

SHSI (DES MOINES)



# From Genealogy to History

The idea for “Get Ready for ‘96” grew out of genealogy research I was doing on the Mitchells who lived throughout Decatur County, Iowa, in the mid-1890s. My great-great-grandfather, the Rev. George E. Mitchell, was a Methodist “supply preacher” based for several years in Davis City. I was reading micro-filmed Decatur County newspapers of the period to learn basic facts about my family’s history.

Family lore suggested that Ralph Mitchell (one of George’s children, and my great-grandfather) had worked for a brief time in the newspaper business, but no one knew where or when. Imagine my surprise and delight, then, when I found a brief item in the *Decatur County Journal* reporting on the purchase of the *Davis City Rustler* in 1895 by

Ralph Mitchell and a business partner.

The newspaper microfilm suddenly provided a window into the journalistic and political milieu in which my great-grandfather plied his trade. Even a casual glance at the newspapers showed that Ralph’s career as an editor came during an exciting period, with a high-stakes presidential election and accompanying partisan rhetoric dominating the front pages of Decatur County’s newspapers. The desire to learn more about this particularly fascinating chapter of my great-grandfather’s life led me to write the accompanying article.

Only one copy—the final edition—of the *Rustler* still exists, and there is no microfilm record of the paper, but it is still possible to draw some basic conclusions about the publication based on references

made in other county newspapers of the period. The *Rustler* seems to have supported the Republicans but was the secondary paper in Davis City, a town of 500, where it struggled with the Populist *Davis City Advance* for readers and influence.

Ralph’s career in the newspaper business did not last long. He married my great-grandmother, Mary Helen Davis, in September 1897. Soon thereafter he swapped the press for the pulpit, leaving the newspaper business to follow in his father’s footsteps as a Methodist minister. Although his journalism career was brief, Ralph nonetheless played a role in the fascinating political and journalistic drama that unfolded in Decatur County during 1896, even if he had only a bit part.

—Robert B. Mitchell