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Journalism Comes to Hamilton County

By BESSIE L. LYON

As far back as 1452, long before Columbus came to America, John Gutenberg, over in Germany, invented a novel machine that ultimately would vitally influence the lives and happiness of the future inhabitants of the new world.

Gutenberg's printing press differed from the Chinese method of block printing in that use of movable type enabled the printer to produce words and sentences more expeditiously and effectively, and eventually books were printed and made accessible to mankind.

Gutenberg himself had no idea of the widely increasing benefits of his invention to all the world; in fact, historians tell us that he was so easily cheated out of his just deserts, the rewards of his work went to others, and Gutenberg died in poverty. Yet, however great may have been his imagination, he did not dream of the far-reaching results of improved printing methods; he could not have dreamed that in some four hundred years, because of his work, printer's ink would begin to flow in the then unknown region we now call Iowa.

By 1833, the Black Hawk Purchase opened up a wide section along the Mississippi river for white settlement; settlers hastened into this new area, and communities teeming with business prospects sprang up as if by magic. This establishment of new towns, in which a newspaper became a source of pride as well as an instrument to promote growth, created a fine opportunity to get on the ground floor with journalism in Iowa. Moreover, the generous amount of advertising by speculators, for which the newspaper was a most convenient vehicle, provided much of the needed revenue.

Naturally, the eastern part of Iowa was the setting for the early newspapers, among which was the *Dubuque Visitor*, edited by John King in 1836, the first to appear.

Following quickly, in 1837, was the *Western Adventurer and Herald* at Montrose, Dr. Isaac Galland, printer, and Thomas Gray, editor. The *Wisconsin Territorial Gazette* and *Burlington Advertiser* came out in 1837, edited by James Clark, who became the third territorial governor of Iowa.

The first Whig newspaper in Iowa was the *Fort Madison Patriot*, published March 24, 1838, by James G. Edwards. It came out strong and vigorous in opposition to slavery. Mr. Edwards moved it to Burlington in a short time and there established the *Iowa Territorial Gazette*. Eventually his paper's name was changed to the *Burlington Hawkeye*, publication of which continues to this day. To this editor, Governor Lucas and others with them in conference in 1838, credited the selection of the sobriquet "Hawkeye" by which the state and Iowans since have been known.

There followed the *Iowa Sun*, of Davenport, and two papers at Bloomington (Muscatine), the *Iowa Standard* and the *Bloomington Herald*. The *Standard* removed to Iowa City in 1841, and the *Iowa Press-Citizen* is its descendant. There were some other sporadic attempts to start papers, but we can count the definite establishment of eight newspapers in Iowa between 1836 and 1841—just five years.

A man who acquired great influence in central Iowa journalism was Charles Aldrich, a native of New York, in which state he had worked in several printing offices. At the age of 22, in 1850, he decided to become an editor and launched the *Cattaragus Sachem* at Randolph, New York. He was the sole factotum, being editor, printer and publisher of the paper. After a year's experience, he decided that journalism should be his career, and he then moved to a larger town, Olean, where he published the *Olean Journal* for several years.

ALDRICH EMIGRATED TO IOWA

But Horace Greeley's advice to young men sounded in his ears, and to satisfy himself as to the soundness of this advice, he traveled to Iowa. Arriving at Dubuque, he worked awhile in printing shops and sought

information as to a good location for himself. Fort Dodge being recommended, he made the trip in the dead of winter, from Dubuque to Fort Dodge, where he found a paper had already been established, and was strongly backed by influential Democrats. As his political belief was in opposition to this paper's policy and knowing that two papers could not flourish in so new a town, he retraced his steps, some twenty miles, and stopped at the small town of Webster City early in February, 1857, and concluded to make his home there.

Could he have had a "crystal ball" to foretell his future and his influence on that promising young community, he surely would have been amazed at the revelation! This somewhat slight, energetic young man not only sought to promote the growth and prestige of his new home in Webster City and Hamilton county, but he met every man as his friend. In later life, he rather proudly exclaimed, "I once knew every man in the county." He truly knew these people as friends and neighbors.

