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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

**NORRIS ALFRED:
A VOICE FROM THE PRAIRIE**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTERS OF ARTS**

GRADUATE COLLEGE

**BY
KEVIN L. WARNEKE**

**OMAHA, NEBRASKA
DECEMBER 1994**

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

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THESIS ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine how a country editor from Polk, Nebraska, could attract a loyal following of readers scattered throughout the United States and be nominated for one of the highest awards given to journalists. Norris Alfred, editor of the Polk Progress from 1955 to 1964 and from 1966 to 1989, bucked a trend among country editors when he made locally written editorials an integral part of his newspaper. Country editors, unlike their counterparts with daily newspapers, have not always chosen to include their own editorials in their newspapers. They cite, among other reasons, a lack of knowledge and a lack of time.

Polk Progress readers from San Francisco nominated Alfred for the 1979 Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing. Although only his work from that year was included in the nomination, it was his editorial writing during the 1970s that attracted attention.

This study examines Alfred's work as a whole, but focuses mostly on his editorial writing during the 1970s. First, the scope of Alfred's editorials from that decade was categorized and ranked for frequency. Half of his editorials in the '70s (180 of 358) dealt with national issues. Next in frequency came editorials with a local subject (63). It should be noted, however, that 69 editorials, or 19.1 percent, dealt with subjects that were so broad they could not be classified as international, national, state or local in scope. Those editorials dealt with topics ranging from materialism to wildlife preservation.

Alfred's editorials then were categorized by subject matter. Natural resources, the Vietnam War and politics were most frequent subjects. Three presidents — Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter — were among his top 12 topics, as was Nixon's challenger for the presidency in 1972, Senator George McGovern.

In addition to examining Alfred's editorial topics, the words, phrases and approach he used in editorials during the 1970s were studied. From this review, conclusions can be reached about why his work attracted attention. Alfred's editorials stood out among his peers because he used simple words, simple phrases and simple sentences. Yet, he was not

afraid to write about complex topics, including taxes. Alfred excelled at writing editorials because he called for an approach to solving society's problems based on common sense, frugality and contemplation. Alfred, a Democrat, was not afraid to take an unpopular stand in a Republican state. His voice offered an alternative. Above all, he shared a message of hope. Despite his concerns about the problems he saw in society, Alfred's messages always pointed out the glimmer of promise in each.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: The Country Weekly Makes Its Mark.....	5
CHAPTER 2: Norris Alfred Speaks His Mind.....	17
CHAPTER 3: Accolades for an Unlikely Recipient.....	35
CHAPTER 4: Fulfilling an Obligation.....	43
CHAPTER 5: Time to Close Shop.....	65
CONCLUSION.....	69
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	87

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
A Classification of <u>Polk Progress</u> editorial topics during the 1970s	45

INTRODUCTION

A NEW MAN AT THE HELM

This is the first edition of your Progress under the new editor-publisher. We hope you like it.
—Norris Alfred

Norris Alfred's weekly newspaper in Nebraska was part of the crowd — better than some, worse than others. Befitting the times, Alfred's Polk Progress during the late 1950s looked like most other weekly newspapers: heavy on copy, short on photographs. With its small headlines, the Progress was synonymous with the term "gray," often used to describe newspapers published in that era.

Alfred's inaugural edition of the Polk Progress on August 4, 1955, included a brief note to subscribers and advertisers: "This is the first edition of your Progress under the new editor-publisher. We hope you like it. . . ." ¹

Possibly to determine who was paying attention, Alfred ended that notice by writing about change. "There are some changes planned in the make-up of the paper. ...Next week we plan to print the paper upside down. You will have to stand on your head to

read it."²

Faithful readers of the Polk Progress, serving the east-central Nebraska community and county that shared the same name, did not suspect that their new editor would one day attract nationwide attention with his editorial writing. Alfred, in his weekly column "Polking Around" and his page 2 editorials, ventured far from the eastern Nebraska community with his writing, sharing his views on local, state, national, and foreign matters.

And people noticed:

—A group of San Francisco journalism instructors, intrigued with Alfred's ideas and words, nominated him for a Pulitzer Prize in editorial writing.

—The NBC Nightly News included Alfred's views about the 1983 Ronald Reagan-Mikhail Gorbachev summit. Alfred wrote "The idea that two men sitting down together are even going to begin to solve the ills of the world is, well, presumptuous."³

Alfred's readers found his writing to be refreshing and comfortable; a fresh cup of coffee on a Sunday morning. But Alfred's editorials and columns were much more. Not only were they a good fit, his words stretched his readers' social awareness. He made them think. He made them question their traditional beliefs. He showed them another way of looking at society and its problems.

Alfred's page 1 column in his early editions stayed clear of controversy. His first column was about Polk's 50th anniversary — even though it was still a year away — the recent high temperatures, and also included a vignette about Betty Crocker cake mixes.⁴ He would not begin writing his free-flowing editorials that would anchor the Progress' page 2 for several years.

Within months, however, his column took on a more serious tone. He questioned, in the December 15, 1955, edition, Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Benson's plans to reduce crop surpluses by having farmers raise less corn and wheat: "WE HAVE OUR OWN

PROPOSAL TO MAKE. Let's have the government give every farmer a four to five month paid vacation next summer and not raise anything. Let them all take a trip around the world. Maybe, by that time, Benson will have the agricultural problems solved."⁵

The next week, Alfred again targeted Benson in his column, arguing that allowing food to deteriorate was the problem, rather than food surpluses. Alfred reminded his readers that many people in the world were hungry: "Sunday, we read an article about Tunisia. That country is full of hungry people. Some of them are eating cactus to hold off starvation. We don't know how much nourishment there is in a cactus plant, but we doubt there is much. Why can't we feed them?"⁶

His call to help the hungry in Tunisia was just one of thousands of questions he would ask in his newspaper during the next four decades.

To understand fully the significance of Alfred's editorial writing, one must understand the role country weeklies have played in society. One also must understand how country editors have used, or neglected to use, editorials in their newspapers. Finally, to understand fully why Alfred's editorial writing stood out, one must look to his words for the answers.

This study of Norris Alfred's career first looks at his editorial writing throughout his tenure as editor of the Polk Progress. His entire body of writing portrays the choices Alfred made during his life as a country editor and the causes he chose to support. His body of work also will be put in context with the role country editors have played in shaping American society. A closer look at the stances Alfred took and the words he used in editorials during the 1970s, which led to his nomination for the Pulitzer Prize, follows. His work during the 1970s brought Alfred national attention. This study will examine the recurring themes in Alfred's writing during that '70s and the editorial positions he chose, thus showing why and how a country editor from Nebraska attracted national attention and gained followers scattered throughout the country.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE COUNTRY WEEKLY MAKES ITS MARK

Write what you feel and if you are not sure of your own convictions, it's better not to write it at all.

—Bruce Kennedy

President Lyndon B. Johnson was not thinking specifically about the Polk Progress when he said, "I believe that the country weekly acts as a form of social cement in holding the community together."¹ Just the same, Johnson's words pertain to the Progress as much as they do to any other weekly newspaper in Nebraska or the United States. Missouri congressman O.K. Armstrong used other words to explain the value of the country weekly: "The importance of the country weekly is closest to the hands, hearts and lives of the people at the grassroots than any other publication. The country publisher and editor knows the needs, desires, and aspirations of his readers as no one else can."²

The weekly, rural newspaper in this country has its roots in the earliest days of journalism simply because the first newspapers were weeklies. "All through the early

years of the nation, the weekly newspapers were the artillery with which major political parties supported their attacks or defended their positions."³

As America moved westward, newspapermen followed. "Whenever a town sprang up, there a printer with a rude press and a 'shirt-tail full of type' was sure to appear as by magic . . . these pioneers were politically minded and they wanted newspapers to promote the spread of their favorite partisan doctrines."⁴ Community leaders also used newspapers to promote a new town and entice prospective lot buyers with the idea that "that they were helping to found a future metropolis."⁵

In some cases, newspapers were published before a town was established. Joseph Ellis Johnson published the Omaha [Nebr.] Arrow from just across the Missouri River in Council Bluffs, Iowa. He published his first edition of the Arrow three weeks before the first log cabin in Omaha was constructed.⁶ On April 27, 1849, James Madison Goodhue printed his first edition of the Minnesota Pioneer from Cincinnati, Ohio.⁷

The rural press, in the 19th century, was marked by controversy and divisiveness between it and city dailies. Rural editors complained about their failure to attract national advertising, their treatment by the larger papers and "yellow journalism" — a product of the national press.⁸ John A. MacMurphy of the Plattsmouth [Nebr.] Herald said, "We are harder worked and poorer paid than any class of men in the United States, Methodist itinerants excepted, and they fare about as well considering they seldom have any cash capital at stake."⁹

The country press received its push as the United States entered the 20th century. "In 1897 Rural Free Delivery made it possible for the big dailies to reach out into the hinterlands, and the journalistic doom-sayers predicted the end of the rural weeklies."¹⁰ Instead of folding, small-town newspapers now could focus solely on local news, instead of world happenings and national events. They survived, often thriving. The country press had received an earlier boost in 1862 when President Lincoln signed the Homestead

Act, passed three years earlier by both houses of Congress. Homesteaders applauded the act because it provided them with a free quarter section of land. Country editors applauded the act because homesteaders, after fulfilling their five-year residency, were required to advertise in five consecutive issues that they had lived up to the law's requirements.¹¹

The honor roll of country and small-town newspaper editors — before and after the start of Rural Free Delivery — who achieved notoriety is an impressive list. Henry Watterson was just 16 when he started The New Era in McMinnville, Tennessee. Although Samuel Clemens began his journalism career at the Hannibal Courier in Missouri, he first attracted attention as a newspaperman with the Territorial Enterprise in Nevada. Edgar Watson Howe, who began his newspaper career at age 19, attracted attention in the late 1800s for his pithy comments in Kansas' Atchison Globe. Newspapers across the country included Howe's editorial comments. "What was so unusual was that Howe achieved his fame in God-fearing Kansas while carrying on his unrelenting war against religion and the feminine gender. People simply had to read what he wrote whether it offended them or not!"¹²

Perhaps it was another country editor from Kansas, William Allen White, who drew the most attention for his editorial writing. White gained national attention with his editorial in the weekly Emporia Gazette bearing the headline "What's the Matter with Kansas?" His words became a war-cry for the Republican Party because it blasted "Populists, whiners, do-nothings and second-rate candidates."¹³

James Reston, in a tribute to longtime weekly newspaper editor Henry Beetle Hough, said the notoriety gained by some country editors is one of the most interesting aspects of journalism: "From Tom Paine to Mark Twain, William Allen White of Kansas and Elmer Davis of Indiana, and the Baltimore crowd from Henry Mencken to Russell Baker, it was, in a funny way, the hicks from the sticks who took over the big-city crowd."¹⁴

Writing editorials is just one of the many roles country editors have played and continue to play. In addition, most country editors sell advertising, write and report, manage the

business affairs and carry out many other responsibilities. The importance editors place on editorials and their actual use varies. In a survey of 749 weekly or non-daily newspapers, journalism professors Ernest C. Hynds and Charles H. Martin asked, among other questions, what value the editors placed on using editorials in their newspapers. Newspaper editors were selected randomly from a list in the 1977 Editor & Publisher Yearbook. They found that, of the 359 editors who responded, 96.7 percent agreed or strongly agreed that editorials and editorial pages still serve a useful role in weekly newspapers.¹⁵

Despite the apparent value that non-daily newspaper editors placed on editorials and editorial pages, academic studies found limited use of such columns. John L. Sim, a journalism professor and a former newspaper editor and publisher, found, through a cursory examination, that while 75.2 percent of all U.S. dailies carried editorials on a regular basis and another 6.7 percent on an occasional basis, only 45.5 percent of all U.S. weeklies, bi-weeklies and tri-weeklies regularly carried editorials, and another 20 percent carried them occasionally. Sim noted that "not a few" editors believed that their personal columns — those often found under a standing headline, carrying the editor's byline, and containing more personal observations than editorial comment — were more effective and replaced formal editorials, those often unsigned and placed as part of an editorial page.¹⁶

Sim quoted the response by a Georgia publisher, given to Harvey Walters, secretary-manager of the Georgia Press Association, as to why the publisher did not include editorials in his newspaper: "I'm a printer. Came here as a linotype operator 25 years ago. When I got a chance to buy the paper I bought it. I would write some editorials if I had the necessary training or educational background. But we get a good-looking newspaper with plenty of news."¹⁷ Walters responded, "Newspapers having no editorial page at all sure give a black eye to the rest of the fraternity."¹⁸

Four decades earlier, University of Minnesota journalism professor Phil Bing found that

a lack of education was not the only reason newspaper publishers opted not to include editorials in their paper. Bing cited a University of Kansas survey, which:

brought forth the astonishing fact that each of the 213 editors who furnished statistics was not only working fourteen and fifteen hours a day, seven days in the week, but that five-sixths of their time was taken up with soliciting job work and advertising, setting type, and running the presses, while one-sixth was devoted to gathering and writing the news.¹⁹

Sim also found that 56 percent of non-daily newspapers in Minnesota did not print editorials; 55 percent of non-dailies in Ohio did not print editorials; 54 percent in Washington; 50 percent in Georgia; and 49 percent of all West Virginia non-dailies did not print editorials.²⁰ Sim stated that the reasons small weeklies were less likely to run editorials were obvious: Printers did not have the time, desire or aptitude to express themselves in editorials.²¹

Sim's findings supported results found by Conover, who reported that 42 percent of Ohio small weeklies did not publish editorials.²² Conover found, through interviews, that publishers of Ohio non-dailies:

- did not include editorials because of a lack of space.
- believed their readers preferred news rather than opinion.
- believed editorials were a waste of time.
- did not feel qualified or that they had the background to write editorials.

Finally, journalism instructors Wilbur Peterson and Robert Thorp found a trend among non-daily Iowa newspapers, especially those with less than 1,000 circulation, to eliminate editorials altogether. The two studied 215 Iowa non-dailies published in November 1960. Their results: 72.3 percent of the papers with more than 2,500 circulation had editorial pages; 27.3 percent of those under 2,500 had editorial pages. All together, 40.9 percent of the newspapers studied had editorial pages.²³ The authors compared their results to Emil Newstrand's findings that in 1930, 63.5 percent of Iowa's weeklies carried editorial pages.²⁴ Peterson and Thorp added that personal columns were found to be a weak

substitute for traditional editorials because they were void of topics usually found in editorials and more likely to discuss noncontroversial subjects.²⁵

Graduate student Robert Jones found these results ironic²⁶, citing a study by researchers Wilbur Schramm and Merritt Ludwig, which indicated that local editorials are better read than half the other areas of a newspaper.²⁷ Schramm and Ludwig found that 40.5 percent of the men and 36.2 percent of the women who read weekly newspapers read the editorials. The authors found that local editorials ranked eighth in 16 categories for degree of readership. Local editorials ranked ahead of categories such as society news, sports news and farm news, but behind categories such as local columns, general news and human interest stories.²⁸ Jones compared these figures to a study by research professor Charles Swanson that indicated readership of editorials in U.S. dailies was just 23.1 percent. Swanson surveyed about 50,000 readers from 130 newspapers.²⁹

Jones stated, "From these articles it would appear that editorials about local subjects should be one of the strong points of a non-daily newspaper."³⁰

Kenneth Byerly contended that strong newspapers were concerned enough about their communities to print editorials. He presented eight conclusions about editorials:

- Little business is lost permanently from editorials.
- Editors should not be concerned because some disagree with them.
- A newspaper should inform and stimulate thinking on matters of public concern.
- It does not take years of training to become an effective editorial writer.
- Mass readership need not be a goal in every editorial.
- What people do not know will hurt them.
- Editorials can give a newspaper character and personality.
- Newspapers should work constantly for the advancement and welfare of their readers and communities, and editorials are one of their most effective tools.³¹

Just as editors do not always agree on the value of editorials, they also cannot agree on

the ingredients for quality editorial writing. Stanford University's William Rivers states that the key to persuasive writing is to present counter-arguments, and to avoid overstatements and insincerity. Overstatement, Rivers contends, is the most common fault in persuasive writing. "In trying to argue convincingly, you are likely to state your case too strongly."³²

Curtis MacDougall, professor emeritus of journalism at Northwestern University, contends that there are no rigid style rules that govern proper editorial writing. News writing has the 5 w's — who, what, where, when and why — and the inverted pyramid style. A good editorial succeeds by achieving the intention of its author to communicate a message. It does not merely view with alarm, point with pride or direct attention to a problem.³³

MacDougall contends that the best editorials are written by people who feel strongly about their topic. These editorials also must tell why the writer feels as he or she does.³⁴

Professor Bing wrote that country weeklies are the logical place for thought-provoking editorials. Country editors who are in touch with their readers will know what issues concern them. "The editor should think with the people, not for them; and if he is alert, he will discover these new ways and will deal with things which will mean progress to the community."³⁵

Newspaper publisher Bruce Kennedy wrote that, above all, editorials should be governed by the rules of good taste and decency. Editorials should be independent from all other parts of a newspaper; they should not be tied to news coverage or advertising.

