Comment--and Discomment

Country journalism back in the early eighties presents an interesting study. Not that it isn't always interesting. Far from it. There isn't another field of endeavor, not excepting preaching or bootlegging, that has more fascinating angles—or slants. The early eighties were particularly interesting, though, for in those days publishing a newspaper was a precarious occupation, and the man who would be called editor sacrificed a great deal for the joy of following his profession. Literature has ever been a fickle mistress, and country journalism, a second cousin of letters, is something of a jade herself.

This western territory produced some notable country journalists, in spite of the fact that the pickings were poorer here than in a good many places. Any new country where settlers were homsteading was pretty sure to get some sort of a newspaper, for there were a lot of legal notices to be printed, and they paid cash in advance. Subscribers might subscribe and year after year get farther in arrears; advertisers might be few and far between, but the newspaper with the politics of the administration might be expected to survive somehow. The editor was usually postmaster, and the salary helped a lot.

'Gene Heath, who was a contemporary of Bill Nye and Bill Barlow, one of whom achieved fame and the other notoriety, was the first man to give Box Butte county a taste of genuine country journalism. 'Gene threw his fortunes in with Nonpareil before the railroad came through or the county was organized. He fought the good fight for the location of the county seat and won, but it was a vain struggle. The railroad elected to go through Hemingford, and one fine day the town of Nonpareil moved over. Here's a description of the Grip office written by Editor Heath when every prospect was rosy. It shows, better than anything else, the beginnings of the publishing business. In those days a man could buy a shirt-tail full of second hand type and a G. Washington or Army hand press for very little money, and stay at the game until somebody killed him or he just naturally starved to death. Heath describes his printing office thus:

"A small frame building constructed of native lumber, by 'boarding up and down,' leaving cracks an inch wide between the boards; door cut bias, of the same material, with a lock warranted to fit everybody's key; a window on either side of the door, neatly adjusted in common western frames, with three tenpenny nails to each sash as support. A planed board with the word 'Grip' painted upon it, and nailed just above the door, as solid as a campaign lie, adorns the front. The roof is covered with tar paper, with faint hopes of shingles some time in the future.

"You necessarily duck your head in order to enter, when an unassuming sort of postoffice first meets your gaze. The office is composed of an empty tobacco box partitioned off for letters, and a boot box nailed to the wall answers for papers. A rough table extending nearly across the room, with a pair of number 10 split leather plow shoes incasing the editor's feet, reared above it, next attracts your attention. There is nothing attractive about the editor excepting his feet, however, and your eyes naturally revert from him and wander to the opposite side of the room where stands another rudely constructed table which answers for an imposing stone. Back farther, deeper down in the den, is our devil, homelier than the story of 'the three bears,' quietly holding down the old stool and gathering up type with a rapidity equaled by no other devil on earth. This is the appearance of our office today. A year from now we will give our readers another description."

Unfortunately, a year from that time there was no Grip in Nonpareil, so we can only guess what strides the paper and its editor might have made. Probably there wouldn't have been any noticeable changes. The devil would have been a year older and possessed a few more freckles, and the editor might have had a new pair of shoes—or trousers.

In order to live and grow in those days, it was necessary for an editor to be continually scrapping. If there was no county seat fight, or up election, he must "burn" his competitor, or the newspapers in neighboring towns. There wasn't much news, anyway, and the people sort of liked to read mean and sarcastic remarks about anything. 'Gene Heath was good at invective, although he probably wouldn't have called it that. He seldom boasted of his ability on the firing line, but he didn't need to. His readers had an opportunity to see it every issue.

Heath's hereditary enemy was, of course, the editor of the Hemingford Gleaner, Joseph Hare. Hemingford was a contender for the county seat and the railroad. Having only the files of the Grip, it's a trifle hard to estimate Hare's ability, but Heath always referred to him as "Gentle Joseph." He also had another natural enemy in Editor Burlew of the Rustler. We'll have to give you some samples of the way newspapers warfare was conducted thirty-five years ago. Here's one from 'Gene Heath:

"Hare and Coates (Gentle Joe's partner) are financially interested in building a town at Hemingford. Each has claims there on which a greater portion of the ill-favored town is built. It is very natural that they should show the brightest side of their railroad prospects. It is also natural for those two particular individuals to lie about the matter from pure cussedness, but with Burlew of the Rustler, it is different. Burlew is a man who is influenced more or less by those above him in intelligence, and is a tool for the balance of the town. It were better had Burlew been bnocked in the head when young and the nourishment upon which he has subsisted so long been saved."

Gentle Joseph wasn't allowing anyone to walk over him. Here's a sample of his invective: "We admire the grit and enthusiasm of the Grip editor in sounding his B. & M. horn, for we very well known that he knows that he won't have much longer to sound it. All we have to say is, 'Give that calf more rope.' To which Heath made reply: "And the Grip editor very well knows that the 'chump' who attracts flies into the Gleaner office very well knows that Nonpareil's present railroad prospects are flattering ineed. The Gleaner editor knows a great deal, in fact we have often noticed gentle Joseph picking his nose—and making pills."

In order that our readers will know what invective really is, we'll put in a few samples, taken at random from the Grip:

"The printer in the Gleaner office complains that gentle Joseph eats up the paste."

"The idiotic correspondent of the Chadron Democrat, the wild ass of the prairie, is still at large."

"Mr. Jackson, the efficient clerk in Bowen's store, has turnips growing on his claim bigger than gentle Joseph's hopes of a railroad."

"All kinds of rumors are received during the past two or three days in reference to where the B. & M. line will run, and if the Hemingford papers have said anything in reference to the matter that is untrue we hope they will retract."

"We have received volume 1 number 11 of the Earth Lodge Champion, published in this county. It looks like an old sweat-pad of a freighting harness. We don't like to be rude on short acquaintance, but that is about the way it looks to us."

"Nonpareil is the largest town in the Box Butte country. Now dispute that, you long-earned, limber legged liars from six miles north, and we will drive you to the wall."

"It is becoming pretty apparent that the goody-goody wallowers in righteousness up on the sandhill will lie a little at times."

"We are pleased to say the Box Butte Country Rustler, printed in this place, is meeting with good success, and we think (were it not for its politics, which are democratic) that it will be a power in this new country.—Gleaner. Rats, the thing that runs the Rustler is no democrat. Democrats wash their feet."

Jenkins and his best kirl were motoring a considerable distance to see one of the last round cup ties, and the margin of time was very short.

With about twelve miles to go, he bade defiance to all police traps and, turning to the girl of his heart, exclaimed: "We're going at fifty miles an hour. Are you brave, dear?"

The girl, as she swallowed a quantity of dust(replied with emotion: "Yes, dear; I'm full of grit!"—London Tit-Bits.

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