As an instance of that real neighborliness, I cite an occurrence in our family. My maternal grandfather, Robert Willis, living some five miles out in Cass township, was one of Aldrich's closest friends. He suddenly became very ill and grandmother sent her son William, a lad in his teens, to find someone who would ride to Fort Dodge and bring Dr. Olney to attend to the sick man.

Accordingly, William went straight to the *Freeman* office and asked Mr. Aldrich if he knew of someone who could go on this errand of mercy. Mr. Aldrich did not wait to find someone willing to go, but locked up his shop, saddled his horse, "Old Kit," and started forthwith for Fort Dodge. When well on his way, he was dismayed to see a prairie fire, extending in a long line, and barring his way. Skirting the fire for some distance, he found a narrow space in the flames, so he put the spurs to "Old Kit," and with a flying leap, reached safety beyond the fire.

Finding Dr. Olney, they returned, reaching the

Willis home about midnight, where the patient was given needed treatment, which brought about his eventual recovery; meantime, Grandmother had a good midnight meal for the two men who had proven to be such steadfast friends in her hour of distress. Who shall say that the pioneers did not exercise the true spirit of the "good Samaritan"?

Webster City, as such, was just emerging from the chrysalis stage, hitherto having been known as Newcastle. In December, 1856, the area comprising the new Hamilton county was separated from Webster county and the county seat and post office designated as Webster City. So, with a brand new name and a new county set-up, it was quite fitting that a newspaper should be started. Under these circumstances, Charles Aldrich looked over the rich possibilities of the region, and made a proposition to the citizens of Webster City to the effect that upon a guarantee of 500 subscribers plus \$500, he would bring his equipment and start a newspaper in the town.

About three weeks later, on March 8, to be exact, Inkpadutah and his horde of Indians perpetrated the atrocious Spirit Lake massacre. One wonders if that horrible event had occurred six weeks earlier, whether Mr. Aldrich would have "signed on the dotted line," despite the \$500 bonus.

It may be remarked that twenty years later, in 1887, Mr. Aldrich originated the movement to erect a memorial tablet in memory of the heroes who went from Webster City on that terrible rescue march. The tablet is in the Hamilton county courthouse and is reputed to one of the finest in the state.

Returning to New York, Aldrich bought a new Washington hand press and other supplies, for which he paid \$700 in cash, for he knew credit would not have been extended to him considering the doubtful success of his project. Packing up their household goods, he and Mrs. Aldrich came by rail as far as Dyersville, which was then the western terminus of railroads in Iowa. The state roads were so treacherous that the

heavy press had to wait until the roads dried up. Mr. C. T. Fenton, a close friend and supporter of Aldrich, met them with a team and buggy, and transported the family to their destination, albeit with no little difficulty. Later, John Meeks, with stout ox teams, laboriously brought the press to Webster City, where it was located in a 16x16 office of native lumber, which as nearly as I can trace the location, was on the north side of what is now the east one of the Twin Parks on Bank street.

As they journeyed westward toward their new home, they found that they could have purchased a well improved farm for the amount expended on the printing outfit—but Mr. Aldrich was a born journalist and he never regretted having started journalism in Webster City.

FIRST WEBSTER CITY PAPER ISSUED

His new paper, the *Hamilton Freeman*, was launched June 29, 1857, and save for interruptions during the Civil war, printer's ink has continued to flow in Webster City for almost a century, going all the way from the weekly *Freeman* to the present daily *Freeman-Journal*.

A glance at this first paper shows the heading announcing, *The Hamilton Freeman*, Vol. I, No. 1, June 29, 1857. Directly under the masthead is a poem by Brig. Gen. George P. Morris, most significantly entitled "Life in the West." This poetic picture is indeed a lure to the prospective settler, and we quote it verbatim:

Ho, Brothers, come hither and list to my story,
Merry and brief shall the narrative be!
Here, like a monarch, I reign in my glory,
Master am I, boys, of all that I see!

