted attention from foreign capital. Hon. George Van Hollern, who became a well-known judge on the bench in New York City, and his brother, John, were in Davenport at the time engaged in the practice of law. They were so impressed with the success of the *News* that they proposed to organize a real-estate and banking house in connection with the newspaper. Capital in New York City became interested; the proposed institution was given a name; cards were printed on which were the names of the Van Hollerns, Harring-

ton, and myself, as constituting the new financial combination.

One may fancy the feelings of two young fellows just out of college as they contemplated this galaxy of glory, all within less than four months! It was overpowering, incomprehensible! We could not repress our joy; we moved on wings; we no longer walked: we soared far up in the blue empyrean!

Almost immediately after the holidays there was a big falling-off in advertisements. The shrinkage was palpable and alarming. At the same time collections became difficult; accounts regarded as gilt-edged, and which we had held back for a possible emergency, were met by requests to "call again!"

The *News*, in a little time, was running at a loss. For a couple of months we had worked off the issue on a hand press, and just before business turned we had taken advantage of the boom to purchase a power press, the money for which had been advanced by an enthusiastic farmer who was anxious to have something to do with a newspaper. We were to pay for the press in installments, one of which was past due, and another near maturity, and our patron was getting inquisitive, paying us frequent visits and seeming to be unusually interested in our welfare.

George and I discussed the situation.

"What, in the name of Heaven, is the matter with everything and everybody? Business is stampeded and is on the run," was his discouraging remark.

I had nothing to do with the practical department of the paper, and only knew that up to date things had gone well. "What's the trouble?" I asked.

"The bottom has apparently dropped out of the *News* and also out of the town. I can't collect anything; the paper bills are overdue; the old man is getting uneasy about the press, and to-day, for the first time, I have had to pay the printers only a little over half their wages."

"That's pretty tough! I don't see but one way out of it."

"What's that?" he asked.

"To 'strike' John for enough to cover the deficit and tide us over till spring business opens."

John was the steamboat man who was backing our enterprise, or, rather, who had supplied us with funds to start in business.

"I was in hopes," said George, "that I would not be obliged to call on him again, for some time at least. You know that the amount he has left in the pot is only two thousand dollars, and this was to be kept for improvements."

The conclusion was, however, that the situation imperatively demanded relief. George reluctantly agreed to interview our patron.

A few hours later he came back, his face white as a shroud and his mouth twitching with pain.

"In God's name, what ails you?" I asked, in alarm at his appearance.

"We are ruined!" was his despondent reply.

This incident demands some retrospection. In the Presidential election of 1856, Frémont and Buchanan were opposed, and the contest, involving all the bitterness and hatred of the Free-soil issues, was carried on with a vindictiveness that was almost deadly in its intensity. Our capitalist was a strong Democrat, but was carried away, confused, lost in the political turmoil, and concluded that Frémont would carry Iowa, as well as the entire election. Inspired by this conviction, he wagered one thousand dollars that Buchanan would lose Iowa and another thousand that he would not be elected. Of course, he lost both the bets, and the money thus wagered was the fund he had laid aside for the support of the *News*. This was the information which my partner brought me after his interview with his brother.

“But he says,” added George, “that he will make it up to us when navigation opens in the spring. That will be three months yet; but when the river is clear he will make money fast—at least a thousand dollars a trip from St. Louis to St. Paul.

“Well, we’ll have to get on some way till that time. But don’t you think it pretty rough on us and the party that a Democrat should invest money on a Democratic defeat, especially when there was not the slightest possibility of a Republican victory, and more especially when the money thus lost was the vital support of a struggling Democratic newspaper?”

We did not disagree on this point. We separated, very despondent, but determined to try and get through some way till the winter ice floated out of the river. The dullness of the winter season was of itself depressing; the loss of the money wagered on Frémont's election added vastly to our embarrassment; and even this was not all that conspired to impede our progress.

Without being at all aware of the imminence of a catastrophe, one was pending which was to almost wreck a nation's prosperity. There were indications of a financial depression; the commercial barometer showed a rapid decline; but few, unless the more sagacious of the weather prophets, foresaw anything like the real extent of the storm. It was the famous, malignant, destructive financial crisis of 1857 that was moving over the country, and which, in time, swept everything before it with the fury and destructiveness of a tornado.

I need not enter into the details of this calamitous event further than to state that Davenport was especially affected by its operations. The only currency in use in the community was what was termed "Florence" money, the issue of a firm of private bankers in Florence, Nebraska, doing business in Davenport. The wildcat banks everywhere had been utterly ruined. The Florence money had been brought in in order to evade the law, and circulated freely at a considerable discount below gold.

The *News* did not at first comprehend the real

calamity that was pending. When we found that the reserve on which we had depended was lost, we turned our attention to efforts to tide over the crisis in our affairs till the opening of navigation, when we confidently anticipated an ample supply of money.

It had always been the case on the river, that, when the ice went out on the Upper Mississippi, there were always boats below, between Cairo and St. Louis, waiting for the clearing of the ice. Among these waiting boats there was a fierce strife prevailing as to which should take the lead in the first trip up the river. Good pilots were in high demand and sure of a small fortune in case they succeeded in holding the wheel of the first boat.