An editorial should not try to mirror what the majority is thinking. Nor the minority either. It is one editor's beliefs publicly expressed. An editorial should choose sides whenever it can, but if you cannot choose sides, be careful of your attempts to please both pro and con. Such pleasing is next to impossible. Write what you feel and if you are not sure of your own convictions, it's better not to write it at all.³⁶

MacDougall states that a good editorial makes three things clear: the news peg, the reaction — clear-cut for or against an issue or pro or con — and the reasons behind the

reaction. "The 1-2-3 organizational order is not only usually the most logical but it is the easiest for the beginner to learn. Good editorial writers have adhered to it for years."³⁷

The Inland Press Association's 1993 "Editorial Excellence Award" used the following criteria by judges:

- Clarity of thought,
- Pungency of phrase,
- Statement of a need or expectation in concrete terms as a basis for action,
- Fostering appreciation of humanity's limitations, capability for folly and potential for glory.³⁸

Murphy Givens, editorial writer for The Corpus Christi (Texas) Caller-Times, encourages editorial writers to borrow some tricks from literary writers. Editorial writers cannot cut out abstractions, but they can eliminate the deadwood and the compound abstractions in a single paragraph. "We can use more buzzsaws in our editorials, with more onomatopoeia, as in 'the slap, slap, slap of the lapping pond.'"³⁹

Givens uses a 10-point grid to judge his own editorials. Each category is worth 10 points, with the perfect editorial earning 100 points. His criteria are:

- Does the lead have a hook?
- Are the sentences short and simple?
- Is the editorial easy to understand?
- Is it brief and to the point, or does it pussyfoot around?
- Is it convincing?
- Is it logical?
- Is it forceful?
- Does it have historical relevance or perspective?
- Is it timely?
- Is it literary at all?⁴⁰

Givens used an editorial about an animal-rights group protesting as unnatural a carnival act in which mules jumped from a 40-foot platform into a tank of water:

"Well, a mule would probably tell you — if he could talk — that it's unnatural for him to be hitched to a plow and forced to pull it day in and day out across sundrenched, stump-strewn new ground. But generations of mules have done it."

That's good texture. When I read that, I see the stumps, like rotten teeth, and the mules. If the editorial has something in it that I can visualize, then it makes me a participant in the process.⁴¹

Other editorial writers use different yardsticks to evaluate what makes a quality editorial. Journalism professor Charles Pearson writes that poorly written editorials are a waste of an opportunity for a newspaper and a waste of a reader's time. He lists seven guidelines that form the framework for a good editorial:

- It must be based on fact, not on assumption, intuition or rumor.
- The writer must decide whom he is addressing.
- The facts must be logically arranged so as to lead inevitably and exclusively to the writer's conclusion.
- There must be personal reference.
- It must have the sound of sincerity.
- It must be well-written.
- It must have class.⁴²

Ed Hinshaw, a public relations executive, states that the qualities of engaging conversation — style, sparkle, and personality — and those of the newspaper editorial — thoroughness, thoughtfulness, and careful reasoning — must be blended together. "When all six qualities are married in the same piece, we find editorial excellence."⁴³

A final test of quality editorial writing was found in the Pulitzer Prize judging guidelines that would determine Alfred's chances of winning the award.⁴⁴ Among the criteria were clarity of style, moral purpose, and sound reasoning. His readers would testify that he hit the mark on all three.

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CHAPTER TWO

NORRIS ALFRED SPEAKS HIS MIND

If you're going to criticize something, you damn well better know what you're criticizing.

—Norris Alfred

Norris Alfred did not pay much attention to what the experts said about the qualities of good editorial writing. He just wrote. He wrote from his heart and he wrote what he knew. What he knew best were his readers and his community.

Alfred spent nearly his entire life in a community called Polk. He preferred the slow-paced, small-town life to the fast pace of larger communities. He watched as Polk prospered, then began its slow decline. While population in Polk County began to decline in the 1930s when it had slightly more than 10,000 residents, the town of Polk saw its population begin to dip in the 1950s. The town had a population of 508 in 1950; 433 in 1960; 413 in 1970; and 440 in 1980.¹ Polk County's population was 8,044 in 1950; 7,210 in 1960; 6,468 in 1970; and 6,320 in 1980.² Population per square mile in the county dipped from 18.6 in 1950³ to 16.8 in 1960.⁴

Largely an agricultural area, the number of Polk County farms, following a trend in the entire state, slowly decreased during Alfred's tenure as Polk Progress editor. Farms in Nebraska were decreasing by about 1,500 per year in the late 1960s and by about 1,000 per year in the early 1970s.⁵ The number of Polk County farms decreased from 987 in 1964 to 727 in 1982.⁶

While he sometimes longed for life in a faster-paced community, Polk always was home for Norris Alfred. He just did not always realize it. Alfred's early plans for his life did not include running a weekly newspaper using a 1913 model Linotype and a Babcock Big Drum press in a one-room building. He had other dreams. He wanted to paint. He wanted to express himself on canvas instead of newsprint.

Throughout his life, Alfred always hoped he could devote all his time to painting his watercolor landscapes and abstract renditions. Something always called him back to newspapers. Before he bought the Progress, he spent time on an island off Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. While there, Alfred realized where his talents lay.

"On an island you have to have a boat to get off and it gets pretty lonely. And I didn't have the talent to paint for a living. . . .I decided maybe it's time I said what I wanted to say, whether people like it or not."⁷

The chance to speak his mind and the possibility that his views might be valid — as he related to Progress readers in his January 17, 1972, edition — motivated Alfred to keep writing editorials. He took this responsibility seriously:

Readers may not believe it, but we worry steadily about what we put in this paper. After it's printed we worry about reactions of readers (if they read it). No sooner do we put those worries behind us, than we start worrying what to put in the paper next week. Anybody wanting a relaxing, non-profitable occupation, buy a weekly in a small, rural town and then publish an honest sheet. Honesty means a weekly is more concerned with what is said than how much advertising is in it.⁸

Alfred was born in 1913 in Polk, located about 100 miles west of Omaha, Nebraska; 35 miles northeast of Grand Island, Nebraska; and about 30 miles from Interstate 80. Alfred's

father came to Polk in 1913 to start a clothing store — six years after the Polk Progress published its first edition with A.C. Hammond as editor and J.C. Nagaell as assistant, and seven years after Polk was founded. Polk was named after Polk County, which was named after President James K. Polk.⁹

Settlers first came to the area that would become Polk in the late 1860s, prompted by the Homestead Act of 1862, which provided government land to Civil War veterans and other settlers at low prices. In return, the settlers had to live on the land for five years and improve it. Later, members of the City Improvement Club sold lots along the proposed railroad line and "planned the town with a Boulevard down Main Street, and a Park at each end. Lots were sold rapidly."¹⁰ The UP branch line had previously opened for business March 1, 1907, and seven months later Polk County commissioners granted the incorporation of Polk as a village.¹¹

By 1910, Polk's population had increased to 396. Building projects boomed and Polk was a "live wire" town, according to the Polk history book, Polk Memoirs: A Healthy, Worthy and Wise Small Town.¹² The community now had concrete sidewalks, acetylene gas lamps and many clubs, organizations, and social activities.

In its early days, Polk prospered. At one point, Polk businesses included five grocery stores, three barber shops, two cafes, a variety store, two drug stores, three banks, and a jewelry store.

Alfred's first experience with newspapers came in 1931, shortly after he graduated from high school. Hugh McGaffin, then publisher of the Progress, asked Alfred if he needed a job working on the handset newspaper. After a year working for McGaffin, Alfred decided to move on.

"You graduate from high school and you think you're pretty smart, but you're not. You're pretty damn dumb," Alfred said.¹³

His love for football took him to Nebraska Central College in Central City. At 125

pounds, he did not see much playing time. His stint at Nebraska Central also included his first and only journalism course — which he flunked. "It was mainly because I didn't do any studying."¹⁴

After studying at Kearney State Teachers College and later working in the Chicago University cafeteria, Alfred enrolled at Doane College. Doane previously had purchased printing equipment and needed someone to run it. "I was able to pay for most of my education by printing envelopes, letterheads and programs."¹⁵ In 1940, at age 27, Alfred received a degree in chemistry.

At Doane, Alfred developed his political philosophy. Alfred labeled Doane's faculty as liberal Democrats, some of whom he suspected may even have been Communists. The faculty helped mold his outlook toward society and politics, which would later emerge in Polk Progress editorials:

It was this emphasis on the individual in those days that I think was the greatest benefit of the government. It was a democratic ideal that you are concerned about the the individual. It gave me a mindset of what government should do and what it could be. The government's been on a wrong track for a long time now.¹⁶

Alfred's first intention was to teach, but the Nebraska Legislature put a roadblock in his path. Lawmakers in 1937 decided that a prospective teacher in the Nebraska public school system could not receive a teaching certificate without having completed a course or passed an examination in physiology and hygiene with "special reference to the effects of alcoholic drinks and other stimulants and narcotics upon the human system."¹⁷

Alfred said: "You either had to drink it [alcohol] or take courses in biology. I decided not to be a teacher."¹⁸

World War II began and Alfred spent the duration working as a chemist in Chicago. He helped develop synthetic rubber rollers for high-speed presses. He was not drafted into military service because his work was considered valuable. That did not make the job any more enjoyable. "It was messy work. I hated it. I hated Chicago. I just plain quit."¹⁹

After the war, Alfred became an itinerant printer, working for newspapers in Louisiana, Washington, New York, Oregon, and Nebraska.

The desire to give painting another try surfaced again and Alfred headed to the University of Kansas City where, at the urging of a Nebraska pastor, he met with the school's president. He told his host that he wanted to study art. "I didn't have any money, but that didn't stop me from doing what I wanted to do."²⁰

Alfred earned his keep by working as an assistant in the university's organic lab. He lived in a renovated swimming pool that was part of an estate, which previously had been donated to the university. After two years at the University of Kansas City, Alfred left and tried to make a living painting. "I would work as a printer until I saved a little money, then I would quit and paint. When I was broke I would get a job as a printer again. But I wasn't worth a damn as a painter. No real talent. I only sold a few of my paintings. The top price was \$25."²¹

Alfred never married — which he says was a mistake. During an interview when he was 66, Alfred reflected on his bachelorhood. "Anybody who says it's a joy to live alone is a damned fool. I don't know why I never got married. Maybe I'd better not try to analyze it."²²

Alfred was in Hamilton, N. Y., working as a printer, when his mother called with news that his father was ill and was being treated in an Omaha hospital. Alfred returned to Nebraska in 1952, when he was in his late 30s, and stayed while his father recovered.

Alton "Mook" Wilhelms then owned the Polk Progress and needed some help. Wilhelms, a high school coach by choice, had to find a new profession under doctors' orders. "He'd get so excited at games, he'd just pass out. After a few times of that, the doctors told him if he wanted to live, he'd better get out of the coaching business. So he bought the paper. . . .It was a wreck."²³

Wilhelms was not experienced in printing and was looking for help from someone who

was. In 1955, Wilhelms wanted to buy the nearby Stromsburg paper and asked if Alfred wanted to take over the Progress. One thing stood in Alfred's way: "I didn't have any money."²⁴

Alfred borrowed \$3,000 from a brother-in-law for a down payment. Wilhelms sold the newspaper to Alfred for \$9,000, to be paid interest-free at \$100 a month. Alfred's initial plans were to build equity in the business, sell it, move on and begin painting again. Instead, he stayed at the Progress for nearly four decades, except for a time in the mid-1960s when he sold the newspaper. He bought it back 16 months later.

Owning his own newspaper, Alfred figured, gave him the freedom few other professions offered. Included in this freedom was the opportunity to write about topics of his choice and run the newspaper as he saw fit. "As a reporter, I write. As the editor, I accept or reject the writing. To date I've accepted everything I've ever written. How can you beat that?"²⁵

Alfred began writing his "Polking Around" column from the start. His predecessor wrote a column, and Alfred figured he needed to continue that practice. "If you can't afford a columnist, you write your own damn column."²⁶ Alfred explained to his readers how he came up with the title for the column: "We thought up the title for this column while on vacation. If anybody has a better suggestion we'll be willing to change. 'Polking Around' sounds as though we'll be sticking our nose into everybody's doings. Maybe we will."²⁷

Over time, Alfred added other columns to his newspaper. "The Weather" gave a complete description of the previous week's high and low temperatures, moisture levels and any storms. Alfred often managed to include social commentary with the weather.

There is a prediction — a white Thanksgiving, a white Christmas and 20 inches of snow in January — which may or may not be accurate. If correct, the past week was remembered as remarkable considering the emphasis already being put on Christmas shopping. The last Halloween goblin was still in sight when Rudolph the red nose reindeer appeared.²⁸

"Bird-watching" contained accounts of Alfred's favorite pastime. The column often included a description of his bird-watching endeavors around the county from the previous week. "A belted kingfisher had Lee (his bird-watching companion) saying, 'It's a female' and me asking, 'How do you know?' and Lee replying, 'Because it doesn't have the reddish brown color on the breast,' and me saying 'I remember reading about that in a bird book.'"²⁹ Another column "From the News Releases," was a roundup of the press releases Alfred received the previous week. Still, Alfred contended that his were not the most read columns in the Progress. That distinction belonged to Marsha Redman, a local housewife, whose column, "Have You Noticed, Ladies," was aimed at women.

Sometimes, his columns turned personal. The week after his 95-year-old mother died, Alfred eulogized her in his August 28, 1975, "Polking Around". Alfred, then 61, told of how his mother's memory had failed her. "Then there were questions and questions about her past. Simple ones about 'Where did I live?' 'Who was my husband?' 'Where are the children?' After we would answer them all she would ask another, 'How do you remember so much?'"³⁰

Alfred recounted his mother's life — one that spanned the days of horses and buggies to astronauts. He told of her first experience with fruit in the winter and her experience with using buffalo chips for fuel. He told of her creativity with making do with what she had. "Her family grew up and left and she undoubtedly had easier years. Her brothers and sisters died; her husband was gone, and one by one, she out-lived her contemporaries. In the rest home she kept asking why the Lord didn't take her. He finally did."³¹

Alfred was prepared for her death and, in some ways, relieved. "Her death actually was a relief to her. She was ready to go."³²

Alfred never surveyed his readers to find their likes and dislikes. He said he never knew whether his readers enjoyed his columns and editorials or merely ignored them.

Omaha World-Herald columnist Robert McMorris wrote, "He suspects that many, perhaps

most, buy the Progress for its staple of news on births, deaths, doings of local organizations and personal items which 'tell people who had coffee with whom.'"³³

Alfred occasionally lost readers when they canceled subscriptions because of something he wrote — but he never let a little criticism slow him down. "The Proofreader," a pseudonym for one of his readers, wrote with criticism of the Progress, starting with Alfred's politics. "Having suffered through the biased opinions, slurs and slanders upon the Grand Old Party from the last national election, I can only find relief in the fact that the next elections are still several years away."³⁴ Just as often as he received criticism, he received praise. Robert and Linda Meyer wrote: "I might add that we agree you're 'right on' with your comments about the Watergate affair— sadly enough."³⁵

His approach to small-town journalism was based on the premise that to know what's going on in a community, one has to be involved. "I had the idea that the place would fall apart if I wasn't a part of it."³⁶

Alfred followed his motto, serving on the village board and the community club, and helping to promote the town's annual celebration. He refrained from spending much time away from the Progress office. He relied on the steady stream of visitors to his office to keep abreast of community happenings and to give him fodder for his columns and news space. He used correspondents to provide him with local news items — club meetings, social gatherings and a little gossip.