Where once was a forest, a garden is smiling,
The meadows and moors and marshes are no more,
And the curls of the smoke of my cottage, beguiling
The children, who cluster like grapes at the door.

Then enter, boy, cheerily boy, enter the rest,
The land of the HEART, is the land of the WEST!

This valiant promoter of the West was apparently

more enthusiastic than poetic or realistic, especially when one knows that roads were so often impassable, winters were long and rigorous, during which supplies were often exhausted. Moreover, those "curls of the smoke of my cottage" frequently had to be produced not by wood or coal, but by corn, used as fuel. (And whoever saw a group of children that resembled a "cluster of grapes"?)

In the matter of payment for advertisements, Mr. Aldrich made his position very clear; his terms were:

- 1 square, 12 lines or less, \$1.50, first insertion
- 1 square, 3 months, \$4.50
- 1 square, 12 months, \$12.

The paper was to be published every week, at \$2.00 per year, in advance.

As to notices, those pertaining to patent medicines were charged no less than the regular rate, but for these, the payment was "To be exacted in advance." Notices of political meetings, associations and societies were generously allowed to go in at half price, as also were obituary notices and obituary resolutions, but double price was to be charged for divorce notices and for "runaway wives"! (Did this rate apply to runaway husbands as well? Since the Fugitive Slave law was still in force in 1857, I had mistakenly supposed this notice was going to apply to slaves—but no, it was to what we would term a "Reno bound wife" today!)

He adroitly skirted a ticklish subject by stating that "The fee for publishing marriage notices *down East* varies from \$1 to a \$5 gold piece." From the above notice, it is very evident that Mr. Aldrich lived long before Fort Knox was the gold center of the world.

An interesting item is to the effect that the Wilson House, Underdown and Tryon, Proprietors, is a hotel conveniently located, "Recently refitted and prepared to attend to the wants of all who call; we have in addition, convenient livery stables, with good hostlers. Our friends are cordially invited to call." One of the "friends" who called as he was on his way back to Irvington, where he was in business, was no less a person than

Kendall Young, who was so impressed by the sister of Proprietor Underdown, Miss Jane, that he returned in 1858 and married her. They soon sold out at Irvington and came back to Webster City to live. Kendall Young went into business, invested in land, and eventually became a great benefactor of Webster City, bequeathing his fortune to found the Kendall Young Library. Mrs. Jane Young also left a bequest of money for the institution, to be used as the trustees saw fit. The original home of the Youngs was moved to lots west of the library and is now the home of the Women's Club, known as the "Jane Young House."

In this first issue, we find patent medicines invading the columns thus: "Astonishing Cures! Louden and Sons Family Medicines lead all medicines of the day; their assortment of family remedies is calculated to relieve almost any complaint that male or female, adult or children are heir to, and we advise all who are afflicted to try them."

It goes without saying, that in those days, there was no Pure Food and Drug act!

Quite a variety of "Ads" from Dubuque, Dyersville and Fort Dodge are mingled with those of local businesses; the firm of Rhodes and Halsey announced that they had the "completest" drug store in northwestern Iowa, asserting that their stock contains "drugs, medicines, paints, oils, dye stuffs, varnishes, brushes, sash-glass, putty, all popular school books, burning fluids, lamps, toys, paper hangings, groceries, glassware, musical instruments and perfumery." Along with this heterogeneous stock, they also carry the most reliable patent medicines!

ISOLATION THEN A REALITY

With no railroad beyond Dyersville, all goods and supplies had to be hauled over roads that were rough at best, bottomless and utterly impassable during the wet and blizzardly months; hence one wonders how these people secured any such lines of merchandise.

Of course, everyone wanted a railroad, and probably the editor noted with satisfaction, "Hon. Geo. W.