My partner's brother, John, was one of the best pilots on the Upper Mississippi River. He was always among the first to be selected for the initial trips; and it was upon this engagement that our hopes now turned. His vessel was the *Argo* that was to bring us the golden fleece. John departed some time in February for St. Louis, to be on hand in ample time for the sailing of the first boat.

"Boys," he said as he left, "you needn't worry any more. She (meaning the river) is going to open early, and I'll be back in a jiffy, loaded with cash to the hurricane deck."

"When do you think you will get back?"

"Oh, the first or middle of March, for certain", he declared.

We shook hands all around, and put up a fervent orison for his success and his swift return.

From this period on, George and myself occupied ourselves in making small payments on the more pressing debts, staving off others, and waiting and watching for the breaking up of the river ice. The latter seemed as if it were a permanent fixture: teams continued to cross it as if they anticipated keeping it up all summer. At last there was a break opposite the city and our hopes were aroused, but then the ice gorged on the rapids and we were torn with despair. Thus hopes and fears alternated while we watched the river as Sister Ann looked from the window of the castle in search of relief from death.

Finally the fetters were knocked off, and we began to scan the lower river to discover the smoke of a steamer over the horizon. We listened at all hours of the night for the welcome shriek of a whistle.

“There she is!” ejaculated George one day. “There she comes! Glory to God, we’re all right!”

We rushed down to the levee, which was but a couple of blocks away, and saw far down the river the form of a steamer, with clouds of smoke pouring from her smoke-stacks, and a jet of white steam flying from her whistle. Her deck had a few passengers, and two or three men were in the pilot-house.

“That’s John, sure!”

“It doesn’t look like John. If it’s he, he is shorter than he was, and has raised whiskers.”

It required a visit to the pilot-house to learn the personality of the supposed John. The man proved to be somebody else.

“Did I see Jack in St. Louis? He was there awaitin’, like fifty others, for a job. There’s six pilots for every boat. They say that river navigation is all gone to hell on account of that bridge,” was his tragic comment.

It was true that the bridge was materially influencing certain commercial phases; but the real interruption was due to the paralysis of the financial crisis. Several boats from below came up the river, and it was not until two or three weeks after navigation was clear that the much-yearned-for pilot made his appearance. He cut all our ardent hopes off at a single blow.

“River business is played,” he said with indignation. “Time was when steamboat owners almost broke their necks trying to get first to St. Louis, to secure their favorite pilot, and to beg him to accept a thousand dollars to take a boat to St. Paul! Now there are more pilots than wheels, and the best of talent has to go begging for a job at half the old figures. It’s all that cussed bridge!”

It was with broken hearts that we received this unexpected information, which promised only remediless disaster. It is true that John hinted that perhaps later on there might be an improvement, but the suggestion was so exceedingly faint that it afforded us no actual encouragement. The steamer

pulled out, went up through the draw, and soon after disappeared around the bend.

We two were prostrated by the intelligence, and for a time concluded that there was no recourse save to close out our business. After a time the elasticity and hopefulness of youth asserted itself, however, and we determined to continue the struggle.

“We’ve got more coming to us than we are owing, Let’s make ’em pay up!” said George.

We tried assiduously to “make ’em pay up,” but they could not in some cases, and would not in others. As a matter of fact, business was prostrated. Very much of the real estate was owned by large proprietors who were eaten up by taxation, who could get no sales for their lands, with the result that many of them were millionaires in the possession of corner lots and acre property and but little better than beggars in means of livelihood.

A death struggle began on the part of the young owners of the *News*. To meet a pressing indebtedness they had to resort to some one of the numerous “banks” engaged in loaning Eastern money and discounting local paper. Two-and-a-half per cent a month was the smallest figure at which accommodation could be obtained, and which, of course, was ruinous to any legitimate business. During the summer of 1857 we struggled in deep water. Often it was up to our chins, and now and then we sank over our heads, only to be rescued strangling and exhausted.

Finally the task became no longer tolerable. It was suggested that the cost of the support of one of the partners would be only half that of two. Accordingly an attempt was made to lighten the craft by throwing over ballast. I was the ballast that was dropped into the raging waters. Harrington assumed the ownership of the paper with all its credits and liabilities, while I was left adrift without a dollar.

I may as well, at this point, trace the career of the *Evening News* to its sepulchre. George Harrington finally became wearied of assisting its weakened steps and turned it over to the charity of John Johns, a son of Bishop Johns, of Baltimore, who was then in the practice of law in Davenport. Johns was immensely pleased to become the owner of a newspaper and beyond doubt contemplated making it one of the leading newspapers in the West.

However, Johns soon tired of his pet, and within a short time handed it over to some other credulous victim, who passed it along till it finally was placed in the receiving vault of the *Democrat*, where, for a few years, there appeared the inscription, *The Democrat-News*. But in 1864 the latter half disappeared and was interred in the fathomless, insatiate potter's field of defunct journalism.

FRANC B. WILKIE