

WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS IN PIONEER MINNESOTA

When the Civil War began, 125 weekly newspapers had been founded in Minnesota.¹ They served to transmit news of the stirring events of the times to their readers, most of whom lived in rural districts and few of whom took daily papers. They were intensely loyal to the Union and published long news articles and editorials concerning the rising movement for secession in the southern states, as well as stories depicting the terrible treatment of the Negro by southern "gentlemen." This national political and governmental news, which occupied almost half of the news space of the average paper, was copied from other papers.² Sometimes there were difficulties. The *Hokah Chief* of November 27, 1860, announced that "We are without the Friday's mail, which is of great value to us in making up our news department. Until the river is sufficiently safe for crossing there will be no regularity in mail matter." When the other papers failed to arrive, the editor often merely postponed the date of publication in the hope that news would arrive, or he printed the same articles and advertisements twice or oftener in the same issue of his paper.

Editorial material occupied a larger proportion of the news space of the early Minnesota weekly newspaper than any other category except civic news—about one-fourth in 1860 and one-fifth from 1870 through 1890. Personal journalism was as characteristic of the small Minnesota

¹ Daniel S. B. Johnston, "Minnesota Journalism from 1858 to 1865," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 12: 183-262. The excellent collection of early Minnesota weekly newspapers in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society was used in making this study.

² Irene B. Taeuber, "Changes in the Content and Presentation of Reading Material in Minnesota Weekly Newspapers, 1860-1929," in *Journalism Quarterly*, 9: 281-289 (September, 1932).

weekly as it was of the great eastern daily newspaper of the same period. The editor conceived it his function not only to print the news but also to guide his readers into the paths of right thinking, especially right political thinking. And, possessed of this crusading spirit, he spared no words in expressing his opinion of his opponents and their views. The following examples are fairly typical of the bitter, personal, mud-slinging editorials of the period.

The person who presumed to castigate the editor of this paper in last week's Evansville paper should have signed the effusion, "Dam-phool." If our paragraph in the premises was in bad taste, it was certainly with less discretion and in worse taste to give it even the slightly greater publicity that is implied in its reproduction in so obscure a publication as the Evansville *Sentinel*.³

The brainless correspondent who furnishes the great-nothing-sheet (*Times*) of Monticello, with Delano items, some of which are generally garbled from a previous issue of the *EAGLE*, talks about catching the "improvement fever." For the benefit of that correspondent's powerful intellect we will state that the *EAGLE* has no need of catching the "improvement fever," it makes steady progress in a *healthy* path of improvement.⁴

The early editor showed a decided tendency to combine moralizing with the reporting of crime news. The *Hokah Chief* of February 7, 1860, concludes a story of a Twin City crime copied from the *Minnesotian and Times* of St. Paul with the following lines:

We trust the authorities will take care of the little children of these drunken parents. How much they must have suffered, those little innocents, during the long and cold night! We have but little sympathy for the man or woman, of mature years, who becomes beastly intoxicated and suffers, but we have and the community have sympathy for the gaunt and half-starved and almost frozen little ones, who are made to suffer through no act of their own. No one but God can tell how much they endured from cold and hunger during the night the fatal blow was given to the mother, who now is beyond the reach of their calling.—We do hope, therefore, that they will be properly cared for by the proper authorities.

³ *Grant County Herald* (Elbow Lake), February 20, 1890.

⁴ *Wright County Eagle* (Delano), February 5, 1880.

The editor of the *Stillwater Messenger* of May 8, 1860, refused to publish the outstanding professional sports news item of the year, but instead gave his opinion of the performance in unmistakable terms.

SICKENING DETAILS. — A large majority of our papers come to us with sickening details, in display type, of the prize fight between the champion bullies of England and America — Heenan and Sayers. We have no taste for that kind of literature. The affair is a burning disgrace to the two governments, and we will not lumber our columns with a recital of the brutal collision. It is bad enough to make public the "mill" now going on at Charleston between the harmonious Democracy.

The early editor was generally just as subdued and matter-of-fact in reporting news items as he was emotional and exuberant in expressing his opinions editorially. The *Stillwater Messenger* of November 27, 1860, contains the following item concerning a shocking tragedy. The report stands in marked contrast to the "sob story" which would probably be written about the same occurrence today.

TERRIBLE TRAGEDY. — The Fort Wayne (Indiana) *Times* says that a most shocking tragedy occurred in Adams county, in that State, a few days previous. A woman about to churn butter, threw some boiling water in the churn, into which one of the children had, unnoticed by the mother, placed an infant, and it was instantly scalded to death. In her frenzy, the mother seized a chair and inflicted death upon the little girl. After realizing what she had done, she threw herself into the well and was drowned.

Approximately half the content of the early Minnesota paper was advertising, the major portion consisting of either patent medicine or legal advertisements. The latter was one of the main sources of income for newspapers in an age when money was so scarce that the editor often advertised that he would take apples, potatoes, cranberries, or other agricultural products in return for subscriptions. The patent medicine advertisements offer a strange contrast to the almost puritanical character of the news content. The quacks and nostrums advertised are numerous. In one

column on the second page of the *Sauk Centre Herald* of May 14, 1880, are advertised "Halliday's Blood Purifier"; "Salicylica, Immediate relief warranted. Permanent cure guaranteed. Now exclusively used by all celebrated Physicians of Europe and America"; "The Great Cause of Human Misery. Just Published in a Sealed Envelope. Price 6cts. The world-renowned author, in this admirable Lecture, clearly proves from his own experience that the awful consequences of Self-Abuse may be effectually removed without medicine"; "The Secret Monitor and Guide to Health. A Private Medical Treatise on the Diseases of the Urinary and Generative Organs," offered for sale at fifty cents by the Galenic Institute; and "Gray's Specific Medicine." Patent medicine advertising was often disguised as local editorial material. In the *Sauk Centre Herald* of February 3, 1870, the editor indorses "Dr. Roback's Pills and Bitters," recommends "Sheridan's Cavalry Condition Powders" for horses, and advises the use of "Johnson's Anodyne Liniment" for the ears.

From twenty-five to forty per cent of the reading material in the early papers consisted of magazine material—short stories, poems, recipes, sermons, and the like. The recipes furnish an interesting commentary on the general standard of living of the period. One learns, for instance, how to make an appetizing hash by seasoning cubes of boiled turnips with salt and lard. The short stories are of the type that one finds in *Godey's Lady's Book*, often ending with the tragic death of the young heroine who was too pure for this earth and so was taken to her heavenly home. There are many short essays similar to the following, which appears in the *Stillwater Messenger* of February 7, 1860.

LIFE.—Ah, there is a touching beauty in the radiant up-look of a girl just crossing the limits of youth, and commencing her journey through the checkered sphere of womanhood! It is all dew-sparkle

and morning glory to the ardent, buoyant spirit, as she presses forward exulting in blissful anticipations. But the withering heat of the conflict of life creeps on; the dew drops exhale; the garlands of hope, shattered and dead, strew all the path; and too often near noon-tide, the clear brow and sweet smile are exchanged for the weary look of one longing for the evening rest—the twilight of the night.—Oh, may the good God give his sleep early unto these many.

The country weekly of the sixties and succeeding decades served as daily paper, magazine, and library to the Minnesota pioneer. In it the family found national news, pungent editorials, some local news, stories and poems, sermons, recipes, farm hints, and advertisements. The country newspaper has been an invaluable source for specific information regarding historical events, but it merits much more extensive study than it has yet received as a reflection of the fundamental attitudes and ideals, the general pattern of life, of the early Minnesota resident.

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