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The Old Printing Office

We called it a "country" printing office, because its chief output was a "country" newspaper. Nowadays we talk of the "community" newspaper. The word "country" is now applied mainly to hillbilly music and a curious kind of fellow known as a "bumpkin" or a "hayseed." Like the words "villian," "boor," and "churl," all of which originally meant countryman or farmer, the word "country" itself seems to have descended in the scale of respectability. The philological standing of his word-symbol appears to have followed the downward curve of the countryman's economic status.

My father was not ashamed to call himself a "country" editor: he was proud of the designation and the vocation. He hoped I might follow in his footsteps; and in recommending such a career to me when I was a boy, he said that it had been his observation that, except for an occasional rascal or drunkard, the editor was always looked up to in his small community. It might not be a big puddle, Father said, but the editor was always one of the big frogs in it. I think that was true. Whatever hierarchy of leadership the country town possessed held assured places for the edi-

tors — or at least one of the editors of the two or three local papers. The editor was usually a political oracle; and he was sometimes sent to the legislature or appointed to state office. He was actually a liasion bringing the outside world of events and situations together with the life of the home community. He was supposed to be the best informed man in town on questions of the day. "They expect the editor to know everything," said my father, and added, "You must get a good college education."

Father always regretted that he had never gone to college, but he made up for the lack of such training by the cultivation of a studious habit throughout life. He was a tall man, standing six feet two, and of spare figure. He wore a full beard, dark red in color, which in its prime lay luxuriantly on his breast; as he grew older, he trimmed it more closely, until in his old age it was a white Vandyke. Father was a quiet man, whose strong feelings were always well controlled. Mother claimed that she had once heard him swear: it was when he was cleaning out a well and was surprised to discover a lost log-chain at the bottom of it.

"What did he say?" I once asked Mother.

"Better forgotten," she replied. "I don't want thee learning bad habits."

But I had never heard Father utter a profane word, and I persisted. Finally Mother confessed,

in a shocked undertone, that on that famous occasion he had exclaimed, "Great Scott! It's the old log-chain!"

Father was thoroughly honest and just. I think he never told a lie; he could not even engage in a game of innocent deception without completely giving himself away. Yet he was in the thick of politics most of his life. He represented his county in the state legislature for a term or two, and later served for a number of years on Iowa's Board of Parole.

The plant from which he issued his weekly newspaper and in which he conducted a job-printing business consisted of a "front office" and a "back office." The former was much the smaller and was devoted to editorial and management activities, and the latter contained the mechanical department. In most Midwestern towns in the Eighteen-nineties, the printing office was all in one room; and that was chiefly because the editor and manager was himself a printer and carried his editorial sanctum with him while he worked at the case or the press. Entering the front door of such an office, one walked directly into a fascinating confusion of characteristic smells, sounds, litter, and orderliness within disorder. But in our shops there was always a "front office," because Father had never learned the printer's trade; and besides he liked privacy for conferences with visitors, for business transactions, and for writing.

Father often said he was sorry he had not gone into the "back office" for a while before he bought his first paper, the *What Cheer Patriot*, so he could have learned the mechanical side of the country newspaper business. Probably it was as well that he had not done so, for many a country paper in those years suffered from the editorial inattention of a proprietor who was kept busy getting out rush jobs of letter-heads and sale-bills. But I am glad that he insisted on my learning the printer's trade in my boyhood, for it is good for anyone to have a mechanical trade, whether he uses it for a long or a short time.

I set my first type in the office of my father's *Tipton Advertiser* in 1896, when I was ten years old. My first copy was a piece of reprint credited to "Ex." to indicate that it had been taken from some paper obtained by "exchange"; and it probably had bounced around among many papers before Father had clipped it from one of his own "exchanges." It was a bit of verse with "run-in" instead of broken lines, dealing with a man's troubles in the Spring, from house-cleaning, wet feet and colds, too much gardening, and so on, in which every stanza (paragraph) ended with the plaintive plea: "Listen to my tale of wo!" It took me three or four evenings, working after school, to get this masterpiece of wit into pica type. I had almost finished the second stickful when, in my awkwardness, I dropped the whole thing on the

floor. The printers laughed, thinking that now the boy was getting his first experience with pi; but when I scrambled down off the high stool to pick up the remains, I found the type intact in the stick! I had not learned to justify my lines properly, but had forced thin spaces in so that every line was very tight; indeed they were so tight that the type could scarcely be removed from the stick when it was ready for dumping on the galley.