Jones, of the U.S. senate, T. G. Boothe, Esq., Treasurer of the D. and P. Railroad Co., Judge Meservy, John F. Duncombe and Editor A. S. White of Fort Dodge were here this week on railroad business." Sad to say, this gleam of hope as to railroad transportation did not materialize until 1869, and the D. and P. Co. had been swallowed up by the Illinois Central company, while poor Homer, the original "metropolis" of the region, was left to wither and decay, since no railroad reached it.

In these days of auto accidents, shootings and burglaries that overcrowd our newscasts and papers, it is interesting to read of a very different kind of accident:

"A stage driver was recently bitten by a rattle snake at Skunk Grove; the snake was hidden in a corn crib and when the driver reached in to get some corn, the reptile bit his thumb. He sucked it vigorously, drank a liberal dose of *Sod Corn*, applied other remedies, and experienced no great inconveniences, although he admits he was "considerably skeered."

It is difficult today to estimate all the functions of a newspaper in a raw pioneer community, where means of travel were limited by weather conditions, muddy roads, infrequent mails, and where rural life in the winter was a long, monotonous battle to provide supplies for the family and keep the farm animals alive. On those rare occasions when the head of the family came to town, he visited the general store, helped himself to the contents of the open cracker barrel, plus a slice of cheese and then traded his meager bit of produce for family supplies, after which, he paid a visit to the newspaper office to obtain all possible information and have a visit with the editor. This contact was a source of encouragement which cheered the long weeks before the advent of spring.

The editor was really the oracle of the community; he not only dispensed news, local and regional, with a sprinkling of foreign happenings, but he must influence public opinion as well, especially in the field of poli-

tics. The editorials were mirrors of the editor's opinions and attitudes toward all things social, moral and otherwise. Here he must advocate everything that would stimulate advancement and prosperity everywhere in his locality and he *must* expound "sound doctrine" in politics.

THE EDITORIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

In the initial number of the *Hamilton Freeman*, of which he is both editor and proprietor, Mr. Aldrich prefaces his first editorial with "A Word At the Start," which runs as follows:

In issuing the first number of our paper, custom requires that we indicate the course we intend to pursue. We have no multiplicity of promises to make, and our introductory is therefore, as brief as we can possibly fashion it, preferring rather to be judged by what we do, than by anything we might now avow. We have always been a Free Soiler and published a Republican paper in western New York, following in this respect our earnest conviction of the right.

In the late campaign, we labored with all the energy we possessed to secure the success of the Republican cause, and it would be considerably like uphill business for us to attempt to publish other than a straightforward Republican journal here. We shall always be found acting with that party which plants itself upon an earnest and consistent opposition to the extension of slavery—we believe a local journal is of no importance unless it presents a faithful record of home transactions, and becomes the organ and defender of home interests. If we succeed in making our paper valuable for its local information, we shall have obtained the principal object for which we shall labor.

We shall present our rural readers one or more good sound agricultural articles upon topics of current interest in every number, and shall endeavor to render our miscellaneous and news columns always spicy and readable. But the size of our paper is just as large as we have dared to make it. We intend that it shall grow in this respect as fast as its patronage will warrant.

In point of fact, the paper consisted of four pages with six columns, 19 inches long; copies of this June 29, 1857, issue are framed and hang on the walls of the *Freeman-Journal* office today—a priceless memorial of journalism a century ago.

In order to grasp the full import of Mr. Aldrich's

commentary on his Free Soil principles, it will be well to cast a backward glance on political conditions in respect to slavery in 1857. Iowa, admitted as a state in 1846, rather proudly became "the first free state in the Louisiana Purchase," but Missouri, on the south, was a slave state. In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska bill virtually opened Kansas to slavery and under the doctrines of Squatter Sovereignty, Nebraska on our western boundary, could easily be settled by slave owners should they so desire. Moreover, the new Republican party had "No Extension of Slavery," as its most important principle, and Abraham Lincoln, a former Whig, struck telling blows for the new party denouncing slavery extension, while Stephen A. Douglas fought for his favorite doctrine, Squatter Sovereignty, the real core of the Lincoln-Douglas debates being the question as to the right to extend slavery into areas where it did not already exist.