Alfred quickly developed a pattern for getting his work done. He'd get up each morning at 4 and work on an editorial or column. He'd begin work at the office at 6 a.m. and continue to 6 p.m. Bedtime was 7:30 p.m. "My mind is freshest in the early morning. That's a good time of the day. Very quiet. You get no interference."³⁷

From the beginning, Alfred's editorials took a liberal stance — although Polk County was a Republican county. In 1967, voters were required to register. The year after, Polk County had 1,843 registered Republicans and had 1,332 registered Democrats. These

figures came as no revelation, based on previous election results. Polk County residents supported Richard Nixon over John Kennedy for president in 1960 by a 2-to-1 margin. They backed Republican Carl Curtis for U.S. Senate by the same margin in the 1966 general election. And the county continued its Republican dominance into the 1980s. In 1980, Polk County Republicans enjoyed a 390-voter registration lead over county Democrats (2,060 to 1,670); in 1984 that margin increased to 545 (2,058 to 1,513).³⁸

Alfred realized his liberal political viewpoints may have been falling on deaf ears. "I never did write to please anyone. I wrote hoping people would be pleased. . . .The Republicans gave me lots of inspiration."³⁹

Although he wrote to please himself, Alfred admitted he had to be upsetting some of his readers. "I know I make people mad sometimes, although they don't say anything. You can just feel it."⁴⁰

Alfred wasn't opposed to trying to stir controversy — and at the same time gauge whether his readers were paying attention. In "Big Farms And Odd Fossils," Alfred, at one point, complained about hog confinements.⁴¹ "I wrote how I mentioned the stink to the banker, and the banker said I shouldn't complain because that was 'the smell of money.' I said, 'No, that's definitely not the smell of money.' Then I said exactly what it was the smell of."⁴²

McMorris, the Omaha columnist, didn't use the word in his story, but Alfred did. "It's the smell of hog shit."⁴³

Alfred expected the use of the four-letter word would cause an uproar. It didn't. "Nothing whatsoever happened. I've used other four-letter words and didn't hear a peep from anybody."⁴⁴

Two editorials that Alfred, when asked in 1975, listed as his favorites show how wide-ranging his subjects were. The first criticized the way the Attica Prison uprising in New York was handled by authorities. "What a person lives on is hope. If you deny them

hope, of course they will rebel."⁴⁵ The other was inspired by a visit to the Stromsburg nursing home to see his mother. Children were playing in a nearby park. "I thought, 'At one time this old lady was a little child. What will these kids look like 70 or 80 years from now?' Life goes on and on."⁴⁶

A member of the Nebraska Press Association, Alfred kept abreast of state events through newspaper exchanges with other association members and several from out of state. Besides television news and public radio, Alfred used several news publications for background information for his columns and editorials. He relied on U.S. News and World Report and New Yorker magazine. "I tried Time, I tried Newsweek. None told me what I wanted to know."⁴⁷

While Alfred used news magazines, television news and public radio for background material, several authors influenced his writing style. Alfred listed Loren Eiseley, Joseph Conrad and E.B. White as being most influential.⁴⁸ Alfred said Eiseley, a poet and anthropologist, White, possibly best known for co-authoring The Elements of Style, and Conrad, who wrote Lord Jim and Heart of Darkness, wrote simply, yet in a profound voice.⁴⁹

Alfred was careful not to take what powerful politicians said at face value. He tried to form his opinions based on fact, rather than opinion. "Just because a person says something, doesn't mean it was true. . . . If you're going to criticize something, you damn well better know what you're criticizing."⁵⁰

Alfred slowly increased the Progress' circulation. Circulation rose from 630 in 1955 when he bought the paper to 694 when he sold it — for the first and only time.⁵¹ The urge to try his hand at painting surfaced once again. In the August 13, 1964, edition, Alfred announced to his readers the sale to the Osceola Publishing Co. Inc., which was to take effect the following week. Running a weekly newspaper was too much work for one person, he wrote.⁵² He told his readers that he had two options: cut back the paper or sell

it. He sold it. The Osceola Publishing Co. named Dick and Kathy Howe as publishers. The two changed the paper's look by using bigger headlines, more graphics and larger photos. Howe introduced himself to Progress readers in the couple's first edition:

It would be easy to follow an editor who did a poor job, but very difficult to come along after Norris Alfred. Frankly, I don't know if I can put in the many hours of time and effort he did in a continuing effort to boost Polk. I can only promise to do the best I can, and assure residents that the town seems to be a growing community and deserves whatever help I can offer.⁵³

Howe's plan was to run Alfred's column whenever possible. "Norris has told me that, although he plans to disappear for a few weeks, he will be within hailing distance of a post office and will try to continue his personal column."⁵⁴

Sixteen months later, Alfred was back at the Progress helm. He had spent time on the West Coast, using a cabin in a remote portion of northwestern Washington as his base. He later painted out of his Eugene, Oregon, apartment. The 1964 winter was an usually harsh one in Washington and Oregon, and Alfred wanted out. Once the mountains were passable, he headed east. "I never saw any sun until I actually came into Nebraska from the west. All of a sudden, there was the damn sun shining."⁵⁵ Instead of remaining in Nebraska, Alfred continued east where he stayed with his sister for a year and continued painting. During a visit to Nebraska, Howe asked if he wanted to buy the Progress back. "I missed having a lot of people around and having something to do, instead of painting, painting and painting."⁵⁶

Alfred contends that the Howes had difficulty running the Progress because Dick Howe's responsibilities with other area newspapers kept him from spending time in Polk. The Howes lived in Osceola and Dick Howe was in Polk just two days a week. "He wasn't able to mix in."⁵⁷ Terms of the sale were the same as when Alfred sold it.

"Then I really consciously decided I would speak my piece. From then on, I did."⁵⁸

The Progress took on its old look, which Alfred explained to his readers in his January 6, 1966, edition — his first back as owner:

The new-old owner has returned to the conservative style of page make-up with column rule, cutoff rule, rule of thumb and any other rule that will keep one story from running into another. The Progress publisher told the Progress editor he is more interested in content than the looks of the paper. The Progress editor told the make-up man the boss wants the pages tightened up. If the pages gain a look—it will be a solid one.⁵⁹

Alfred also shared his thoughts about returning to the newspaper business after being away for more than one year. He used his "Polking Around" column to tell them:

We sold this paper 16 months ago fully resolved never to print another newspaper, and here we are, eagerly and happily beginning another grind of producing Progresses and hoping to find enough advertising and subscriptions to make the operation profitable. Martin Jones sez, "You won't get any subscription money out of me." He bought one of the 3-year deals we were promoting in 1963 and has been cussing us ever since. He claims the future is bleak looking forward to that many Progresses.⁶⁰

Readers noticed that Alfred was back as publisher-editor of the Progress and applauded the move. Circulation numbers had dipped from 688 in 1965 to 578 in 1966. They remained at 578 in 1967 but then jumped to 660 in 1968.⁶¹ Some readers even wrote Alfred, offering their congratulations and gratitude. "Martha Westfall dropped us a line from Grand Island to tell us she is glad we are back with the Progress. We hope to give Martha a year of good Progress reading."⁶²

Alfred made a point to give his readers what they wanted: to see their names in print. In one eight-page edition he counted more than 700 names. "That's what they take the paper for."⁶³

At the same time, Alfred tried not to take himself too seriously. When he made a mistake, he admitted it the next week rather than hoping no one would notice. He also took every opportunity to poke a little fun at himself, his newspapers and his competitors. In his January 27, 1966, column, he explained to his readers how he critiqued the paper after each edition, checking for typographical errors, poor writing, misspellings, and the quality of layout:

We discovered a confused bit of writing "...and saw a large student painting on an easel." Immediately we pictured a large size student standing on an easel while painting, which wasn't what we meant at all. But this confusion was nothing

compared to what we read in the (Stromsburg) Headlight. There we read where a woman "fell on Tuesday ... and broke her arm."⁶⁴

Although his newspaper looked relatively the same throughout his tenure as Progress publisher and editor, Alfred did make one dramatic change. In 1979, he changed the masthead to promote his philosophy that a simpler, slower life is better. Lincoln artist Marjorie Bicker designed a new Progress masthead, which Alfred unveiled in his May 3, 1979, edition. The masthead included "The Polk Progress" in dominant letters, with "Slower is Better" below. A snail wearing glasses anchored the left corner.

Three weeks ago we reported in a talk at Lincoln that she (Bicker) was designing a new log (sic) for the Progress featuring a snail and a Progress Great Truth "Slower is Better." This replaces the cliché, "A Progressive Paper in a Progressive Community" which is and the community are not. Progress is suspect in these days of increasing shortages and needs to be downgraded.⁶⁵

Alfred adopted his new motto from a speech he heard given by economist E.F. Schumacher at Doane College in 1977. In his speech, Schumacher told of his plan to turn India's economy around by having every Indian plant and care for one tree in each of the coming five years:

This is a sort of philosophy of intermediate or appropriate technology or the philosophy of "small is beautiful" to strive for, set up so everybody can take initiative on it, so that the great joy of life which is to be productive and independent and self reliant is no longer continuing to be reserved to a few big corporations or multi-national companies but becomes the possession of the great masses of the people.⁶⁶

Schumacher admired Gandhi, who advocated the concept of village life, meaning that residents look out for the welfare of each other and often can do without material objects.

Alfred agreed and took Schumacher's premise and used it for his own:

The late E. F. Schumacher declared, "Small is Beautiful." The beauty of being small is knowing we are inoculated against delusions of importance. We don't have to battle that disease. Another nice aspect of being small — it is not a great loss if we fail. Lynn Dornburgh told the story of the man moving into Nebraska and how happy he was with having made such a successful change. When he moved he had \$5 in his pocket. Now, he owed \$40,000.⁶⁷

Alfred occasionally had written columns and editorials along the same premise.

Often, these columns focused on agriculture and rural life. His August 24, 1967, "Polking Around" column focused on Polk and the changes it was experiencing:

"Bigger is Better." This theme has been drummed into us for so long, we automatically conclude it is true. The bigger the village or city, the better. The more blocks of paved streets, the more ranch-type new housing with two-car garage attached, the greater the enrollment in school, the more elaborate the school building, the more, more, more of all aspects of living is the criteria by which a community is judged alive and "growing" or dying and "shrinking." There is no static standard for reference. Constant change is the life of a community.⁶⁸

Alfred often trumpeted the value and benefits of living in a small town. Friendliness, camaraderie, and comfort were common themes. In an October, 1986, column he explained why he preferred life in rural America:

A village is a comfortable place. There has been a lot of talk about stress lately and we suppose there is some in Polk but, being backed up by the familiar, stress is not overwhelming. We can cope. ...a small town is where everyone knows everyone...A jacket hanging on a hook in the restaurant is recognized as belonging to Frank. You know Frank. He's the son of Clarence who farmed the Olson place south of town for many years. Surely, you remember Clarence. He married Helen, the daughter of the couple who ran the restaurant for a few years back in the -- now when was that?⁶⁹

Alfred didn't stop there. "Our plan is to live in Polk and die in Polk. While awaiting that momentous, final event, we plan to shop in Polk."⁷⁰

Alfred was careful never to let his personal views carry over from his editorials into his news coverage. His stance against the Vietnam War was widely known in the community, but he did not let it sway his news coverage. When Allen Tonniges was awarded the Army commendation medal for heroism in action⁷¹ and when Leonard Warnick was awarded medals of valor posthumously⁷², both stories received page 1 attention above the fold. "That was news, you didn't let your own views get in the way. You played it straight."⁷³

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CHAPTER THREE

ACCOLADES FOR AN UNLIKELY RECIPIENT

I thought it [the nomination] was nice. I didn't think much of it, but I was amazed at the reaction. Hell, I had TV cameras pointed at me from everywhere. I had a good time.

—Norris Alfred

Alfred recalls he was quite ill that evening in 1980 when he first received the news that the Pulitzer Prize committee had accepted his editorials. "I was having problems with my back. I had already broken a wrist. ...The phone rang one night. I was in bed. I hated like hell to get up."¹

The caller was Lynn Ludlow, San Francisco newsman and journalism instructor, who years earlier had taken a liking to Alfred's editorial writing. Ludlow gave Alfred the news, telling him to be sure the letter he was sending was printed in the next edition of the Progress. "I wasn't hardly listening. I said, 'As long as you write the story, I'll print it.' I went back to bed."²

Ludlow had become acquainted with Alfred's writing by accident. One of Alfred's out-of-state readers had left an edition of the Progress in a San Francisco bar. Ludlow picked it up, started reading, and liked the content and Alfred's writing style. In a letter to Alfred, dated August 31, 1971, Ludlow explained why he liked Alfred's newspaper.

The closest I've come to Nebraska is 30,000 feet (it looks like a marble floor in the winter), but I am an admirer of your newspaper because of your devotion to sweet corn, in common with all right-thinking people, your notion that repairmen in bronze will decorate our parks, your selection of one of Von Hoffman's few quotes that doesn't sound embarrassing all by itself and, of course, your thought on grass roots levels.

I once worked on a country newspaper in Paxton, Ill., which was an experience that propelled me swiftly into other lines of news work. But in the devising of many a birthday notice, visit to Chicago by someone's aunt, Masonic initiations and the like, I got something of a feeling for the kind of guts it must take to carry out the slogan under your nameplate—a slogan that is possibly only half true. So I wish you prosperity, the kind that counts most.³

Ludlow and Alfred developed a friendship and corresponded regularly. Alfred published Ludlow's letters in the Progress. Ludlow later took a sabbatical to travel the United States to see if other small town weekly newspapers operated the way Alfred ran the Polk Progress. He didn't find any, according to Alfred. "Of course not."⁴

Alfred refused to get his hopes up about the possibility of winning the Pulitzer. He did follow Ludlow's instructions and printed his friend's letter.

Dear Norris

The editors of feed/back, the journalism review, have nominated editorials in the Polk Progress for the 1979 Pulitzer Prize.

As you know, this is the most important award in journalism.

Unfortunately, the judges rarely pay much attention to entries from weekly newspapers.

We hope they will change their ways.

Enclosed is the "summary" of the exhibit we prepared.

Good luck.⁵

The summary told of Alfred's life as a journalist and showcased his approach to editorial writing through several examples from the Progress. Finally, it paid Alfred's writing style a compliment:

The "test of excellence" is set forth as "clearness of style, moral purpose, sound

reasoning, and power to influence public opinion in what the writer conceives to be the right direction." Mr. Alfred's style is suited to his community. It appears to be a rambling discussion over coffee, but analysis will show adroit use of logic, persuasion and the association of familiar observations with original perspectives. As for the right direction, only time will tell.⁶

Ludlow and his colleagues included eight editorials and one "Polking Around" column (see Appendix A) with the nomination.

In the column, Alfred chastised society for its misuse of the English language. He started with the media's use of non-news, referring to a recent headline: "Measles not found in county." He finished by complaining about how automobile commercials were touting their product as economical, yet luxurious. Which was it? Alfred asked. "Madison Avenue has never totally rejected the idea 'bigger is better.' To expect the avenue's scribblers to give up on luxury as a selling point is as impossible as expecting the sun to rise in the west."⁷

In his "A Bottle Bill Is Needed" editorial, March 29, 1979, Alfred accused container makers, breweries and soft drink companies of irresponsibility toward the environment. Throwaway containers, which had replaced returnable containers, were cluttering the countryside, Alfred wrote:

Individual responsibility is the cornerstone of a democratic society. Responsibility encompasses concern, caring. The bottle bill was the correct legislative solution to litter. The proposed nickel deposit by the individual purchaser would give each can or bottle value. . . . Perhaps a monetary motive is not the ideal for caring. It works. Why knock it?⁸

Alfred compared the uncertainty of radiation leaks with high nitrate levels in Platte Valley water in "Radiation And Nitrates," April 12, 1979. In both cases, experts used jargon to avoid giving the public straight answers to serious questions. "The experts will kill us, yet. . . . For a safer, saner world risks should be reduced, not increased. In the hurry to exploit and profit civilization's tolerance level may never be known until it is too late."⁹

In "Propaganda Of The Deed," September 13, 1979, Alfred argued that the

government's explanation that the MX missile system was needed to keep worldwide peace was a camouflage to keep the military funded. The results could be devastating, Alfred wrote:

The "Tale of Two Countries" is a 21st century story of United States and Russia on a tragic collision course. The tale begins: 'It was the worst of times, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Darkness, it was the winter of despair.'