I had plenty of experience with pi after that, however. Some years later, helping out in a rush hour when we were late getting to press, I removed my case, which was "poor" in type by that time, from the stand in order to shake it (a method of getting the remaining type out of the corners of the boxes and making it easier to pick up); but in my clumsy hurry, I dropped the entire case. There it was, pied all over the floor. I turned in dismay toward the foreman — and knocked a full galley of type ready for the forms off a galley rack. If I had not been the editor's son, I should have been booted out of the back door.

But usually setting type was, if not fun, at least mildly pleasurable. Monotonous it was, indeed, but there were always the twin challenges of speed and accuracy. On a Saturday, when cases were full and the office was clean and comparatively quiet after the hurly-burly of a Thursday press-day, followed by the "throwing-in" of Friday, when the type was returned to the cases — then

it was that setting type was peculiarly satisfying. Beginning with a new case, the boxes rounded up full, and the type cool and damp from fresh distribution, was a little like sitting down before a generously loaded table — just as working from an almost empty case, with dust at the bottom of the boxes, had been like starvation diet.

Sometimes the copy itself was interesting and instructive. I enjoyed setting up my father's editorial in bourgeois (pronounced berjoice); and I was always pleased when I found an excerpt from the current *McClure's* or *Harper's*, sent out by the magazine as promotion, on my hook. But how inexpressibly boresome was the monthly job of setting the patent medicine notices in nonpareil!

The principal machinery used by a country printing office in the Nineties included eight or ten stands of type, a cylinder press, a couple of job-presses, and two or three imposing stones. The type stands and cases were of wood, and nearly always old and battered; it seems to me I never saw new printing equipment in my boyhood. We continued to use type long after it was badly worn, too, though our supply was sometimes replenished by those "foreign advertising" agencies which paid in printing materials instead of cash. Perhaps once in a decade a prosperous country weekly would come out in a "new dress" of brand-new body-type and fresh, sharp heads.

The newspaper press most commonly used was

a flat-bed machine with a big tympan-bearing cylinder known as the Campbell. Because it was hand-powered, and a stout man was required to turn the wheel on press-day, we nicknamed it the "Armstrong" press. We printed only the front and back pages, buying the sheets already printed on the second and third pages from the Western Newspaper Union in Des Moines. These "patent insides" were filled with miscellany suited to the small-town and rural audience, including farm and garden hints, a serial story, the Sunday School lesson, and a lot of advertising. The pages were generally large in the early Nineties, but there came a swing to a format with eight smaller pages, numbers two, three, six, and seven being "patent insides"; and still later there was such a strong movement to "all home print" that a few years ago the very last supplier of the "ready-print" papers ceased and desisted.

The Gordon job-presses were not hand- but foot-operated. You gave the flywheel a turn, and then you kept the machine going by a foot-pedal as you stood in front of it feeding in blank sheets with one hand and removing the printed ones with the other. This we called "kicking off" a job. It was tiresome, especially with the larger jobber, and there was always some danger of getting a finger caught and crushed.

Steel is now used for the imposing surfaces on which the printer makes up his type forms, but in

the days of which I write "the stone" was always made of stone, chipped around the edges perhaps, but very satisfactory for imposition. In later years, I found making up my own front pages in my own printing office one of the most interesting of a printer-editor's tasks.

My father called his group of employees "the force." It consisted of a foreman, two all-round printers, two lady compositors, and a "devil" who worked after school and on Saturdays.

At least, such was the personnel when my brother and I took turns "deviling" on the *Tipton Advertiser* in the Mid-Nineties. Our duties ranged from sweeping the floor and burning trash in the back yard to setting type and learning to feed the small jobber. Cleaning up after press-day was no easy task, for wastepaper, rags grimy with grease from the press, and dabs of sticky printer's ink seemed to be everywhere. Moreover, our job was complicated by the printers' habit of chewing tobacco. It was commonly said that printers were subject to lead-poisoning because they were constantly handling type, which contains a considerably proportion of lead in its composition, and that the best antidote was chewing tobacco. This was probably a medical fable invented as an alibi by nicotine users; however, most printers chewed plug-tobacco, and the "devil" had to cope with their expectoration. We improvised spittoons from the heavy, small boxes in which we

had received shipments of type and plates, filling them with sawdust and placing them conveniently near the type-stands, stones, and presses; but the chewer's aim was often imperfect.