It heartens one to think that the voice of freedom, echoing from the far off villages and farmsteads of early Iowa, lent strength to Lincoln's spirit and shed light on the path which led him to be the "Great Emancipator."

Mr. Aldrich did not mince matters when it came to following the forthright stand against slavery, which he announced in his first statement of policy; he was a fighting Republican, using many original terms of derision against his opponents. It should be noted that the custom in that period of early journalism was to use profusely the most scathing invectives against a rival in politics, and the *Freeman* was no exception to this rule.

The *Fort Dodge Sentinel*, edited by A. S. White and backed by John F. Duncombe, was as profoundly a Democratic organ as the *Freeman* was Republican, and inky warfare was waged with mighty energy between them—but when the editors met, they were the best of friends.

DISTRESSING FINANCIAL CRISIS

The panic of 1857 was keenly felt in Iowa, and the struggling new newspaper was in sore financial distress. In the December 3 issue, when economic conditions seemed most seriously to threaten the existence of the paper, the editor declared, "We never were so hard up for a little ready money; the elephant, *Hard Times*, has stepped on our pocketbook some six months ago, and we have not in that time taken in enough cash to pay our expenses for three days—if quarter sections were selling for a cent apiece, we couldn't pay for a gopher hill!"

The promised \$2 for subscriptions were so delayed in coming in that a reminder had to be issued; a statement was sent to N. B. Paine, in Wright county, who had pledged a bushel of black beans in payment for the paper. Now, Paine was a very able and witty man, whose farm was the one on which the famed eagle's nest was located. He had been most instrumental in organizing Wright county in 1855, and was one of the most progressive citizens of that region. Like other men who pioneered, starting a new farm was difficult and money was scarce, hence the promise of black beans. But, the beans did not materialize and in response to the Aldrich dun, he sent the following poem, which both surprised and amused Mr. Aldrich:

The Bible says, God promised Noah
The earth should ne'er be flooded more,
Nor drouth nor famine should prevail,
Seed time and harvest, should not fail.

Upon the strength of this I made
Last year, a very foolish trade,
I bound myself and all my means
To raise a bushel of black beans
For Aldrich, who with paper squibs
Has often blistered Duncomb's ribs,
And hit old Hunker Democrats
With Kansas shrieks, hard as brick-bats,
And turned, or helped to turn the scale
'Gainst men who had Lecompton art,
Which gave Republicans a chance

To give up fiddling and to dance,
 And crowd around their office shelves
 And take the loaves and fish, themselves!

The season's past—in vain I tried
 To raise them on a high hill-side;
 They would not grow. How could they grow?
 A flood of water answered "NO."
 So, *Feeman*, 'tis beyond my means
 To pay my debt in colored beans!

So farewell, Aldrich, you must wait
 In vain for beans; in spite of fate
 I'll send you soon, two yellow boys—
 They're awful good at making noise."

N. B. Paine, Eagle Wild, November, 1858

It seems appropriate to digress here and tell a bit more about this pioneer poet, who had located on Eagle creek in November, 1854. He was a well-educated man, studied law, and was the first county attorney of Wright county and later acted as county superintendent of schools.

We wrote the story of the Eagle tree situated on his farm, and I quote:

A large oak tree, some 70 feet high, stood near where the C. & N. W. tracks now cross the Boone, and in the top of this mighty tree was a bald eagle's nest which could be seen for miles since the oak stood out far above all other trees. The nest had for its foundation red elm limbs four inches thick and long enough for a fence rail, while the nest was at least six feet in diameter. The old eagles were at home in '55 and '56, with full plumage, head dress and tail feathers white as the driven snow. But in the spring of 1857, a vandal trapper named Doty shot the old eagles and the young ones starved to death.