We hope the end of the story is more cheerful than the beginning.¹⁰

The dangers of pesticides and the government's tendency to bend regulations to reinstate banned chemicals were the themes of "The Art Of The Possible," August 9, 1979.

The government's permission to use previously banned Toxaphene in South Dakota to kill grasshoppers irked Alfred. When it comes to chemicals that can kill, Alfred wrote, there should be no compromise:

Compromise isn't as important as cooperation. We need to cooperate with nature instead of forcing it to cooperate. The environment we inherited has survived (and so has life) because it wasn't tampered with in the past. But we continue refusing to accept adversity as part of existence, convinced there is a Golden Age, where all is peace and love and not a damn grasshopper anywhere.¹¹

"Blackpoll Warblers And Illusions," May 17, 1979, dealt with Alfred's displeasure of companies that show disregard for society's welfare. In this case, his target was the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and its contention, in a pamphlet, that technology was improving the quality of life in Nebraska. Not so, Alfred wrote. "We expect this kind of propaganda from corporations with something to sell. Appreciation is lacking for the 'selling' of educational institutions. The pamphlet is evidence of a lack of quality in Nebraska life at the higher educational level."¹²

Alfred compared his crusade for protecting the family farm with the words of a Catholic priest in Iowa in "Big Farms And Odd Fossils," September 6, 1979. The priest lamented the loss of membership in his rural parish and what was happening to the family farm. Knocking technology and the use of bigger and better farm equipment seemed fruitless.

Alfred noted: "Progress is a myth propounded by hucksters who claim they can detect it in

old man observed, 'If I had known I was going to live so long I would have taken better care of myself.' If we had known we would be nominated for a Pulitzer Prize we would have taken better care of our writing."¹⁸

Those who appreciated Alfred's editorials thought his writing didn't need improvement and told him so in the many letters that arrived after word of his nomination spread.

Jerrold Werthimer explained in a letter why he and his colleagues nominated Alfred for the award:

The nomination of the Progress editorials for the 1979 Pulitzer Prize may come as a surprise to you but not to we big city types in San Francisco. We've been thinking in those terms since we have regularly read the Progress since the early 70s. ... We all have rural roots. We need your sagacity. The ever accelerating complexity of life here is exhausting. You force us to think of our nuclear alternatives and ecology in a deeper way than the New Yorker, that slick weekly which also opposes war and waste.¹⁹

In his April 17, 1980, edition, Alfred informed his readers that he had not won the Pulitzer Prize. The Wall Street Journal had bagged the prize. "It has been years since we have had 'great expectations' of any sort and this time our enthusiasm was restrained by past experience."²⁰

"I thought it [the nomination] was nice. I didn't think much of it, but I was amazed at the reaction. Hell, I had TV cameras pointed at me from everywhere. I had a good time."²¹

Alfred later was able to take solace in a Wall Street Journal writer's comment after "NBC Nightly News" quoted Alfred about the Reagan-Gorbachev summit. Journal writer Daniel Henninger called Alfred's comments, "Indeed, the wisest words spoken on television about the summit."²²

Which caused Alfred to reply: "So, revenge is sweet. Now the Journal declares, in black and white, that we are the wisest."²³

bigger, faster, higher. Progress is confused with change to the extent that every change is declared progress as we journey from worse to better while accumulating much, more, most."¹³

In the "Blessings Of Shortages," June 7, 1979, Alfred explained that doing without was not all bad. The Arab oil embargo in 1973 forced the country to realize how dependent it was on technology and machines. The embargo showed that "we are confined within material limits" that cannot be ignored any longer. The problem was that Americans never learned restraint, Alfred wrote.

Exuberant youth will still discover a world full of opportunities to "do or have whatever I want" with the added discipline of material limit. This is, probably, a healthy restraint, resulting in a more natural world; less technical, more human. Shortages could prove a blessing, not a disaster.¹⁴

Finally, in "It's A Different World," March 22, 1979, Alfred again lamented the decline of rural agriculture. Machinery, Alfred concluded, was the impetus for turning agriculture into big business: "The urge to have is powerful motivation and questionable risks are taken in the name of more, more, more. When the risks contribute to a more precarious environment for all forms of life it is time for authority to step in and order, "Stop!"¹⁵

Alfred accepted word of the nomination with humility. He explained to his readers how his friendship with Ludlow began and his thoughts about the attention he was receiving:

That's a mouthful to chew and swallow. According to Lynn Ludlow chances of winning are one in thirty. We copied the No. 6 (the category Alfred was nominated for) recipe for excellence because in the "Summary" Lynn refers to the various ingredients in his arguments for the Progress editorials. Lynn sees one drawback to winning: "Once you become a certified genius, you are morally obliged to fake it."¹⁶

Word of his nomination spread and Alfred shared with his readers the following week his amazement about the attention he was receiving. "We have been dumbfounded by the magic of a word—Pulitzer. . . . the phone hasn't quit ringing. Friends we haven't heard from in years call or write."¹⁷

Alfred also poked fun at himself in an editorial in the same edition: "The hundred-year-

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¹Norris Alfred, Polk Progress editor, interview by author, 15 May 1993, Polk, Nebr., tape recording, Polk Progress office.

²Ibid.

³Lynn Ludlow, Personal Letter to Norris Alfred, 31 August 1971, 1.

⁴James Denney, "Polk Pundit Reaches Coast to Coast," Omaha World-Herald Magazine of the Midlands, 5 January 1986, 7.

⁵Lynn Ludlow, Personal Letter to Norris Alfred, 21 February 1980, 1. The spring 1980 edition of feed/back included an item, found on page 4 and written by Ludlow, which expressed Alfred's thanks to journal's editors for nominating him. Ludlow wrote: "Polk, a village of about 300 in the Platte Valley, is a long way from feed/back's primary circulation area. But for more than a decade, we have savored the iconoclastic wisdom of Alfred, a country printer who ruminates about things that matter."

⁶Norris Alfred, "In The Mail Box," Polk Progress, 21 February 1980, 1.

⁷Norris Alfred, "Polking Around," Polk Progress, 29 November 1979, 1.

⁸Norris Alfred, "A Bottle Bill Is Needed," Polk Progress, 29 March 1979, 2.

⁹Norris Alfred, "Radiation And Nitrates," Polk Progress, 12 April 1979, 2.

¹⁰Norris Alfred, "Propaganda Of The Deed," Polk Progress, 13 September 1979, 3.

¹¹Norris Alfred, "The Art Of The Possible," Polk Progress, 9 August 1979, 3.

¹²Norris Alfred, "Blackpoll Warblers And Illusions," Polk Progress, 17 May 1979, 2.

¹³Norris Alfred, "Big Farms And Odd Fossils," Polk Progress, 6 September 1979, 2.

¹⁴Norris Alfred, "Blessings Of Shortages," Polk Progress, 7 June 1979, 2.

¹⁵Norris Alfred, "It's A Different World," Polk Progress, 22 March 1979, 3.

¹⁶Norris Alfred, "Polking Around," Polk Progress, 21 February 1980, 1.

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²¹Redd Aubrey, "1987 Man of the Year: Norris Alfred: A Liberal Thrives in a Prairie of Conservatives," Grand Island [Nebr.] Independent, 3 January 1988, 2B.

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CHAPTER FOUR
FULFILLING AN OBLIGATION

We think the person whose name is listed in the masthead as 'editor' must sit down in front of a typewriter and pound out pertinent comment on the news.

—Norris Alfred

Norris Alfred knew the value of a good newspaper. He also knew the value of a good editorial. Although Alfred claimed his writing was at its best during the 1980s because of his distrust of President Ronald Reagan,¹ his work during the 1970s brought him national acclaim. Readers responded to his editorials because of his willingness to take unpopular stands, his tendency to question authority and his ability to take complex topics and explain them in simple terms; ones which his readers could understand. A study of his editorial writing during the 1970s will support this contention.

Alfred believed he had an obligation as a newspaper editor to write editorials, despite the many demands on his time:

Editorials appear in the Polk Progress because the owner-publisher-editor-pressman

believes a weekly newspaper that doesn't print editorials is a no-account newspaper. We don't think printing the canned comment available from sources eager to write editorials — at a price — is a credible substitute. We think the person whose name is listed in the masthead as "editor" must sit down in front of a typewriter and pound out pertinent comment on the news. The activities of the community, or whatever else comes to mind. Such writing should have only one constructing rule — to tell the truth as the writer understands it.²

During his nearly four decades as Progress editor, Alfred never pretended that he had all the answers. He regularly told his readers as much:

We don't claim a pipeline to the truth. The Progress prints editorials, personal comment, etc. because we worked on several weeklies during years of almost being a tramp printer, and always concluded what we helped print wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. We never stayed at any job until we took over the Progress. Now we wouldn't want to be anywhere else. ... We have taken to heart our local talkative philosopher's admonition: "If you don't talk, you never say anything."³

During the 1970s, Alfred's editorials appeared in 358 editions of the 520 he published (one edition — Jan. 22, 1970, is missing). He began the decade by questioning the competency of state insurance inspectors and finished it by trying to explain why President Carter's popularity had dwindled and what measures the former governor should take to rectify the situation.

Throughout the decade, patterns surfaced in his editorial topics. Half of his editorials (180) dealt with national issues. Local and state editorials, when combined, equaled one quarter of those written during the 1970s (63 and 33 respectively). Another 16 dealt with international issues. Finally, 69 editorials, or 19.1 percent, were not placed in one of the three categories. Those editorials, which could not be considered international, national, state or local in scope, dealt with topics ranging from greed to growing old.

In addition to favoring editorials that dealt with a national angle, Alfred also developed a pattern of favoring certain topics. Natural resources, the Vietnam War and politics were among his favorites. Of note, 115 editorials, which ranged from a treatise on materialism to a comment on how litter caused an eyesore, didn't readily fit into categories.

Table A

Classification of Polk Progress editorial topics during the 1970s*

Topic	Total	Percentage
Government	29	7.7
Sen. George McGovern	6	1.6
Military	16	4.2
Vietnam War	37	9.8
Agriculture	26	6.9
Watergate	15	4.0
President Jimmy Carter	10	2.7
President Gerald Ford	11	2.7
Natural Resources	45	11.9
President Richard Nixon	27	7.2
Nebraska Bottle Bills	10	2.7
Other Politics	30	8.0
Other	115	30.5**

*Nineteen editorials were placed in two topics.

**Total percentage equals 99.9.

Although Alfred wrote just five editorials in 1970, his second dealt with the Vietnam War. In it, Alfred questioned the need for the U.S. government to justify the war through means of public relations. He noted that the military had more than 9,000 public relations officials working to make the war palatable for society. "Wars have to be justified. The cost in money, lives and freedom is enormous. One horrible editorial in The Lincoln [Nebr.] Star claimed the United States has had to assume the white man's burden in that corner of the world since the English, French and Dutch have refused to accept further responsibility."⁴

Alfred's criticism of the United States' involvement carried over from the previous decade. Alfred admitted that, at first, he supported the United States' involvement in Vietnam. "We were all for the 'Adviser' soldiers first sent to Vietnam, even though the adviser concept is based on the prejudiced notion the U.S. had superior military know-how."⁵

Then, the United States stepped up its presence by sending more troops to Vietnam and increasing the draft process. For example, in August 1965, President Johnson ordered armed forces in Vietnam be boosted from 75,000 to 125,000 and the monthly draft from 17,000 soldiers to 35,000. Consequently, death tolls also increased.

We've heard a lot of talk, and read many words about being strong and well-armed as a means of preventing war. All this military hardware is manufactured to maintain peace. After reading about the military taking over the pacification program in South Vietnam, we wandered around the Progress office doing a little printing here and a little printing there, mumbling to ourself, "War is peace, war is peace, war is peace."⁶

Alfred continued to criticize what he considered questionable acts by the United States government and its military. An example was the My Lai Massacre, in which American servicemen killed unresisting South Vietnamese men, women and children on March 16, 1968.

In October 1971, Capt. Ernest L. Medina was found innocent and acquitted of all charges in connection with the incident. Alfred wrote that the jury's decision didn't make sense. Alfred contended that President Nixon's previous intervention in Lt. William Calley's punishment was an indication that Medina would be acquitted. Calley, in March 1971, was found guilty by court-martial of killing 22 South Vietnamese men, women and children. "President Nixon personally intervened to alleviate the punishment of Lt. Calley, and the military was quick to take the hint. The trial of Ernest Medina was, in our opinion, a whitewash."⁷

Alfred then called the government's legal actions against those accused in the massacre a facade. He called the government's rationale for the country's involvement in the war an

illusion. "This country can only lose in Vietnam. As long as the United States supports a Vietnam civil war, it can truly be said of the Vietnamese at My Lai—Blessed are the dead for they shall no longer mourn."⁸

Alfred made no attempts to hide his liberal views. He often toed the Democratic Party line. Vietnam, however, was an exception. He held President Johnson accountable for promising that the United States' involvement in Vietnam would not negatively affect the country's economy: "None of the World War II rationing would be needed; price and wage control would be unnecessary; disruption of civilian life would be minimal. The deaths and crippling wounds of servicemen were the one impact of this war that could not be glossed over."⁹

While blaming Johnson for the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, Alfred used strong words to question President Nixon's inability or lack of effort in ending that involvement. He reminded his readers that while the Nixon administration had promised to end the war, it actually had done just the opposite:

We sense no compassion in what passes for administration policy. There is little concern for unemployment except to decry it; there is little concern for the poor except to express regret for their condition; there is no determined effort to end the Vietnam War—only a stream of words to rationalize its continuance. In one breath there are expressions of sympathy for the war dead and in the next breath a decision to continue the killing.¹⁰

The previous year, Alfred used the 1972 election to question Nixon's sincerity about ending the war and called for change at the same time. Nixon had used patriotism to justify the war and called those who disagreed with his views traitors. "Courage is needed to fight, but this time an even braver man is needed. One who has the courage to surrender."¹¹

The year 1973 saw events that ended the United States' involvement and presence in Vietnam. In February, Operation Homecoming, which brought American prisoners of war home, went into motion. The first day (Feb. 12) saw 142 prisoners of war returned home.

Despite the positive events, Alfred was not ready to let his readers forget what he saw as a government mistake in becoming involved in the war. Alfred suggested that the United States' quest for power superseded good judgment and led to the poor decision to become involved in the war. "This is a far cry from the hope voiced in that second sentence of the Declaration of Independence."¹²

Perhaps Alfred was at his best when he used his personal life to question societal wrongs. In his January 31, 1974, editorial, Alfred told of his weekly visits to the Midwest Covenant home to visit his mother — whom he explained was living in her own world because of a mental illness and advanced age. Still, her long life was a blessing because she lived in a country where citizens did not live in constant fear for their lives. He then described democracy in South Vietnam, which included "the jailing of political opponents, plus their torture, which means beatings, electric shock, hanging by the arms, crushing testicles, keeping them in cages (built by a United States construction company) in which it is impossible to stand up; . . . "¹³

American citizens trusted that their government, based on World War II experience, would always oppose authoritarian regimes. "How naive we were."¹⁴ Alfred recalled a question posed to Sen. Joe McCarthy during McCarthy's censure hearing: "'Have you no decency?' This is the question that now needs to be asked our elected representatives, the administration and the military."¹⁵

Alfred reminded his readers that the United States soon would be 200 years old. Now was not a time to get cynical. Instead, it was a time for hope and promise for the coming century. "If we no longer care what happens to other peoples; if we help deny them their right to grow old; if we destroy their hope—ours too, is destroyed."¹⁶

The following year, when Americans remaining in Saigon were evacuated by helicopter and South Vietnamese President Duong Van Minh announced an unconditional surrender, the Vietnam War was over. Alfred now could move on to other issues and could devote

more time to those he had already tackled.

On May 8, 1974, the Omaha World-Herald called for President Nixon to resign. While acknowledging that it had previously endorsed the president three times, the Nebraska daily said that despite his accomplishments, Nixon had allowed morality in the White House to hit an appallingly low level. "Let a new occupant establish a new level of political morality for the President of the United States. The President should resign."¹⁷

Three months later, some of the most prominent daily newspapers in the country — in addition to Time magazine — also called for Nixon to resign. The New York Times said that Nixon "would be performing his ultimate service to the American people—and to himself—by resigning his office."¹⁸ During the same week, the Denver Post, Detroit News and Atlanta Journal called for Nixon to resign.

Alfred had been saying for more than a year that Nixon was unfit to be president. He discussed Watergate with his readers in his April 26, 1973, edition. He again used democracy as his theme.