Father was always particular about his foremen, and I remember them all as men of good character and some skill in "the art preservative of arts." Three papers that Father owned at various times he eventually sold to his foremen. For the other printers he often had to take what he could get, and they sometimes drank too much; indeed, I remember that we were often late with the first issues following the Fourth of July and Christmas because of trouble getting reorganized after the sprees that many printers regarded as their right on those holidays. I do not wish to wrong the average printer of those days: many of them were men of industrious habit and excellent character. My Uncle Artie worked in Father's printing office for several years; he was a fine, spruce young man who excited my unbounded admiration by dressing up in approved bicycle costume — sweater, tight pants, and black stockings — in the evenings and riding a high-wheeler along the wooden sidewalks and dusty streets of What Cheer.

Our foremen were always strictly charged to see that the printers never annoyed or insulted the young women who set type for us, and who were themselves models of circumspect deportment. I

well remember the two rather tall and buxom ladies who worked at adjoining cases in the back of our office at Tipton. Tightly corseted, wearing long skirts and shirtwaists with high collars under their aprons, with hair coiled high over artificial foundations known as "rats," they made an imposing and Eminently Respectable appearance.

Itinerant printers appeared once in a while, and sometimes, when job-work was plentiful, they were welcomed and put immediately to work. They came unannounced from nowhere, and they disappeared without warning into limbo. They had rainbows 'round their shoulders that lured them always to the next town, or into the next state. "Tourist typos" my father called them. They usually brought some curious craft secrets with them — a new ingredient for our home-made blocking glue, a secret for a paste for "single wraps," a formula for an ink to imitate embossing.

Usually these wanderers would stay with us no more than three or four weeks at the most, but I remember one man in his thirties who declared his intention to settle down, and who stuck with us for over a year. He was the son of parents who were circus performers and he had been trained as a child aerialist; but a fall from a trapeze had injured his feet and turned him from the big tops to the printing office. He was tattooed all over the upper part of his body; and when he worked near the big window of the shop in the summer-

time with his shirt off for coolness, he drew such a crowd on the sidewalk and made such a scandal that a sleeveless undershirt had to be prescribed as minimum clothing. Whether this offended him, or what it was, one morning he simply did not show up. He left no debts behind him; indeed he had a couple of days' pay due him and he had paid his landlady ahead for board and room. Apparently the old wanderlust had carried him off between days. We never heard of him again.

Many of these "tramp prints," as we came to call them, were alcoholics. Either they drank because they were jobless or were jobless because they drank; probably it was the latter, since in those days of hand-set composition it was usually easy to get a "sit" in almost any town.

The climax of the week in the printing office was the Thursday press-day. The stress and strain, hustle and hurry of the weekly effort to "get out" on time brought the whole office to a high pitch of activity. Putting the last paragraphs of news in type picked from nearly empty cases, setting the last heads, correcting the galley proofs with swift care, marking and placing the corrected galleys for the make-up man — all these things were parts of the planned urgency of press-day. What a welcome sound was the rat-tat-tat of mallet on planer which announced that the front-page form was ready to lock up in its chase! While the heavy form was being transferred to

the bed of the press, we were laying clean papers on the stones and tables in readiness for the operation of hand-folding the edition. Also someone was preparing the patent mailer which, when it worked, addressed the folded papers; and another was laying out the wrappers for the single-list of papers to be dispatched to a distance. To help with the folding, the editor often recruited his whole family. My own mother, when her family was small, used to help fold papers on press-day. Some editors' wives worked so much in the office that they became practical printers, and occasionally one of these small plants was operated entirely by the editor's family. But on any paper, the tensions of press-day were bound to affect all the editor's family, and everyone helped as he or she could — with the news, the mechanical work, the folding, wrapping, and mailing, and the final carting of the papers to the postoffice.

I have been describing the old printing office as I remember it at the very end of the Nineteenth Century; and I realize I have been putting it all in a fixed status, as though it did not vary in place or in time. I write what I remember; but I know that there were many differences between various towns and the printing offices in them, and that improvements took place from time to time. There were better towns, better offices, and better papers than ours, and many that were worse. Perhaps ours were fairly typical.

Changes came fast about the turn of the century. The greatest one was the adoption of gasoline engines to operate the presses. In 1898, my father, having bought the *Audubon Republican*, installed in its plant a new Country Babcock newspaper press which would print two pages at a time, and put in a gasoline engine to power it. There was some skepticism in town on the question of whether such a sputtering contraption would actually run such a big press, and run it evenly enough to print well; and there was also some resentment on the part of the muscular fellows who were thrown out of a Thursday afternoon job by the newfangledness. But it did work, under the careful nursing of Grif Wolf. Grif was the only man in town who really understood the mysteries of an internal-combustion engine; and on many a press-day afternoon he received an emergency call to make haste to the printing office, where the press stood still while time was running out, and get that pesky engine started.

