

## Newspapers of 1880s Pioneer Country Editors and Printers Added Color to Their Environment

By HOMER O. CAMPBELL, Seattle, Wash.

Weekly newspapers in Holt county in the early '80s were peculiarly personalized. Their editors, looking upon themselves and their precious mediums as one and the same thing, called the combination "we." Thus, their papers partook the nature of personal organs. Similarly, local news—even a personal telling who went where—was alive with sympathy, kindness or a little joke, the editor's very own.

Yet, in this fraternal quietude there was always the likelihood a war of words would break out. Without warning and for no other reason possibly than a temporary feeling of orneriness, a brother editor might attack an esteemed contemporary, charging with drawn split infinitives under a barrage of long-primer epithets.

Nor was this all bad, for occasional change from the pastoral to the bellicose was what was needed to put the old zipper into a calling which, in poetic truth, otherwise must have been exclusively a labor of love.

I chanced among these unpredictable good fellows in 1883 when the Atkinson Graphic, Harry Mathews publisher, took me on as printer's devil. And for five or six years thereafter I worked at different times on most of the other weeklies in the county. Unfortunately for the classics, no Dickens was around to assign to imperishable roles these country-editor stars, together with printers and townspeople sucked in as the situation developed.

### Limited News, Slim Rewards

The weekly paper in those days, consisting of four or eight pages, supplied three out of four families their only news. Half of the pages, containing world and other external news, was printed, say in Omaha, leaving blank the reverse side of these already printed pages, to be filled with local news and sent to press at home by the respective publishers.

What a contrast with today, when nearly everyone suffers from a news tapeworm that keeps him or her insatiably hungry, glued to the radio or chasing after extras.

While this frontier at the time was cushioned from the depression prevailing in the country at large, due mainly to settlers having brought with them means to keep going awhile, the press as a rule experienced close to hard times. A few papers, however, benefited more than others from publication of final-proof notices. These usually came as political patronage from the district land office, and meant \$3 for a lucky publisher every time a quarter section of land was deeded to a settler.

In the tightest pinches the less fortunate resorted to barter, accepting merchandise and services in exchange for advertising and subscriptions. Printers working for wages not infrequently helped out by taking underwear, shoes and plug tobacco on account.

Times got tough for homesteaders, too, as the winter wore on. There was reliance on buffalo chips and ear corn for fuel. Farm wives quit offering butter at the general store. "It's a shame," said one, "to be slavin' and doin' for eight cents a pound. Now we lob plenty of butter on the potatoes."

**About Mediums and Men**  
In this period, according to my recollection, Atkinson, Ewing, Inman, and Stuart had one weekly each; O'Neill had a pair. A little later Atkinson and Stuart added another paper each; O'Neill at the same time became the first Holt county town to have quadruplets (Frontier, Tribune, Holt County People, and Free Press).

For the sake of a first love I'd like to start the rounds of the Holt county press by saluting the Atkinson Graphic, where 65 years ago I set my first line of type. The publisher, who paid my devil's wages at \$5 a month was Harry Mathews, himself a printer but at the time in the front end of the business. A likeable, well-groomed gentleman in his late 30s, he employed a full-time journeyman who also did much of the writing—"Chas. E. Fields," he signed himself. Charley was smart and dynamic, the kind that any small community would enthroned as poobah.

At his next stop after leaving Atkinson he started a weekly on a shoe string, was appointed postmaster, elected justice of the peace, and owned a drug store which did a big business in Hostetter's Bitters.

I do not recall the name of



**LONGEST CAREER . . .** Dennis H. Cronin, who died in March, 1947, was identified with The Frontier for 54 years—the longest active career of any Holt county newspaperman. For 12 years he was U. S. marshal, served in the state legislature.

the paper which later became a competitor of the Graphic, although a Mr. Dudley was its editor. Like Harry Mathews, he hired a printer and kept to the front office. By the way, his printer was Liss (Ulysses S. Grant) Moon, a hometown boy graduated from the Graphic. He knew all the local characters, too. One of these was a saloon-keeper christened Patrick—as good a man behind the bar as you'd meet in the full length of the Elkhorn river. Many's the time, should one of the sprouts enjoying a social round show signs of elevation, Pat would admonish, "Ye have enough taken; not anther drop!" (the last three words very emphatic). Again, it might happen that the fellows would get a bit primed, in spite of Pat's watchfulness, and start ribbing him. On one such occasion, when the well-meaning Irishman could stand it no longer, he leaned across the bar and expounded: "There're two divels. There's a divel on earth, and there's a divel below the earth. You b'at th' both of thim."