A successfully operating democracy is a balancing act on a razor edge between chaos and order and can be easily tumbled by those charged with maintaining the balance when they ignore their responsibility and bend their efforts to perpetuating themselves instead of their government. This is a long, roundabout introduction to critical comment on the Watergate affair and the caliber of the men who conceived it.¹⁹

Alfred questioned Nixon's motives and his intelligence. The president had what turned out to be an insurmountable lead over his Democratic challenger, Sen. George McGovern, in the 1972 presidential election. The outcome, obviously, did not justify the means. "There is something reprehensible about an eavesdropper. In an ever more crowded world privacy is an increasing necessity and more precious."²⁰

McGovern's attempt, in his campaign's final days, to make Watergate an issue failed because the American public did not want to believe that the president would condone such an act. Only men with mediocre minds, Alfred wrote, would resort to such tactics. "This

is the only reason we can conceive why they consented to sabotage, illegal as they must have realized it to be. A conspirator stated last week the Watergate bugging was an act of stupidity. He could have added—and so were the men who approved it."²¹

Once Alfred started writing about Nixon and Watergate, he staged a relentless attack. The next week he questioned how Nixon could surround himself with men who were unscrupulous. Where did he find these men? Alfred asked his readers.

"What is disheartening is their rejection of decency in their doings. They are after the fast buck. With the help of government financing fortunes are made, and in some cases, when the government refuses to bail them out, lost."²²

Alfred attacked Nixon the following week, saying he had had enough. Alfred wrote that up until the previous week he had been willing to give Nixon some leeway because he could not imagine that the President of the United States would try to subvert the country's political process.

Alfred quoted Nixon from a speech the president had given the previous week: "I accept the responsibility."²³

"When he was elected President he was given the responsibility, and when he took the oath of office, he accepted it. How could he accept what he already had?"²⁴

Alfred took two weeks off — including one to write about why humans should be like birds and accept life for what it is — before returning to Watergate. In his May 31, 1973, editorial, Alfred wrote about two Polk brothers who had been arrested for theft. The two had been the focus of community gossip since their arrests. Alfred reminded his readers that those accused in this country are to be presumed innocent until proven guilty. How ironic, Alfred wrote, that President Nixon was preaching that same message after his "lack of scruples in his willingness to use guilt by association in his political campaigns."²⁵

"What goes beyond reason is the activities of people who didn't need to steal but stole

anyway. Why? We don't know the answer. Maybe it can be found in the affluences of society. There are so many things and we are told it is important to own them."²⁶

Alfred continued to hound Nixon during summer 1973, focusing on the president eight of ten weeks, beginning May 24. Alfred saved his harshest words for his August 30, 1973, editorial, in which he reminisced about how people 125 years earlier did not publicly question a person's moral or religious assertions. Those times have changed, Alfred wrote:

In this last third of the 20th century our beliefs are no longer either simple or based on simple faith. We do not necessarily believe a man simply because he is the President. Assertions of honesty are good to hear, and we hope they are more than mere assertions. We want to believe the President, but there is a complexity of influences in the 1970's shaping our beliefs and warping our faith.²⁷

Nixon's explanations about Watergate, Alfred wrote, were causing a steady deterioration of U.S. citizens' faith in government. Alfred claimed that Nixon was trying to justify his actions by saying his administration had acted no differently than previous administrations. "He attempted to justify the destructive secret activities of the Committee to Re-elect the President by comparing them with the open demonstrations of civil rights protesters and claiming that this was also the reason for Watergate. The 'Tricky Dick' handle is well deserved."²⁸

Alfred then veered off course as this editorial was nearing its end. He stated he did not believe that all politicians were crooked — but added, given "Nebraska's contributions to the U.S. Senate, we cannot ignore the possibility that more than a few of them are pretty stupid."²⁹

While most politicians were trustworthy, Alfred wrote, the few who were not were giving the others a bad reputation. Their attempts to justify their wrongdoing were especially malicious, Alfred wrote. "It seems obvious to us that the time has come to throw ALL such rascals out."³⁰

Four weeks later, Alfred posed a simple question to his readers: "Who's minding the

store?"³¹

If there ever was a national administration needing to gain the confidence of citizens, it is President Nixon's. With Watergate stripping the President of majority approval in the conduct of the nation's affairs and now the Vice President [Agnew] having to contend with serious charges of malfeasance while governor and vice president, whatever belief there was in the competence and integrity of the Nixon administration is being eroded by assertions and disclosures of wrong-doing.³²

If Nixon's conduct regarding Watergate was not enough, Alfred wrote, the president was faced with spiraling inflation, rising costs, squabbles in his administration and constant leaks to the press. "A customer in a barber shop could no longer remain silent. He asked the barber: 'Is no one tending the store?' The barber replied, 'It sounds like it.'"³³

Alfred was even more candid about his distrust of Nixon in his November 22, 1973, editorial. In it, he tried to list the president's admirable qualities. His daughter, Julie, claimed that Nixon played the piano, Alfred wrote, but that could be attributed to childish pride. Nixon was likable, Alfred admitted, when as the new president he put out a call for Americans to reconcile their differences. That plea didn't last long. Then Nixon's true character surfaced and the president lashed out at people against whom he held grudges.

Indelibly printed in our mind is a television shot of Nixon conferring with another lawyer, Cohn (sp?) who headed the McCarthy Un-American Activities Committee staff. "What a slippery-looking pair" was our impression and we have had no reason to change that initial estimate of Richard Milhaus Nixon.³⁴

Alfred continued sharing his views about Nixon and Watergate into late summer 1974. The Progress published August 8, 1974 — the day Nixon announced his resignation from office, to take effect the following day. Although Alfred could not predict the next day's events, he spoke of the president in past tense. "President Richard M. Nixon's conduct in the office showed he either didn't know, or else disregarded, limits. It is incomprehensible that the man, a lawyer, didn't know and understand limits."³⁵

Alfred did not use the next week's editorial space to celebrate or to be smug about Nixon's resignation. He did not even address the topic, choosing to focus on the state's

bottle bill instead. The following week, Alfred already had moved on to life after Nixon. He voiced his skepticism that the country could not expect its problems to be solved just because a new president was in office. Gerald Ford was not the answer, he wrote: "Nothing has been done to limit election campaign spending nor to limit the amount of money one person can 'donate' to a candidate. Something needs to be done about the setting up of 'committees' for candidates and funneling money through them."³⁶

Alfred earlier had stated his concerns about Ford's qualifications to serve in higher office. Alfred wrote he first realized Ford would not be much of an improvement as president long before the Congressman took office. He referred to a speech Ford gave when he was vice president. In it, Ford called the Watergate crimes the work of amateurs. Those involved in Watergate, including H.R. "Bob" Halderman, John Ehrlichmann and Charles Colson, were far from being amateurs due to their considerable political experience, Alfred wrote. Many had worked in previous Nixon campaigns.

Alfred surmised that Ford's actions were an attempt to play to the party faithful — especially because the 1976 election was just two years away. "Vice President Ford's popularity with his party consists of telling them what they want to hear. His genius is knowing what they want to be told—that there is nothing wrong with the Republican party."³⁷

Ford's claim that radical changes were not necessary, Alfred wrote, raised suspicion of his astuteness or, possibly, his intelligence. Republican Party leaders, Alfred suggested, were more interested in retaining the presidency than saving their political party.

This is the dilemma facing the Grand Old Party leaders—to condemn President Nixon is to condemn themselves. Not [to] condemn Nixon is to approve lawbreaking as an acceptable political campaign practice. The coming months will be interesting for Democrats and crucial for Republicans as they wrestle with the problems of President Nixon, the crimes of Watergate and the need to do the impossible—change.³⁸

Alfred used a letter from a longtime reader Charles Wolverton as the introduction to his October 24, 1974, editorial, in which he explained why he had lost confidence in the new

bottle bill instead. The following week, Alfred already had moved on to life after Nixon. He voiced his skepticism that the country could not expect its problems to be solved just because a new president was in office. Gerald Ford was not the answer, he wrote: "Nothing has been done to limit election campaign spending nor to limit the amount of money one person can 'donate' to a candidate. Something needs to be done about the setting up of 'committees' for candidates and funneling money through them."³⁶

Alfred earlier had stated his concerns about Ford's qualifications to serve in higher office. Alfred wrote he first realized Ford would not be much of an improvement as president long before the Congressman took office. He referred to a speech Ford gave when he was vice president. In it, Ford called the Watergate crimes the work of amateurs. Those involved in Watergate, including H.R. "Bob" Halderman, John Ehrlichmann and Charles Colson, were far from being amateurs due to their considerable political experience, Alfred wrote. Many had worked in previous Nixon campaigns.

Alfred surmised that Ford's actions were an attempt to play to the party faithful — especially because the 1976 election was just two years away. "Vice President Ford's popularity with his party consists of telling them what they want to hear. His genius is knowing what they want to be told—that there is nothing wrong with the Republican party."³⁷

Ford's claim that radical changes were not necessary, Alfred wrote, raised suspicion of his astuteness or, possibly, his intelligence. Republican Party leaders, Alfred suggested, were more interested in retaining the presidency than saving their political party.

This is the dilemma facing the Grand Old Party leaders—to condemn President Nixon is to condemn themselves. Not [to] condemn Nixon is to approve lawbreaking as an acceptable political campaign practice. The coming months will be interesting for Democrats and crucial for Republicans as they wrestle with the problems of President Nixon, the crimes of Watergate and the need to do the impossible—change.³⁸

Alfred used a letter from a longtime reader Charles Wolverton as the introduction to his October 24, 1974, editorial, in which he explained why he had lost confidence in the new

president. Wolverton, of New Orleans, had chastised Alfred for making too quick of a judgment about Ford.

You turn me off as a fair-minded citizen when you write of Gerald Ford as a pig before you have tasted the quality of the pork. . . . I never considered President Ford as any white knight who is about to resolve a sticky situation that has been brought about jointly by a depraved Republican executive and an irresponsible Democratic congress. I think you might give the poor guy a stay of judgment until we can see how he performs.³⁹

Alfred responded by writing that he already had given Ford a chance — and the new president had failed miserably.

I gave President Ford a stay of judgement until he asked me to make a judgement. That request came when he pardoned Richard Nixon. At that moment every citizen in the country had to make a judgement. They were forced to make a judgement not only of the right or wrong of that pardon, but also of President Ford.⁴⁰

Alfred compared Ford with his predecessor in his November 21, 1974, editorial and found, in many ways, the two were alike. "With Gerald Ford in the White House the country now has an HONEST Nixon. The inadequacies are still there."⁴¹

Ford had journeyed on an eight-day visit to Japan, Korea and Russia that month. Alfred claimed Ford's motive for the trip was to show his authority and international influence. The charade did not work in Alfred's opinion.

"We realize that, more and more, everyone is trapped by events about which they can do nothing, and that we are no longer in control of our destiny. President Ford is also trapped and responding with gestures, as a puppet is made to perform when the strings are pulled."⁴²

Ford continued to draw Alfred's disapproval throughout 1974 and 1975. In the final months before the 1976 general election, Alfred claimed that Ford could not win. He still could not shake President Nixon's legacy, Alfred wrote. "At the moment, Ford looks a loser. Touted as the man who returned decency to the White House, no Republican wants it mentioned why it was necessary."⁴³

At the same time, Alfred showed his allegiance, although slightly begrudgingly, to

Ford's challenger — Jimmy Carter.

If we had a voice in Democratic campaign strategy we would have candidate Jimmy Carter constantly reminding voters that Gerald Ford is a DECENT man. In the years before the Nixon administrations voters assumed, as a matter of course, the decency of presidential candidates. Now Republicans feel the need to emphasize the fact.⁴⁴

Alfred continued to give his candidate advice as the election neared. He questioned Carter's decision to downplay Ford's actions to pardon Richard Nixon. Alfred wrote that he could not understand why this country would allow anyone who had even the slightest connection with Watergate to remain in office. Carter needed to remind voters that "never in the history of the United States government, had there been so many crooks in the White House as there were at the time of Watergate—breaking-in, stealing, bribing, collecting millions in illegal campaign funds, wire-tappings, destroying opponents with false character assassinations."⁴⁵

Alfred appreciated Carter's contention that the federal government needed to create jobs as a way of reducing unemployment in the inner cities of this country. Ford, however, proposed giving tax breaks as a way of enticing businesses to move into inner cities. Alfred wrote that he had never before heard of business being used as a welfare agency. The proposal would never work, Alfred wrote, because the business community was not looking to improve society, just make money.⁴⁶

Despite his support of Carter's candidacy, Alfred was quick to point out mistakes and inadequacies. He questioned U.S. policy, without providing specifics, of selling weapons as a way of balancing foreign trade and to reduce the deficit. "Along comes Jimmy Carter, an unknown nationally, proclaiming a new approach — a man of vision — with a willingness to try to turn this nation around. He has failed — miserably."⁴⁷

Alfred, however, in his June 15, 1978, editorial, sympathized with the president for his efforts in dealing with OPEC countries. The United States set a bad precedent, Alfred wrote, as it became more dependent on Middle East Oil. American citizens were venting

their frustrations for the country's economic woes toward their president. "President Carter's current low rating in popularity polls was inevitable given the set of circumstances. As president of the United States even Jesus Christ would have popularity problems."⁴⁸

Alfred was looking ahead to the 1980 election and a strong challenge to Carter's hold on the presidency when he wrote that the president was the person who could help the country become accustomed to living with less. Distributing natural resources in an equitable manner can be a thankless task. Alfred said that the Watergate episode had shown that authority can cause corruption, but he was confident Carter was up to the task:

We will stick with Jimmy Carter, a decent man. He will make mistakes, and has. His critics pounce on the mistakes and claim he is incompetent. We think not. From what we have viewed on television and read in newspapers and magazines, he is probably less corruptible than those wanting to knock him out of office in 1980. After the corruption of the Nixon years voters should beware [of] loud-mouths pointing fingers.⁴⁹

While Alfred showed a fondness for discussing politics with his readers, he did not allow that fascination to prevent him from tackling other issues of importance in Polk County and across the United States.

More than ten percent of his editorials during the 1970s dealt with natural resources. Alfred's continuing theme was society's disregard for the land, air and water. Deserving their share of the blame for this cavalier attitude were the country's elected officials, who seemed oblivious to the plight, Alfred wrote.

An avid bird-watcher, Alfred wrote in his May 17, 1973, editorial that Americans could learn something from their feathered friends. Americans should watch how birds behave and interact. Birds accept the world as it is, Alfred wrote. "They see a tree and — Wow! Just what they want."⁵⁰

Humans take a different approach to what they encounter. They feel the need to control their environment — to change it and adapt it to fit their needs. Humans cut down trees, bulldoze brush and dam rivers. "If we can just get the idea across that no one has time to

re-do the world. That it is a waste of time to try and alter the world to a pre-conceived order. The grand, chaotic natural order was developed over thousands of years and our brief effort cannot change it — only destroy it."⁵¹

Alfred took up the plight of quail and pheasants in his January 19, 1974, editorial. He wrote that the especially severe winter had made survival difficult for the game birds. Alfred questioned why the State Game and Parks Commission had extended the hunting season into the new year. Money, garnered from license fees, was the motive, Alfred wrote.

The commission contended that because 90 percent of these game birds did not survive the winter, giving hunters extra time to kill birds — ones that wouldn't survive anyway — just made sense, Alfred wrote. "This sounds reasonable until the realization hits — the 90 percent death (rate) is due to natural causes. The gun is not a natural enemy. The hunter may be killing some of the 10 percent that would otherwise survive."⁵²

In 1976, State Sen. Maurice Kremer of Aurora caused concern among Nebraskans when he warned of water shortages in the state. The legislator visited Texas earlier that year and returned with stories of abandoned irrigation pumps in the Lone Star State because of depleted groundwater levels. Kremer's account made Nebraskans wonder if the same thing could happen in their state.

Alfred had his own story to tell. In his March 31, 1977, editorial, he told of a conversation he had with a well digger. The man told Alfred that he had spent the past summer and fall lowering wells — deepening wells so groundwater would continue to flow. If the practice of lowering wells were allowed to continue, Alfred wrote, nothing ever would be done to halt the decline of the groundwater level because people would never know there was a problem.

Alfred had a simple solution: Return to dryland farming for a time in order to allow the water table to restore itself.