A few years later the line-casting machines began to revolutionize printing in the weekly shops. Before the casters came, however, Simplex Typesetters had been installed by some of the more daring publishers; but they broke type and made too much trouble. A primitive line-caster called the Typograph had some users. I operated one for some months. This machine had exposed wires down which the matrices slid to the assembly

line when released by a heavy touch on the keys. When the line was complete, I turned a crank three revolutions to perform the casting operation, then tipped the whole fan-like top of the machine back so the "mats" would return down the wires ready for use in the next line. I never got so I could set much more on the Typograph than I could by hand. It was not until the Mergenthaler Linotype and the later Intertype came to dominate the field that mechanical composition became important in the country office.

The first casting machine I ever saw was a Mergenthaler on exhibit at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition at Omaha in 1898. My father took me with him on a two-day visit to this great fair; but the only things I saw there that I now remember clearly are the Linotype and an Igorrote village which had been transported bodily from the Philippines, complete with nearly naked natives. My observation of the Igorrotes was brief, though fascinated; but I later spent a year operating a Linotype, and my life has had certain connections with that mechanical marvel ever since.

But that was when I was on my own. In the years when I was a boy in my father's office, our equipment was more rudimentary. We did not even have central heating at Tipton, and my brother and I had to bring in the wood to keep the fires in two stoves going all winter. There was no typewriter in our office until Father traded

advertising space for a primitive Blickensderfer in 1899, but he never learned to use it with facility.

The subscription price of the typical Midwestern weekly during the Nineties was a dollar a year. The rate was often quoted at a dollar if paid in advance and a dollar and a quarter when past due, but usually the editor was so glad to have the old account paid that he would throw off the extra quarter. The "delinquent" subscriber was the curse of the American weekly newspaper for more than two hundred years; but when an editor knew most of his thousand or so patrons personally, it was hard to strike the names of any who fell a little behind off the list. Besides, many farmers felt reluctant to pay for anything they had not received — which seems reasonable. I doubt if my father really lost a great deal in bad accounts. I remember his calling me into his office one day and showing me a pile of ten silver dollars on his desk. "Ole Olsen, from the southwest corner of the county, was just in and paid his subscription," Father said; and added, "I thought you might like to see it sometimes pays to trust a man. I knew Ole would be in sometime. He is all right — just a little slow." Ten years slow.

The advertising rate on our paper was eight cents a single-column inch in the Nineties, but Father raised it to ten cents just about the turn of the century. That made it cost three dollars to insert a quarter-page "ad." Most of the advertis-

ing was paid for at the end of the month, or, in the case of transient business, in advance; but there were a few large accounts that were settled annually. With those few stores we ran a year's bill on which our parents charged purchases, while the merchants would let their own advertising and job-work bills pile up. Settling such accounts on the day following New Year's was very exciting for the family. Since we were always careful to keep the balance on our side, Mother could at these times get the yard-goods she wanted for new dresses, we children got new shoes and so on, and there were always settling-up treats of candy.

Most country editors provided a column or two of "editorials." These articles and paragraphs were usually written with care and read with respect. Later consolidations, which have commonly left only one paper in a town, have had a tendency to prevent participation in controversies; but sixty years ago, when every town worth its salt had at least two newspapers, sides were always taken, and with vigor. The rival editors often engaged in bitter quarrels. Those battles of the types, though often carried too far, with their personal attacks, invective, and intemperance, did stimulate reader-interest in editorial columns, and perhaps sharper thinking about issues. Unrestrained scurrility and personal attack were commoner in the pioneer press; but in the Nineties

there were still editors who loved to print innuendo and even outright accusation regarding the characters and private lives of their "contemporaries" of the opposing party, all in fancy writing adorned by such epithets as "poltroon," "black-guard," "the miserable slang-whanger who edits the filthy sheet which disgraces our fair city." It is easy, however, to over-emphasize the vulgarities of the fighting editors of those days; there were also many sober and respectable country Greeleys and Danas whose articles were read with quiet acceptance at home and quoted with approval abroad.

My father was a controversialist in his editorial column, especially on party matters; but he was never violent. On the whole, I think his editorials were too heavy, but they suited certain tastes of the times. Perhaps his very moderation, and his sedulous abstention from invective, sometimes provoked rival editors to excesses of attack; certainly there were times when he caught it hot and heavy. Father was a Republican by family tradition and by personal conviction. It seemed as though his Republicanism was a built-in element of his personality. "That galled and jaded wheel-horse of the Republican machine," the editor across the street once called him. I think Father rather liked that jibe.