### Knew a Lot for a Printer

Another printer-editor associated with the Graphic in the late 80s was "that inspired pagan, O. C. ('Old') Bates," as my boyhood friend Romaine Saunders affectionately called him. Were the ancients from Aristotle to Zenophanes too much for him? Did he too readily agree with Ecclesiastes that all is vanity? No. He was everlastingly unperturbed.

I regret never having had personal contact with either the Ewing Item or the Inman Index, or their editors. It was on the Item, however, that my intimate in those days, Clyde King, served much of his printer apprenticeship before moving to O'Neill and entering upon his well-known career. Clyde was an excellent printer and a craftsman at phrasing whatever came to mind.

**Still another of Holt county's early printer-editors was Colonel Ketcham, who had been around long enough to be rated "oldtimer."**

He was a Civil War veteran, had worked in the Government Printing Office in Washington, D. C., and took pride in a massive mustache that stuck out at both ends and hung down in front—the kind that went out of style about the time printers began wearing derbies. The colonel was having a fling at country journalism on the Stuart Ledger at the time I met him, which was just before John Wertz took over the paper. I remember watching him as he stood at the case setting type with smooth rhythm, going right along; never, however, raising his eyes to read copy. Then I realized this typesetter's copy was in his head. It seems the colonel's weekly schedule was divided between covering the local field and doing job work about half the time, and "throwing in" his cases, setting up the paper and going to press the rest of the time. Doing the work himself, he explained,

there was no need to write copy.

### Good Writer Saw Bad Times

John Wertz, editor of the Stuart Ledger, by whom I was given my first job as a journeyman printer, possessed both native ability and liberal arts training. Not only was he a born epigrammatist, but there was a Wertzian piquancy in every "take" he sent to the printer. Oddly, much of his best work was penciled on scrap, such as old envelopes carried in his pockets, crumpled paper bags or brindle meat wrappers from the hotel kitchen. More than once copy was on thin panels of a pine box.

My stipend was \$8 a week and "keep." This included rooming with the boss and three meals a day at the hotel, where the waitress sang the menu (beefsteak, pork chops, cold meat, etc.) and where, perhaps because John and I were rated second-table boarders, we seldom got the hotcakes for breakfast always served commercial travelers. Supplementing my keep, John kept for final settlement so much of the \$8 per week as he was unable to pay weekly.

Inured to hard times that winter though we were, the last straw was added when the Elkhorn station agent put a \$1.20 COD on our patent insides, without which we could not go to press.

In spite of such incidents, existence was not without moments of luxury—for example, at the height of summer when the watermelon crop was prime our offer of a year's subscription for the largest melon brought in so many we ate only the immense hearts.

### Sketches from O'Neill Scene

O'Neill newspapers 60 years ago reflected more or less the stability built into an older community. Along about 1886-'87, however, with the advent of the Free Press and the Holt County People, the stage was set for a comic-opera interlude. The "People," bringing type but no press, which it rented from a competitor, came upon the scene unannounced and soon departed unwept. The Free Press, though, brought not only a complete printshop but Doc Mathews, veteran editor earlier connected with The Frontier.

**In due course the versatile Doctor and John McDonough, editor of the Tribune, began lifting the journalistic hide off each other. If Doc led with "yap-yap-yap," John countered with "yap-yap-yap-yap."**

Usually each paper carried on the war with a reply, a new attack, and epigrammatic jabs as fillers. About the time yapping had become meaningless, one of the principals—which, I do not recall—played up a story alleging a certain editor had been observed acting suspiciously in the vicinity of a certain woodpile (the weather had been bitter cold), and that the owner of the wood had reported several armfuls missing. Townfolk began wondering what would happen next—a gun battle? No. The editors met, exchanged blows, got a shiner apiece, and quit yapping.

### Tribune Talent Two Deep

John McDonough, editor of the Tribune, would stand out in any group of country editors. He was tall, trim, well groomed, and well dressed except for wearing the highest collar and the longest cuffs stocked by his haberdasher. Often he would sit in obvious preoccupation softly twining the ends of an adequate but unobtrusive mustache. Eventually he realized at least temporary satisfaction of his ambition to be associated with a New York City daily, which happened to be the World.