This solution to the problem of declining groundwater levels, seemingly never is considered. Irrigation has become a must. Yet, most older farmers in this area can remember dryland farming and, without mental strain, recall their parents managed to raise crops and children without pump irrigation. If the irrigation pumps could be held in reserve and used only to insure dryland crops during seasons of drouth then the supply of groundwater could last into the foreseeable future. As pump irrigation is now being exploited the only question is when Nebraska farmers will face the same disaster now confronting irrigators on the Texas high plains — no water.⁵³

Alfred often used conservation, adding a new twist to the definition of the word, when he discussed agriculture with his readers. Alfred championed the small farmer. His worry was there were becoming fewer and fewer of them.

In the 1930s — when Alfred left Polk for the first time — residents depended directly on farmers. They sold milk and eggs directly to consumers. When Alfred returned to his hometown in the 1950s, the pecking order had changed. He witnessed farmers buying eggs and milk in the grocery store — no longer selling them directly to consumers.

Alfred claimed he would never argue with development or technology because they could help farmers in their annual battle with climate, soil conditions and moisture deficiencies. However, this new technology, Alfred feared, could eventually be the demise of the family farm.

Farms were still family operated in Polk, Alfred wrote in his January 29, 1976, editorial, but the future looked bleak. He wrote of a 23,000-acre farm in Holt County, which was owned by the National Alfalfa Dehydrating and Milling Co. of Kansas City, Missouri. To help his readers understand the enormity of the farm's size, Alfred put his description in terms to which his readers could relate. First, he explained the difference between farm owner-operators and farm owner-investors. Alfred wrote that the former see the land; the latter only see dollar signs.

Lost is respect and affection for the land. A 23,000-acre farm made up of a center pivot on each quarter section is a monstrosity. Imagine that farm covering the area between Polk and Hordville. It would take the five miles between Polk and Hordville plus 3 1/2 miles on either side of Highway 66. With that area in one farm, all that would be needed of Polk and Hordville would be elevators to handle the grain. We leave it to readers familiar with the area to count the number of family farms that would

be obliterated. The 23-000-acre farm would eliminate Immanuel Lutheran Church and Day School and most of the congregation's farms— there would be no school buses because there would be no school children and no school. Certainly, there would be no Polk Progress; center pivot systems can't read and farm investor-owners only read their bank statements.⁵⁴

Alfred chastised farmers in his January 26, 1978, editorial for often being too willing to blame government for their failures. In the 1950s, Alfred wrote, farms and farmers were more self-sufficient. Now, they no longer were reliant solely on themselves for their survival.

In a democratic society, Alfred wrote, citizens are allowed to think for themselves, develop their talents and have a chance for success. "Inevitably, individual freedom entails individual responsibility. That's the rub. When our doings don't result in success it is ego-shattering to blame ourselves. We search for a scapegoat. The failure of government to govern and provide submitted opportunity is the easiest — and therefore the most popular — complaint."⁵⁵

Alfred showed his versatility when he wrote about topics currently in the news. He felt as much at home writing about art at interstate rest stops in Nebraska as he did discussing the inadequacies of Gerald Ford running the country.

At times, Alfred was able to put on his knowledge of art to use, and took exception with people who complained about sculptures to be placed along Interstate 80 in Nebraska. In his July 31, 1975, editorial, he used the example of an art exhibit in New York City that drew a similar response in 1913. The Armory Show featured examples of modern art — which the public deemed trash. The exhibit contained works by Picasso, van Gogh and others who now were viewed as historical giants. He concluded that the same could happen with Nebraska's I-80 art, even through people were intolerant of things they did not understand.

The Hall County supervisors showed their intolerance, Alfred wrote, when they tried to block the sculpture titled "Erma's Desire" from being placed at the rest stop near Grand

Island. While Alfred could understand the supervisors' dislike for the name, sketches of the piece showed it was quite acceptable. "This manifest intolerance is disturbing. If anyone is interested in learning what lack of tolerance can do to people and nations, read The Source by James Michener. Without tolerance we are in danger of becoming arrogant and arrogance of belief can be the deadliest sin."⁵⁶

Alfred also took time to reflect on the meaning of "stop." He used his newspaper as an example. Progress, he wrote in his December 18, 1975, editorial, always has positive connotations: moving forward, excelling and achieving.

Sometimes, enough is enough. He told of an early Polk resident who had an automobile with a one-cylinder engine. The man got into a discussion with the owner of an automobile with a two-cylinder engine. Why should he need a car with a two-cylinder engine when his one-cylinder automobile runs perfectly well? "Now we are beginning to realize vaguely a need to 'stop.' This realization is developing partly from shortage of finite natural resources. 'Stop' also becomes less a restraint, while gaining adherents is a blessing, when can be seen, in murky outline, the potential disaster of uncontrolled 'progress.'"⁵⁷

Progress often means society makes changes without considering the ramifications. Those changes could take the form of leveling a hill, bulldozing a grove of trees or straightening a stream all for the sake of progress.

We all should yell "stop!" Give us time to consider, to evaluate, to adjust: Are we progressing or regressing? Is stripping the hills to get at the coal, progress? Is a ditch replacing a swamp or wetlands, progress? Are more 4-lane, cross country highways, progress? Loren Eisely writes in Firmament of Time, "...progress which pursues only the next invention, progress which pulls thought out of mind and replaces it with vile slogans, is not progress at all. It is a beckoning mirage in a desert over which stagger the generations of man."⁵⁸

As Alfred brought another decade of publishing the Polk Progress to a close, he took time to reflect on his life and the world around him. Before addressing the issues of the times — oil shortages, communism, and efforts to set a national holiday honoring Martin

Luther King — Alfred discussed the value of time.

Time can only be spent, never saved. That's a Progress Great Truth. Time cannot be stored, banked, added to or subtracted from. As this is written the Seth Thomas mantle clock is ticking, a measure of time much as the inch or centimeter measures distance. The span of human life has increased in these United States according to a recent news story, and this is considered "progress." Progress toward what? The measure of time lived is not as important as its quality.⁵⁹

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CHAPTER FIVE

TIME TO CLOSE SHOP

We decided to speak our piece. Consciously we began to speak out on what we regarded as wrong. Not that that proved it was wrong, but that we felt free to express opinion—political, environmental, etc.—without worrying about subscribers and advertisers reactions. We were more comfortable with ourself.

—Norris Alfred

The 1980s marked the end of Alfred's tenure as editor/publisher of the Polk Progress. When Alfred's tenure was over, so was the Polk Progress. As the computer's role became more prominent in journalism, Alfred stuck with his Linotype and offset press. When he stopped printing the weekly Progress in 1989, he was one of two Nebraska weeklies still using "cold type." He realized that because his newspaper equipment was so archaic, he had little chance of finding a buyer.

In his Dec. 21, 1989, edition, Alfred, at age 76, announced that his next edition would be his last. "The last Polk Progress to be published, after 82 years, will be a day late and a dollar short due to the Christmas holiday."¹

At least Alfred could say he closed shop when his newspaper's circulation was still growing. The Nebraska Press Association listed the Progress' circulation for 1989 at 886 — up from 630 when he bought the paper and the highest during his tenure as editor.² Alfred estimates that half his circulation when he folded the weekly paper was sent to states other than Nebraska. He credits out-of-state readers — some former Polk residents, others readers, including the West Coast journalism instructors, who developed an appreciation for his writing — for the circulation increase during his tenure as editor.³ In all, the Progress was sent to readers in 45 states and several foreign countries.

Alfred had known the end was coming and he tried to be philosophical about it. "There isn't the zest. You're pushing somewhat. You're thinking a little bit more. ... You don't think so much ahead. Your hopes get to be short-term."⁴

Several months earlier, he had warned Nebraskans that he would stop publishing the weekly paper if no buyer was found — although he knew he wouldn't find one. "The Linotype is falling apart before I am. I don't know how long it will hang together ... I want to get out before it falls apart."⁵

Alfred devoted his final "Polking Around" column to explain his fondness for his hometown:

Having been born in Polk, the village has always been home. Home is a wonderful place. Homeless is one of the cruelest words in the dictionary. Mother Alfred stated, after her nine children grew up and left home: "If they get into trouble they know where home is." We have always felt at home in Polk. Wherever we had gone previous to buying the Progress, it was a place "away from home."⁶

He also wrote about the goals and ambitions he had as a newspaperman. He explained how he viewed the role of his editorials:

We decided to speak our piece. Consciously we began to speak out on what we regarded as wrong. Not that that proved it was wrong, but that we felt free to express opinion—political, environmental, etc.—without worrying about subscribers and advertisers reactions. We were more comfortable with ourself.⁷

Alfred did not pass up his final opportunity as a weekly newspaper editor to share with

his readers his views about nationalism. He wrote that the United States' growing dependency on military power would result in the country's demise. The country has lost its sense of decency, he wrote:

War is nationally legalized murder. Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Man. Gunfire sounds. Hark the Herald Angels Sing. President Bush is not a wimp. Glory to the Newborn King. Only two nations wholeheartedly support President Bush's decision to invade Panama. Joyful, All Ye Nations Rise. Helicopters drop bombs on Noriega's military headquarters. Join the Triumph From the Skies.⁸

When Alfred stopped publishing the weekly Progress, he could not entirely walk away from the profession he had practiced for the past four decades. He kept the Progress office open for job-work printing and to publish a monthly newsletter:

As we state in an ad in this issue, we will cheerfully refund money to those requesting it. YOU ARE REQUIRED TO ASK FOR IT. Those who don't will receive a monthly newsletter for the months they have left on a Progress subscription. The hope, of course, is that they will be pleased with that and renew. We had to slow the pace from weekly to monthly or lose our sense of humor. Without humor there's no point in living.⁹

Alfred continued his monthly newsletter, which largely resembled the weekly Polk Progress, with some minor changes. The Polk Progress masthead gave way to Polking Around — A Full Circle Horizon. "Polking Around" still contained some artwork, but few photographs and no advertisements. "The Norris Notes" and "The Weather" columns were prominent fixtures on page 1. Letters from readers were scattered on inside pages.

Alfred received letters, thanking him for continuing his publication — if only on a monthly basis. Some were thankful for the local news, others for the editorials and columns. "Heck, yes, your monthly is worth seventeen bucks. Here's my check. ...You've got a good thing going. Keep it up. Love your neighbor. Plant a tree. Smell a rose. Don't give up. You are needed and loved."¹⁰ "...Your first copy convinced me that I can't do without it. You give renewed energy to my sometimes flagging interest in working to change the political systems, and make me ashamed of being discouraged."¹¹

Like the weekly Polk Progress, the monthly Polking Around — A Full Circle Horizon

also came to an end. The November-December 1991 edition was the last. The reasons for ending publication remained as they were when he stopped publishing his weekly: archaic equipment and a lack of revenue.

"I had this idea that my writing would be enough. I thought I might get rich."¹²

Alfred continues to writes; his editorials appearing in the Grand Island [Nebr.] Independent and the San Francisco Examiner. He also continues to write his journal, which he shares with friends. "Writing is a habit I can't shake. I don't want to shake."¹³

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CONCLUSION

A WRITER'S LEGACY

Norris' writing is like that butterfly against the gale. Delicate but forceful, against all odds, it inspires us merely by the enormity of what it attempts to accomplish.

—Marty Strange

As editorial page editor of the Lincoln [Nebr.] Journal in the 1970s, Dick Herman felt a responsibility to share with the newspaper's readers opinion beyond his own. Newspapers traditionally devote a portion of their editorial pages to include opinion writing from their peers. Herman first looked at the other Nebraska dailies. "Most were following the leader — dinosaurian Republican."¹

Not entirely satisfied with what he saw, he turned to the Nebraska weeklies. He settled on the Polk Progress and Norris Alfred. Alfred's writing, Herman said, was different. He first noticed the quality of Alfred's writing and that it had substance. He then noticed that Alfred's writing was refreshing.

"His was a voice of rural Nebraska that didn't believe all this rhetoric. His writing had an independent spirit that was in the best interest of what the Journal was all about."²

Alfred's penchant to take stances that were entirely his own is one reason his writing drew attention and approval. To discover the other qualities, one must first understand what Alfred's writing was not. It was not perfect. His grammar wasn't flawless. His sentences sometimes ran too long, and included too many clauses. His newspaper certainly wasn't free of mistakes and typographical errors. Those flaws, to some, might be enough to dismiss Alfred as a credible voice.

Norris Alfred never claimed to be a skilled writer. He never claimed to have a way with words. He simply believed his opinion was worth sharing. Readers who looked beyond the surface found an unlikely voice full of refreshing thoughts. Above all, he wrote the truth — as he saw it.

A second reason Alfred's writing stood out was his devotion to journalism. Jack Tarr, former editor of the David City [Nebr.] Banner-Press and former board member of the National Newspaper Association, noticed Alfred's devotion to his community and his work. "Norris was a man who came back to his hometown because he thought the town needed a newspaper. He was willing to sacrifice himself in order to produce his newspaper."³

Tarr noticed Alfred's passion when he wrote about environmental issues — soil conservation, wildlife and natural resources. "He was almost an environmental activist before it was popular to be that way."⁴

Tom Allen, veteran Omaha World-Herald staff writer, saw another quality in Alfred's writing: his ability to be upbeat and positive, when appropriate, yet unrelenting when deserved. "His writings were as sweet as clover honey, but with his droll humor, he could treat the deserving with the sting of a bee."⁵

Allen added two other qualities he noticed about Alfred and his writing: "Norris has the intelligence of a Harvard professor, yet what he dispenses in his writing and editorials has down-to-earth folksiness."⁶

Finally, writer Casey McCabe contended that Alfred provided his readers with a voice from the countryside that was fresher, more honest and less self-conscious than his peers:

Alfred's notoriety is enhanced by the fact that he is an unapologetic crusading liberal Democrat in a state that loyally doles out its five electoral votes to the Republicans. But his plain-spoken and often rambling prose also mines the strong populist vein that runs through rural areas, where mistrust of the government comes as naturally as the corporate farming and bank failures that are now part of the local landscape. Alfred's regular targets include the CIA, the military-industrial complex, toxic polluters and the sleazy ilk that determines our "hysterical national policy in general."⁷

In 1991 the Center for Rural Affairs, in Walthill, Nebraska, published a booklet of Alfred's best writing, 107 editorials and columns. In the forward, Marty Strange, director, recounted Alfred's past and paid his friend a lasting tribute:

One of Norris' favorite themes was that of hope -- hope for the human condition. At the end of a dark editorial in which he painted a gloomy picture of our sorry performance as stewards of the earth and caretakers of each other, he suddenly burst out with a hope-filled message which he concluded by writing, "I have watched a butterfly make its flight against a gale, and the performance gives me hope. If an insect can overcome such a monumental difficulty, surely humans are capable of solving their manmade problems."

Norris' writing is like that butterfly against the gale. Delicate but forceful, against all odds, it inspires us merely by the enormity of what it attempts to accomplish.⁸

This study examined just a portion of Norris Alfred's work. Other portions, especially his editorial writing during the 1980s, deserve study. Alfred said his writing during the '80s was at its best, partially because he found ample topics to write about in Ronald Reagan's presidency. A study of this portion of his writing could then be compared to his work during the previous decade to determine whether the recognition Alfred received affected his work.

Norris Alfred is just one of the countless country editors who have left their mark on society. Their role in the field of journalism and society as a whole deserves additional study. Too often, attention is given to journalists because of the stature or circulation of the newspaper for which they work.

Norris Alfred, however, was an exception. It was not his prominence or the circulation size of the Polk Progress that attracted attention. Readers appreciated the clarity of his writing style, his ability to simplify complex subjects and his ability to find something positive in even the most difficult situations.

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⁸Marty Strange, "Foreword," in Butterfly Against the Gale, (Walthill, Nebr.: Center for Rural Affairs, 1991), iv. The Center for Rural Affairs is a rural advocacy organization that promotes the family farm and alternative agriculture. It is funded through grants and contributions.

APPENDIX A

Editorials and column submitted with Pulitzer Prize nomination

In "A Tale of Two Cities" Charles Dickens wrote: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

That bit of writing has universal quality. The quotation is copied from Bartlett because we have been thinking 1979 has been the worst of times and the best of times and we wanted the exact quote.

At this latitude everyone is a four-season person. The seasons have been definite this year. No one was confused about winter last January and February. It was white and deep. Spring is remembered as wet and gentle with a minimum of dusty winds. Summer, on the average (a suspect estimation), has been cool and wet.