Occasionally Father would with some effort strike a lighter note. The most famous piece he

ever wrote was about a prayer he had heard a country preacher offer one Sunday. This was in the midst of the drought of 1898, and also in the time of the Spanish-American War. Here is the prayer as Father set it down on his arrival at home, and as he published it in his paper the following week:

. . . And O Lord, we ask for rain. Thou hast taught us to come to Thee to ask for what we need, and we need rain. Thy servants of old prayed for rain, and their prayers were heard. Elijah prayed for rain, and his prayer was answered. The ground is parched, the grass is dying, the heat oppresses us so we can hardly breathe. O Lord, give us refreshing rain!

We prayed for rain last week, and it has not come yet. Perhaps we did not need it as badly as we thought. Now the farmers say we will not have half a crop unless we have rain soon, but then some would say that anyway. But we know we need rain! O Lord, we need money to carry on this righteous war for humanity, and we need crops to get the money with; so, Lord, give us rain that we may have the crops.

Thou hast tempered the winds to our battleships. The typhoons and the hurricanes of the Tropics have not molested them. Thou hast given us the victory, and we praise Thy name. . . .

The story ended simply by telling how, as the editor drove home that afternoon, he noticed a cloud in the Northwest "as small as a man's hand," and how that night the whole countryside received a generous downpour. This article was quoted in the *Des Moines Register*, picked up by

other papers, and reprinted all over the country.

Mother contributed a "Temperance Column" to our paper. She began it in the face of What Cheer's seven saloons, and later continued it in dry Tipton. Much of it — both prose and verse — was original, though some was carefully "selected." When I reached high school, I wrote weekly "School Notes" for the paper. We all gathered "items"; we were conscious of representing the paper wherever we went.

It has long been common for urban satirists to undervalue the local news reporting of the small-town weekly. But that report and record has, in fact, certain great and fundamental values. Devotion to home is the first loyalty, the foundation of patriotism, a primary virtue. The country paper is dedicated to the homely matters — to births and deaths, the churches and the schools, crops and weather, the parties and bees of the home folks. William Smith has been painting his house; Mr. and Mrs. Richard Jones have been enjoying a visit from their son, Sam, who is doing so well in Cedar Rapids as an inspector in the new Quaker Oats factory; the Christian Endeavor will have an ice-cream social on the A. Y. Simmons lawn Thursday evening, with adjournment to the nearby church basement in case of rain. William Dean Howells once defined the realist as the writer who "cannot look upon human life and declare this or that thing unworthy of notice." The country

editor was (and still is) a realist who is committed to the belief that such bits of life and social intercourse as are recorded in the "items" of his news columns make up an important sum of human living. And the record which he prints serves to unite and solidify community interests and community loyalty.

My father never thought his work trivial or of little consequence. We all looked upon our paper as the historian of many lives. We know that we put the town and country down in black and white — joys and sorrows, good and ill, peace and war, prosperity and failure. We watched the growth and development of the community, the decay of some institutions, the setting of new patterns. Our paper recorded all these things, bringing our people and the little episodes of their lives and the town's events together within the compass of a few columns weekly. Thus any country paper welds together all the elements of its social group in a continuing history.

As I look backward at the country paper of the Nineties and the first decade of the new century, it seems to me to have performed three services — in some instances badly, indeed, but in many very well. It was the contemporary historian of local events; it offered an editorial column that was often thoughtful and sometimes influential; it contributed to the economic welfare of its community by affording an advertising medium and

by acting as a leader in progressive movements.

For many years now, everything in America has been irresistibly swept up into the prodigious heaps of the great cities and their sprawling suburbs. But some nine thousand newspapers remain to serve about that many small towns throughout the nation. The weekly of today, however, is not the same country paper I knew as a boy; it has a linotype, it is illustrated by local pictures, it is smarter, it serves its advertisers better, and it sells for from two to four dollars a year. Nor is the town it serves the same, as I have already tried to show in my essay on the country town of my boyhood; it is no longer a semi-isolated hamlet, undisturbed by the blare of automobile horns, unstirred by the incursion into its midst of the strange phantasmagoria of "show business" on electronic screens in every home.

But in spite of changing patterns, the home paper of today has the same spirit of neighborliness and service that it has always had, and continues to integrate the life of its community. It was the object of my fascinated devotion throughout my early life, and I have never lost my deep interest in it. The local editor, the country printing-office, and the home-town paper have played a vital part in many lives through many years.