It would be unfair, however, to say the Tribune was a one-man shop in those days, or that its editor had lost in popularity merely because the best he could get was a draw with Doc Mathews. Endowed in no mean way also was a strong boy who regularly propelled by hand the shop's power press. This strong boy had the loudest laugh imaginable (fortissimo jackassimo). To go with it were slightly retarded mental reactions—a defect which set him back two or three seconds in getting the point of a joke. The result was, when others were in the last ha-ha of laughter, the strong boy would get the point and let loose triphammer guffaws even funnier than the joke. He was so good the boys got to taking him to the visiting road shows, sitting with him far back in the gallery. Fun! Always just as the ripple of laughter following a funny hit was fading, the strong boy would get the point and bring down the house.

### "Jimmy" Riggs' Frontier

The Frontier was the atmosphere, not the deadweight, of life in the new country. James H. ("Jimmy") Riggs, editor and publisher, was the kind of a man younger fellows could wish to emulate. Cleanminded, kindly, with a little cloud sometimes in his sunny smile, he kept The Frontier on a high plane. On the credit side of his ledger, Jimmy had the satisfaction of knowing that the following young men who got part of their training under him later made good in the metropolitan field or at home: Lish Graham, Jimmy Killoran, Grant Saunders, George Riggs, Clyde King, D. H. ("Denny") Cronin, and Romaine Saunders.

Perhaps it has been forgotten that The Frontier started the first branch publication in Holt county. It was about 1886 when

this offshot, called the Emmet Echo, was founded. Emmet in those days consisted of a lone general store, the Elkhorn depot and water tank, and little else.

A number of homesteaders roundabout, however, were anticipating the time when they would receive government title to their claims. And this branch was established in anticipation of a number of \$5 fees for printing notices in connection with what was called "proving up."

Jimmy sent me, along with several cases of text type, a few fonts of display, and an army press, to do the job, requiring but two days. He also had issued in my name a pass on the Elkhorn railroad between Norfolk and Long Pine, which I had no opportunity to use except a

round trip each week between O'Neill and Emmet. (Was that a square deal?)

The hardest part of the job was discovering something that would make news. In the semi-solitude one could walk a mile for a personal. It turned out, too, that final-proof notices became scarcer and scarcer. So, after a few short weeks that were pregnant with promise, the Echo passed to its reward. (If Bill Nye had been its editor he would have given it a real obituary.) It was in the late summer of 1890 I last worked on The Frontier, helping with a "progress" edition. Today I can hardly realize 58 volumes of this sturdy pioneer have gone to press since I went away.

Giraffes grow as tall as 18 feet.

### Gillespie Story

(Continued from page 2-C)  
nesses during contempt of court. Connolly had no doubt been 'posted' and knew the only punishment he would get in case the court fined him for contempt would be good board at the City hotel with a servant for companion."

Hileman was bound over to district court for trial on a charge of grand larceny, bail fixed at \$300. What ever became of these cases the writer has not thought it worth while to look up. Al went into the race horse business, at which he was a howling success. Mr. Gillespie became county judge, the family esteemed residents of O'Neill and later B. S. became a U. S. land office official, while the Dutchers and others faded away.

### O'Neill a Man's Town —

So far as early issues of The Frontier disclose O'Neill was a man's town. Perhaps the editor felt that the ladies were so far above him that he dare not take their names on the end of his editorial quill. One exception is found in the following which appeared in a January issue in 1882:

Miss C. E. Cleveland, sister of G. M. Cleveland, an O'Neill attorney, wrote the Sioux City Journal from Mitchell: "It would be very gratifying to the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, of Mitchell, if you would publish the fact that upwards of 200 have signed the pledge during the week's meetings just held."

Glass windows were known 1,600 years ago.



# For More Than 60 Years Holt County Has Depended on Banks...

**FOR THE INDIANS IT WAS TRADE AND BARTER —  
THEN THE WHITE MAN CAME**

AND GRADUALLY conditions changed. With the coming of the white men the bank took its place with the church, the school and the press in providing the services needed for the pioneer who had come from the more populated sections of the East.

IN THIS COMMUNITY the dependency upon banks was evident long before the town of O'Neill was incorporated and the services rendered in those early days made it possible for the community to forge ahead more rapidly than in less favored settlements. Through the years the needs and demands of the community in financial matters have been met.

TODAY the O'Neill National Bank stands ready and willing to provide banking facilities second to none, and our friendly service is at the disposal of those in our great community. The past record of this banking institution has been outstanding and has stood the stress of storm and time, growing stronger with each year. We invite you to take advantage of our services.

# O'Neill National Bank

1901

— Member Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. —

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