Plant growth has been unusually persistent this year. Lush tree foliage has effectively maintained birds' privacy from snooping bird watchers while wildflowers have been super-abundant. Corn has grown high as a giraffe's eye, urged upward by hybrid breeding, fertilizers, persistence and the high price (\$2700 per acre) of horizontal expansion. This condition is similar to New York City's Manhattan Island where the only way to grow is up. Seed corn breeders are developing taller and taller stalks with longer and longer ears. The goal is 18-ft. stalks and yard-long ears. This will triple the yield and allow the United States to continue supplying Russians with enough corn to remain alive.

Compelled by commercial compassion (and need for an enemy) the United States is becoming Russia's granary. Russia is the enemy only as long as it is alive and threatening. Dead enemies pose no problems and cannot be justification for building missiles and deploying them over vast sections of the western United States.

Since a significant percent of the United States economy is based on manufacturing and selling military hardware (the United States and Europe, including Russia, supply the weapons necessary to maintain wars, little and big, throughout the world) it is necessary to keep peace temporary and hostility permanent.

As a goal peace is nice but unprofitable. Peace has always had a dream-like quality—the chicken and the coyote lying down together—with a dove as the symbol. Dove hunting season is open in Nebraska, a state lacking concern with symbols except, the hunter is expected to shoot them on the fly.

One of the arguments for building the MX missile system (estimated cost, \$33 billion) is the 150,000 jobs it will create. This will give work to many possibly unemployed construction workers while adding a dilemma to that work category. Are these construction or destruction jobs? Most of the 150,000 jobs will be as temporary as peace. Permanent employment will be military. As a civilian promoting unprofitable peace, we suspect the MX system has been designed by Pentagon pencil-pushers to create jobs for generals.

The logic of the gun is the bullet propelled from the barrel with murderous momentum and intention. Manifest Destiny has been altered to "vital interests" but the re-wording doesn't change the reality of the gun. The United States is becoming too dependent on military solutions while claiming reason should rule. Military solutions should be a last resort, not the first.

Being a four-season person we expect the best and the worst of weather. The worst weather is winter's sub-zero blizzards and summer's blistering 100-degree heat. The best weather occurs during the moderate seasons of fall and spring. Despair is eased by spring hope; wisdom is in autumn seasoning.

Being a year-round peaceful (rational?) person, force is discouraging and terrorism dismaying. Anarchists of an earlier era proclaimed belief in the "propaganda of the deed" and bombed places, persons, and things, claiming they had a pipeline to the truth. The truth being that people are essentially good and that, somehow, by violent deed, this truth would out. Crazy? No crazier, than an MX missile system costing \$33 billion only anarchists or terrorists would dare fire.

Peace is not maintained by threatening war. . . . although the longing for peace had been especially pronounced in the last twenty years, the intellectual and physical strength of nations, labour and capital alike, have been unproductively consumed in building terrible engines of destruction. Today these were the last word in science, tomorrow they are obsolete and have to be replaced. The systems of armaments (dependence) in transforming the armed peace into a crush-

"Propaganda Of The Deed"

Continued From Page 2

ing burden that weighs on all nations and if prolonged will lead inevitably to the very cataclysm which it is desired to avert."

That could be a quote from a 1979 peacenik's speech. It isn't. It is paraphrasing a statement made by the Czar of Russia in 1898 inviting European nations to a conference on limiting armaments, and copied from Barbara Tuchman's "The Proud Tower." Since then World Wars I and II have been fought. After World War II the United States fought in Korea and Vietnam and now the buildup in armaments is bringing about the inevitability of World War III.

What is the difference between the anarchist's "propaganda of the deed" and the military mind's belief in the "propaganda of the threat of the deed?" The "propaganda of the threat of the deed" is terrorism camouflaged as sanity by proclaimed peaceful intent.

The "Tale of Two Countries" is a 21st century story of United States and Russia on a tragic collision course. The tale begins: "It was the worst of times, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Darkness, it was the winter of despair."

We hope the end of the story is more cheerful than the beginning.

It's A Different World

Dr. Robert L. Strange is closing his Saturday office in Polk. We are not surprised. Dr. Strange is a congenial person and he likes Polk, but he couldn't generate sufficient practice to maintain the office.

The closing reminds us of the many disappointments the village has experienced, during our years with the Progress, trying to keep a doctor in Polk. It is no longer economically feasible. As we told two members of our peer group in Sportsman's Bar, "It's a different world."

The community cannot support a doctor because the farmer population has declined. The village, probably, will show increased population with the 1980 census, but number of farms and farmers will show a drastic decrease. Polk Main St. depends on farmer customers and many are gone, having disappeared with larger farm operations.

What came first, big farms or big machinery? The answer is big machinery. Farm equipment manufacturers must share blame for Polk's inability to maintain a doctor in the community, even on a one-day-per-week basis. That seems far-fetched but we are cutting across accepted logic looking for insights into why our world has changed so much.

President Carter hacked through a forest of protocol to convince Israel and Egypt that peace is not only preferred to war, but that they had no other alternative. The U.S. State Department did not realize how different the world had become until President Carter showed it with personal diplomacy.

U. S. power is being eroded by our consumption. The nation does not have sufficient domestic oil to maintain its self-proclaimed position as the greatest power on earth. Dependency diminishes power. That is a Great Truth.

Oil is power and half the U.S. supply is dependent on supertankers bringing it from wells beyond national borders. The choice is either to extend national borders to include the wells (unthinkable) or to try moral suasion. This is counter to force, but it could, and should be of greater influence.

President Carter put it bluntly, publicly to Begin and Sadat: "Your peoples want peace. You are afraid to chance it." That put those two "Mideast rug merchants" as a news correspondent described them, on the spot. They quit bargaining and accepted terms for an agreement. The two had invited President Carter into the treaty-making process and didn't dare let him go home empty-handed. That is moral suasion.

The U. S. is primarily dependent on the Mideast for 50% of its oil needs. That means whoever depends on oil (we all do) will have to adjust to less if imports decrease. When Bob Bergland became Secretary of Agriculture in Carter's cabinet, he viewed with something akin to horror, agriculture's dependence on a diminishing resource—oil. Oil is plow-power in today's farming practices.

Although it wasn't discernible at first, now we can see that the beginning of the end to family farming came with the first tractor. It is a "lingering death," the description usually confined to cancer, tuberculosis, and the like, but the end is in sight. Less than ten percent of the population are farmers today and that percentage continues to decline. The small family farm is doomed and even larger spreads won't last under present farm practices and federal programs.

What agriculture needs in the United States is an innovative Secretary of Agriculture to emulate Carter's Mideast approach. To hack through a maze of farm programs, subsidies and practices set up by the Ag department and Ag colleges, and warn: "Hey! Look what's happening!"

What is happening? Chickens have disappeared from farmyards into broiler and egg factories. Milk cows have become concentrated in Grade A and C dairies. Cattle feeding is being penned into larger and fewer operations. Hog raising is steadily moving into confinement pigging and feeding with an increasing percentage non-farm owned.

What's left is cropping the land. With the ever-increasing size of equipment comes the opportunity and urge to increase crop farming—

It's A Different World

Continued From Page 2

add an 80 here, a quarter there. "Suitcase farming" was the ridiculous name for the practice in the 1920s. Now it is accepted and approved.

It's a different world and in many aspects not as nice as it was. Highly toxic poisons, unheard of a quarter century ago, are casually handled by the uncaring, causing human tragedy, animal death and financial loss.

The urge to have is powerful motivation and questionable risks are taken in the name of more, more, more. When the risks contribute to a more precarious environment for all forms of life it is time for authority to step in and order, "Stop!"

Neither the authority nor the day is known. Perhaps there is no authority and the day may never be known until it is too late.

The Art Of The Possible

Three items concerning farm chemicals crossed our desk and mind last week and had impact. The first was an AP story in The Grand Island Independent revealing that livestock losses to chemical poisons in Nebraska totaled more than \$1 million the past year. A chemical to control rootworm was found in feed that caused the biggest loss, the death of 582 head of cattle at a feedlot near Grand Island. Loss was estimated at \$600,000.

The poison control center at Children's Hospital in Omaha received 625 calls last year dealing with poisonings from farm chemicals. Children under 5 were involved in 379 cases. For example: a girl riding in the back of her father's pickup, dropped her sandwich on the floor where a corn rootworm poison had been spilled earlier. She picked up the sandwich, took a bite, and became very ill. She recovered.

The second item was an ETV program, Farm Digest, with a representative from the Environmental Protection Agency, an environmentalist from the Environment Defense Fund (not positive the title is correct) and a representative from the Farm Bureau. The program concerned farm chemicals—safety, cost, banning—and the discussion was wide-ranged. Wide enough to take in implications from the Farm Bureau member that banning DDT had been more a political than an environmental action.

The revelation of the Farm Bureau member's opposition to DDT banning reminded us of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union spring meeting where Fran Hamerstrom of Plainfield, Wisconsin gave a talk and slide presentation on raptors, including a detailed study of the marsh hawk. The presentation included graphs, one of which showed the remarkable recovery of the marsh hawk after the banning of DDT. Before the banning, Mrs. Hamerstrom was convinced the marsh hawk was doomed to extinction.

The third of the three items that combined to provide impetus for this essay was a column by John M. Anderson in the Lakeville (Conn.) Journal, July 19, 1979, on Toxaphene. The column is titled, "Worse Than DDT." From it we gleaned some facts.

Toxaphene is 4 to 5 times as toxic to mammals as DDT. In water 2 parts per BILLION kills half the large-mouth bass. A few parts per TRILLION will have drastic effects on fish fry. It seems to reach concentrations in water some 91,000 times as great as the aerial concentration in spray. The entire oyster-shrimp-shellfish industry in the Gulf is reportedly in trouble and good old Toxaphene is suspect. Toxaphene has been detected in the air over the ocean.

Mr. Anderson's column on Toxaphene was prompted by its recommended use by the State Department of Agriculture in South Dakota to control grasshoppers. The extension service of the state ag college is supposedly manned by "experts" with useful information for farmers from various fields of science. Mr. Anderson writes:

"In South Dakota this agency [extension service] has long been a devout champion of pesticides from DDT on down. It is not surprising that these experts recommended the spraying of Toxaphene over some 600,000 acres of rangeland in which cows, grasshoppers, pheasants, bass and many other forms of animal life—including human—occurred.

"What is surprising is that the federal Environmental Protection Agency violated its own regulations when it granted South Dakota an exemption so that the deadly poison, Toxaphene, could be used."

The regulations called for a review by scientists of the Department of Interior of any proposed exemption and also for a thorough explanation to the public of probable effects of any pesticide. None of this was done. The ranchers in South Dakota were given no warning other than the usual "get the kids and pets inside and cover up your fish ponds."

The National Audubon Society sued the EPA for violating its own regulations. "The Governor of South Dakota ranted and raved about emotional conservationists with communistic backing obstructing justice, motherhood and the cattleman's right to make an honest dollar. After all," writes Mr. Anderson, "the spokesman for the single company that makes Toxaphene had given ample warning when he told them to be real careful, this stuff 'kicks the hell outa fish.'"

Continued On Page 3

THURSDAY, AUGUST 9, 1979

The Art Of The Possible

Continued From Page 2

Until a judge had ruled on the suit the Audubon Society representative was not allowed to publicly explain why the Society had sued the EPA. After the trial, won by the Audubon Society, and including some tough language by the judge on the EPA's action in granting the exemption, the Society's representative told of some interesting telephone calls.

One call from a California cattle rancher told how the state dipped and sprayed his herd with Toxaphene to control scabies mites. Out of 800 head, 91 died and 500 aborted.

According to Mr. Anderson, the gist of most calls to the Audubon Society since the trial have been, "For God's sake, don't stop now. This stuff is far worse than DDT. Let me cite you an experience . . . Perhaps the most gratifying calls are from the South Dakota ranches thanking the Society."

The Anderson column concludes: "It should not be necessary for a private citizens' organization to sue a federal agency to force compliance with federal law. But when it comes to keeping our own environment fit for us to live in, I'm afraid that will be necessary for a long time."

The Farm Bureau representative on Farm Digest was correct that the politics involved in decisions on the safety of agricultural products is the smoke-filled backroom kind concerned with maneuvering around laws and regulations.

Political achievement is accomplished by compromise or, as someone said or wrote, practicing "the art of the possible." However, there is no compromise between life or death. Once a chemical has been banned as a deadly poison, with risk far outweighing benefit, a compromise does not change the balance. Risks are not reduced by compromise nor are benefits increased.

Years ago we studied chemistry in college—inorganic, organic and a couple more exotic courses—and were drilled in the safe handling of toxic compounds in classroom and lab. We watch, with something akin to horror, the casual handling of toxic chemicals today. No one knows with certainty, the amount of these chemicals that can be tolerated without ecological damage. It could be more disastrous than killing a few fish and birds.

Is it our imagination, or is the incidence of cancer increasing? It seems we are being told, almost weekly, about someone we know being diagnosed as having cancer. We don't know if chemical agriculture increases cancer risk or not. However, we think about the possibility knowing most chemicals introduced into our environment are put there too recklessly. Of course, death is accepted by all living beings. Most of us are intent on postponing it as long as possible. Certainly, none of us want what is euphemistically described as a "lingering death." A carpenter said, "I want to go with hammer raised, ready to pound another nail." We have declared a willingness to topple over when pounding out another line of wary words at the linotype.

These are the worries of a person long in the trade and are of little account to the younger. As we live from one category to the other we have thought about the older versus the younger and have come to a conclusion. No one under 80 years of age should govern us. That number of years is needed for learning the art of the possible, which is the same as discovering the impossible.

Compromise isn't as important as cooperation. We need to cooperate with nature instead of forcing it to cooperate. The environment we inherited has survived (and so has life) because it wasn't tampered with in the past. But we continue refusing to accept adversity as part of existence, convinced there is a Golden Age, where all is peace and love and not a damn grasshopper anywhere.

Big Farms And Odd Fossils

A Catholic church in Iowa is organizing its farm community members in opposition to bigness in farming and we applaud the attempt while wanting to write the priest and describe the first aid treatment for head wounds caused by butting them against a brick wall. For several years we figuratively wore head bandages while trying to convince farmers that longer furrows were digging the graves of small farm operations, that the interment would be an irreplaceable loss and agriculture would hurt like hell.

In a television interview the priest said he was concerned about the loss of membership in his rural parish and what is happening to family farming. We were concerned (still are) with loss of Polk community membership and ditto the rest. As we peer around a 6-ft. diameter tractor wheel, which has almost obliterated the future of the small farm, we see a glimmer of hope. If the priest can convince his flock that bigness is a sin—wow!

It may take religious conviction to turn big farm development around. That could be the double-whammy, knocking out 4-wheel drive tractors and 16-row equipment; putting agriculture on more reasonable terms with the rest of us. Not having a direct line to God, all we could do was complain while pointing out the tragic disappearance of farm after farm, swallowed by the economics of efficiency.

Efficiency is dull business. It destroys individuality. In agriculture it reduces the landscape to a monotonous common denominator. No space is allowed for a lilac bush by a yard gate. Efficiency discourages originality, destroys creativity while mixing diversity into bland homogeneity. Agriculture efficiency does this by closing the field gate on opportunity. The Catholic priest said he was concerned about the decline in opportunities for the younger generation wanting to farm. "Join the club, Father."

A Farm Bureau official, also interviewed, was, strangely enough, in opposition to the Catholic church congregation's goal, stating, "You can't turn back the clock." He was claiming inevitability in large farm development. The myth of inevitability is always proposed by so-called pragmatists when practicality rots social fabric, endangers the environment, introducing previously unknown risks to daily life.

The truly practical have their work cut out for them destroying myths. When we voiced some criticism of odors from a confinement hog operation, we were told not to complain, that it was the smell of money. "It is not," we replied. "It's the smell of hog shit."

So-called pragmatists need to be thumped back to earth, occasionally, when they are about to float away, out-of-control, on their view of reality. They have a convenient theory—scale tipping. If benefits outweigh risks, that is good. The vice versa is bad. Benefit is claimed if progress is detected, which is myth supporting myth. The myth of progress has been around a long time and its inevitability has firm hold.

Progress is a myth propounded by hucksters who claim they can detect it in bigger, faster, higher. Progress is confused with change to the extent that every change is declared progress as we journey from worse to better while accumulating much, more, most.