He also tells that later on some boys treed a 'coon in the old tree and they chopped down the tree, thereby getting two coons, but at the same time they destroyed the most valuable landmark of the locality, the landmark which gave Eagle Grove its name. We are indebted for this information to a small book, "Pioneer Poems," a compilation of poems by Paine, together with a number of pioneer stories, which the wife of one of his grandsons assembled; a copy of the

work is to be seen in Kendall Young library, in Webster City.

SECURED FINANCIAL BACKING

As further evidence of the serious financial situation in which Mr. Aldrich found himself in the second year of his editorship, I reproduce a letter sent me by the late Otto H. Montzheimer, of Primghar, who lived in Webster City during his earlier years, and who was co-author of a history of O'Brien county. He also was prominent in the Iowa Bar Association, and his findings are known to be accurate. An excerpt from the letter follows:

On August 2, 1858, Charles Aldrich was trying to eke out a living and keep his head above water by publishing a newspaper at Webster City. He had bought the type and machinery and needed about \$400. He owned 80 acres of land southeast of town, worth about \$5 per acre. He knew very well Charles T. Fenton, a carpenter who had been making money building houses and selling them. So, he went to Mr. Fenton and told him about the money he needed, also telling him that if he got the printing of the county delinquent tax list that fall, he was sure he could pay it back. Mr. Fenton said he would buy the 80 acres for \$380 and pay Aldrich for it, and then if he got the money for the county printing, he would sell the 80 acres back to Aldrich; they decided they ought to have a written contract, so Mr. Aldrich drew the contract which obligated Mr. Fenton to reconvey the land to Aldrich if he got the printing to do, with 10% interest on the loan, and though it was Fenton's obligation to reconvey the land, Aldrich signed the contract and gave it to Fenton to keep. The contract said: "I have this day (Aug. 2, 1858) sold to Chas. T. Fenton the S½ of the SE¼ of Sec. 24, Twp. 89, R. 25, Hamilton Co. Iowa, which I agree to repurchase of him for the sum of three hundred and eighty-four dollars, and pay him in county warrants, provided I receive the job of publishing the delinquent tax list of Hamilton county, Iowa, and provided further, that said tax list amounts to a sum sufficient to satisfy said amount. If land is redeemed, interest on said amount at 10%. CHARLES ALDRICH." The county printing did not materialize and so Mr. Fenton had to keep the land, which he held until 1860, when he sold it for \$5 per acre and got back his money.

Inasmuch as Mr. Montzheimer became a son-in-law of Mr. Fenton, this contract in Mr. Aldrich's handwrit-

ing was probably kept in the Fenton family until it was given to the Aldrich collection in the Kendall Young library, at Webster City, where it has since remained.

But, regardless of hard times, Mr. Aldrich held on and secured a farm north of Webster City, which he later made famous for its fine orchard and thoroughbred Jersey cattle. When the Civil war called for men, Mr. Aldrich closed the door of his printing shop and entered the service, and for almost two years the town was without a paper.

V. A. Ballyou, a former employee of Aldrich, having been disabled and discharged from the army, eventually bought the paper, and Mr. Aldrich at the close of the war went into wider fields of endeavor. His work for the state and for the U. S. government often has been told; his most lasting memorial is the Iowa State Department of History and Archives and its *ANNALS OF IOWA*. Though traveling much and meeting the great and near-great people of the world, he always considered Webster City as "Home," and a magnificent monument in our Graceland cemetery marks the last resting place of this, our most illustrious early citizen.

Defender of American Rights

American school boys for generations have known Edmund Burke as the indestructible defender of American rights in the British parliament during the period before our Revolution. Burke may well be recalled now when despite the fact that in both Britain and America a conservative majority has spoken, it would seem that the governments in power are still seeking to appease, if not to intimidate those whose vain designs are offered in the fair name of liberalism. They might be reminded of Burke's stricture that statesmen have a state to preserve as well as to reform.—Raymond Moley.

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