Thus, progress in farming is in bigger equipment needing bigger farms for efficient operation. Fewer and fewer farmer-owners are accumulating much, more, most of the land and inevitability means that, eventually, if this is progress, one owner will have all of it.

That's the logic of inevitability of progress as proposed by that

Continued On Page 3

Big Farms And Odd Fossils

Continued From Page 2

Iowa Farm Bureau official. Ridiculous? Not if belief includes inevitability of progress as reality. That is ridiculous. We need to understand what is myth and winnow it from reality.

We watch the apprentice printer with his pretend play. He understands pretense. If we introduce reality into the play situation he protests: "No, Norris! Pretend!" Last week, while in the car, we were arguing, as usual, about our individual mental capacities, tossing dumb and dim-brain descriptions at each other. Finally, we said, "You don't know anything." He replied, "I know everything."

"I'll bet you don't know how much two plus two is," we argued. "I do, too," the apprentice claimed.

O. K.," we asked. "How much is it?" The apprentice answered, "I won't tell you because then you'll know."

That was a twist to a pretend situation and delightful because we both understood the pretense. "You can't turn back the clock," claimed the Iowa Farm Bureau official, not understanding his statement supported a myth. Debate is hopeless with a person who accepts myth as fact. He's forgotten we'll be turning the clock back this fall.

We are transients on this planet, bumming a ride for a few years. A strange lot of bums we are, critical of the vehicle carrying us, wanting to "improve" instead of trying to understand it. We boarded it "bare-naked" and can't take anything with us when we leave.

Loren Eiseley described us as potential fossils and that's our only recognizable contribution to the earth's future. A lucky few will be recognized in scraps of their bones while the vast majority will become unrecognized particles, anonymous specks.

The process—life-death—has been operating on this earth for hundreds of thousands of years. Anyone claiming the process is progress will make an odd fossil. A future archeologist will handle the skull in bewilderment, remarking, "From the looks of this there was only solid bone between the ears."

To be denied any of the daily actions or things that constitute living, is confining. We have always thought accomplishment or failure were personal responsibilities. As a young man we thought, "I can do or have whatever is possible."

The exuberance of youth, viewing a world of opportunities, was a wonderful feeling. Supported by sound limbs, a healthy body carrying a full load of inherited, competent genes, the outlook was limitless. Of course, some disciplines were present, though none were due to material limits.

The mood of our youthful years was optimistic, encouraged by the seemingly limitless resources of these wonderful United States. Influence and affluence were buddy travelers on the road to bigger and better. More was praised and less downgraded.

Technical miracles were a daily revelation. Fingertip power was the wave of the future. Machine-made superseded hand-made. Ten-thousandths of an inch tolerance was the perfect fit. Nature's odd match-ups were gear-grinding screeches.

This outlook spilled over into damming rivers, levelling hills, draining wetlands, straightening streams and building on flood plains. Improving nature was the name of the game. Efficiency was the goal and re-arranging the terrain the method for achieving it. By divine decree man had dominion. With unshakeable faith and fingertip power mountains were moved and valleys filled with water and silt.

Faster, faster was the prod, urging us to go further, do more. Speed and efficiency became synonymous. More units per hour, per minute, per second, was the supersonic pinpoint destination on the levelled horizon.

All to be accomplished smoothly, comfortably, without strain. Back-breaking labor never has been glorified. The ditch digger, wielding a spade, not only worked at a low level, but was kept there. "Get out of the ditch, man! Let the machines take over."

Mechanization revolutionized farming. With machines, fewer and fewer farmers raise more and more food. The machines are ending a way of life but that is progress and who would dare deny the inevitable? Barns are going the way of log cabins, and sod houses. Small farmsteads disappear in larger spreads.

A recent study of the contemporary farming picture concluded bigger farms are formed mostly by farmer-owners buying neighboring farms. This development is deteriorating farmers' political impact at the national level. A farmer on a tractor can raise hell in Washington D. C. but the tractor can't vote. A farmer can own half a county but he still has only one vote.

Our total dependence on machines, technologists, and non-renewable energy resources never was realized fully until the Arab oil embargo of 1973. Then the realization clubbed us, shattering dreams of abundance and enough for all. Now we are facing the insurmountable barrier of limit, discovering the natural resources of the United States mostly have been consumed and we have become dependent on imports to maintain our economy and dreams.

We are confined within material limits and no longer can ignore them. Shortages are a permanent feature of the future and rationing inevitable. Voluntary rationing will not suffice because we never were taught restraint. Advertising encouraged consumption, with happiness and having identical twins.

The contemporary picture of perfect living is a ranch type house with attached double garage set in a large yard. A hard-surface driveway to a hard-surface street provides easy access to more with two cars in the garage and, maybe, a third parked in the driveway. Alongside the garage is a house trailer, fully equipped for camping(?) and, perhaps, a boat on a trailer with an outboard motor of sufficient horsepower for water skiing. If there are children, the garage and yard may hold bicycles, tricycles, plus a motorcycle or two.

Most of the accumulation is energy-consuming and now we change our lifestyle or become a second-rate nation dependent on imports. We must learn having is not happiness.

Exuberant youth will still discover a world full of opportunities to "do or have whatever I want" with the added discipline of material limit. This is, probably, a healthy restraint, resulting in a more natural world; less technical, more human. Shortages could prove a blessing, not a disaster.

We were watching a blackpoll warbler as it searched, intently, purposefully, a budding tree branch three feet above our head. The little bird was oblivious of our presence in the Polk Cemetery as it moved constantly and "pecked up" edible tidbits from near leaf-bursting twigs. To that diligent devourer of nature's crumbs we were another tombstone, albeit an enthralled one, and we remained as motionless as a grave marker while observing that small bit of the Grand Design go about its business of living.

Above the trees in that narrow grove that edged the west side of the cemetery, a crow was circling and muttering. To that bird we were the invading enemy and it protested every step. The crow was not about to mistake us for a tombstone. The crow knew that odd, though familiar animal with arms instead of wings was THE ENEMY. We are not an enemy of the crow, but it didn't know that. Sometimes enemies are more imaginary than real. Separating fact from illusion is important when determining the enemy.

Thousands of evolving years went into that crow's wary watchfulness and cawing concern. We were the shape of the enemy and binoculars could have been a gun. The crow had no intention of becoming an endangered species.

The blackpoll warbler was a small, lively chunk of the infinite variety of life on earth and we, momentarily, wondered about size and significance. That little bird wasn't concerned about, or even noticing us. To that blackpoll warbler we were of no account—insignificant. Our death wouldn't upset its programmed life. Would the bird's death upset ours?

One bird's death would not be disturbing. If the blackpoll warbler joined the passenger pigeon, Eskimo curlew and great auk as an extinct species, that would be cause for worry. The decline in numbers of any species is reason for worry.

Each spring, the sight of migrating birds is reassuring. Just as reappearing green growth renews the spirit, so do spring warblers and a V of geese. A gnawing uneasiness that human exploitation may be upsetting earth's rhythms subsides with the spring migration. The little beasties survived another winter. The Grand Design is still intact.

Hundreds of thousands of years are in the history of present earth life. Each part fits a worked-out design—a functioning, throbbing whole. The blackpoll warbler flew north and found food in a Polk cemetery tree. Accidental? Not likely. The bird demonstrated repetitious purpose in its hunger and unawareness of our nearness.

The repetition has been described as machine-like but life is more than mechanical motion honed to ten-thousandths of an inch. Earth supports life that has hopes, expectations, love and capacity to cope with the unexpected. Machines are monotonous, predictable, and wear out. With care and conservation the earth won't.

As caretakers of this wonderful planet we must separate the false from the true. The present energy shortage is revealing illusions and they should be pointed out. The University of Nebraska-Lincoln has published a beautifully printed pamphlet titled, "New Technology is Brightening Nebraska's Energy Future." The introductory sentence is a falsehood—"Energy goes hand in hand with the quality of life." The amount of available energy has a deteriorating effect on the quality of non-human life. We don't believe it has one erg of influence on quality of human life.

"Quality" is an elusive word when applied to living. The lay-out and printing of the pamphlet is of high quality. The text is not. It's a propaganda piece designed to reassure without doing much. The thrust is to let tax-paying citizens of Nebraska know their university is concerned about the energy shortage. If "the academic community" had been concerned 30 years ago, perhaps Nebraska and the United States would not be in its present energy crunch. The beautifully printed pamphlet is reaction, not action. The money could have been better spent exploring renewable energy sources—solar, methane gas, alcohol from agricultural products, and the like.

We expect this kind of propaganda from corporations with something to sell. Appreciation is lacking for the "selling" of educational institutions. The pamphlet is evidence of a lack of quality in Nebraska life at the higher educational level.

This comment has strayed far from the blackpoll warbler in the Polk Cemetery tree. That beautifully designed little bird is more convincing of quality in life than a beautifully designed pamphlet, which reinforces illusions instead of exposing them.



After the snow melted.

The damndest nonsense ever foisted on a willing electorate was a comprehensive litter law, during last fall's general election, to be enacted as a substitute for the bottle bill. The result has been comprehensive litter. A coalition of container makers, breweries, and pop companies still doesn't give a damn how littered the countryside, parks, boulevards, and lawns become; neither is it concerned about the cost to government at local, state, and national level to clean up the mess. The coalition was organized to make certain the breweries, soft drink concocters, container makers, and distributors would not have to share responsibility for the trashiness of their business.

For years beer and pop were marketed in returnable containers. The system worked. Then came throw-aways.

The supreme gesture of affluence is to use once and toss aside. The toss is profitable to makers and distributors of the tossed. Cost of collecting discards becomes the responsibility, primarily, of non-tossers.

A throw-away society lacks admirable qualities. Conservation is downgraded. As shortages develop in resources, throw-aways become more reprehensible. Contempt for lack of value in one thing, (can or bottle), breeds contempt for all things. Value is then based on utility and nothing can be priceless. All is commercial.

Such an attitude is praised as hard-headed, practical, realistic. The creative mind is channeled into the commercially feasible. The aesthete relegated to second place.

"Waste not; want not" has been reworded "want and waste." In a world with everything in its place and trash in all of them, the consumer is expected to consume. The goal of planned obsolescence is the instantly obsolete; a consumer constantly consuming.

Constant consumers are ideal customers; sustaining demand while standing knee-deep in the rubbish of their purchases.

Individual responsibility is the cornerstone of a democratic society. Responsibility encompasses concern, caring. The bottle bill was the correct legislative solution to litter. The proposed nickle deposit by the individual purchaser would give each can or bottle value. The nickle would generate individual concern. Perhaps a monetary motive is not the ideal for caring. It works. Why knock it?

Radiation And Nitrates

"Let's go back to candles." That was the solution offered by a young mother who had fled the immediate area of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania with her baby, after radiation levels increased following an accident within the "containment." Pregnant mothers and young children were ordered to leave the neighborhood of the installation and its leaking radiation as a "precautionary measure."

Described initially as a "normal aberration" and "event," concern about the accident soon escalated and more accurate words, "serious nuclear accident" were voiced. According to Time magazine's report, an executive officer of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission said, "We are in a situation that is not a situation we have ever been in before."

We are in a world that is not a world we have ever been in before. Potential catastrophe that can be seen, felt, heard, smelled, tasted, is easily comprehended. We react. We don't need experts to tell us to react.

Radiation cannot be detected by the five senses. What is radiation? Residents within a five-mile radius of the nuclear power plant were advised to stay indoors and close windows as though it was raining. The frightened young mother had a blanket over her baby. If radiation is similar to raindrops why does a nuclear power installation need such thick walls?

We start worrying about an "event" when an expert is needed to explain what is happening in our world. The experts will kill us, yet experts have their jargon. The nuke ones describe what is happening in millirems: Wonderful. Now we have a word, though a millirem is as mysterious as radiation.

How about changing it to "cranberries?" Everybody understands cranberries. How many cranberries is safe exposure for a deer, buffalo, cow, moose, mouse, skunk, pheasant, quail, chicken, hawk, goldfinch, cardinal, bluebird, wild rose, plum thicket, cottonwood; for Indiangrass, sandlove grass, corn, milo, wheat, alfalfa? Nobody knows.

The experts are confused. One said, "A little radiation is a little harmful. A lot does more harm." In other words, no tolerance level exists. The less, the better. Another said, "Risks are taken with whatever we do."

Granted. However, with radioactive materials it is the first time the future has been asked (and it can't reply) to assume the risks of the present. We recall a member of the original Atomic Energy Commission replying to a layman's question about maintaining safe storage of radioactive wastes for 500 years: "We plan to be around."

That flippant answer came to mind when we read that some nuclear power wastes will still be radioactive after 500,000 years. Even 500 years is an outrageous mortgage on the future.

The concern for babies and young children caused us to remember a similar worry when a panel of experts commented on the high nitrate levels in Platte valley water and, in soothing words, explained to residents how to live with it. "Blue babies" was the graphic description and the experts advised installation of filters as a preventive measure.

Other similarities exist in the two situations. Nitrates in water cannot be detected by the five senses. Just as there is always some radiation bombarding the human frame, there is always the intake of some nitrates. Again, the experts admitted they don't know the tolerance level, or if there is one.

The worry in both cases is that we are asked to tolerate MORE in the name of progress. Which brings to mind the remark of a chemical company representative who replied to a question about the safety of a company product: "It hasn't been proven harmful."

In terms of safety that is tragic logic. The chemical company should be required to prove the product is not harmful before it is marketed. For a safer, saner world risks should be reduced, not increased. In the hurry to exploit and profit civilization's tolerance level may never be known until it is too late.

Polking Around

Occasionally, when the lights are beginning to lower along with our spirits, we think about negative news and the infinite stories that can be written about what didn't happen. The latest bit of negative news, which we have jotted down and tacked in place for future reference, is a headline in the Grand Island Independent, "Measles not found in county."

A tremendous variety of the not found can be located in all counties. Gold has not been found in Polk county except in jewelry, coins and a few teeth. Oil has not been found in Polk county except in cans. Headline writers have problems. We all do.

Professional football television commentators live in a world of their own and we have no intention of entering it. "The guy's really starting to mature" was aimed at a quarterback who had completed a pass to a tight end despite being grabbed by the legs while a second opponent was on collision course with the rest of him. The commentator continued, "He's got quite a future. His mother told me he is the youngest of eleven children."

For the totally nonsensical listen closely as television spellers spout words of non-wisdom during commercials. The virtues of an expensive car were being extolled, including so many extras we wondered if enough room had been left for the driver, and the chatterbox came to the climax of the spiel—the price. It was described as being sold "at a price you never thought you could afford."

"Everything comes in a box" had us thinking about Great Truths instead of the parts which, when taken out of the box and put together, made a whole. Speculation is nip and tuck which is the greatest invention—the box or the wheel. That bit of "spellerese" came from a television commercial for toys of which the boob tube is jammed these days and nights far into. "Look! Mommy! He's got a radio in his tummy!" were the startling words advertising stuffed animals. Salvador Dali with his dripping watches was a piker.

"Most people can use IBM computers" is an attempt to put computers on the use level of toilet paper by suggesting they are as common as "Adult strong nasal mucus" will confuse anyone learning the English language plus adding chaotic meaning for those who do speak it.

Before there was anything, there was Karastan"—spoken in sinister, jelly-like tones, is a commercial for a rug, though it sounds like a re-write of Genesis.

"The true extension of you" is a commercial for a Eureka vacuum cleaner. This is not poetic license. It is poetic licentiousness. Anyone buying a vacuum cleaner on the strength of that commercial labors under a low level of self-regard.

At times, in this column, we have needlessly exaggerated, in failing tries, to depict the comic and have tripped over words head-first into hot water. Here we go again. "Environment for Young Pigs—Challenge for the '80s" is the title for a speech at Nebraska Swine Days. That the environment for young pigs has become a challenge shows how much change has occurred in the farming picture since the days when farmers stopped the hogs.

What started the wheels turning and the thoughts churning in our balding head was a rhetorical question by the automobile commercial speller who told about that price we never thought we could afford. He asked, "Is luxury obsolete?" He said it wasn't and that the car to be sold at a price we never thought we could afford was luxurious and economical. It was EPA rated at 20 mpg (miles per gallon) which has become a more important rating than mph.

Madison Avenue has never totally rejected the idea "bigger is better." To expect the avenue's scribblers to give up on luxury as a selling point is as impossible as expecting the sun to rise in the west. Neither will happen. Luxury has become another "right" along with free speech, unhindered travel on smooth highways, overtime after 40 hours and double time on Sunday.

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