

diversions



Connie Sheehan/ Daily Nebraskan

The block for the flag of the Polk Progress.

By Joeth Zucco
Senior Editor

"We have been recipient of phone calls and letters since announcing we want to retire from the weekly newspaper business. The reaction has been that of drug addicts, couched in terms of needing "the Progress fix" each week. The Progress publisher is also in need of a "fix" and hopes to find it somewhere beyond the walls of the Progress office. There's something called "burnout" and we have reached it. A subscriber asked: "How do you manage to write so much each week?" My reply was: "I'm beginning to wonder also how I do it." That's when it is time to step down, fold up, get out -- quit!"

-- from "Polking Around" in the Polk Progress, Thurs., Oct. 5, 1989

Norris W. Alfred is ready for a new way of life. After spending more than 30 years as editor and publisher of the Polk Progress, Alfred is ready to relinquish his linotype and take some time off.

"Physically, I'm okay," Alfred said. "I just don't have the interest that a person should have in (the community) and school. It's time I got out. There's only one way to get out . . . to sell it."

Alfred said he'd like to sell the paper to a business that would hold it together. The American Publishing Co. has bought all of the other papers in the county, he said.

One of the unique aspects of the Polk Progress is the use of the linotype. Linotype is a process that typesets by casting lines of type in lead slugs. Alfred types in the copy on a keyboard line by line, pulls a lever which causes the mold of corresponding letters to fall into place in a carriage. The carriage, which collects the lines of type in the order in which they are produced, is taken to a table where Alfred arranges the slugs as continuous text within a box that holds an entire page.

Afterwards he proofreads the page, then locks in the copy and takes the pages to press.

The pages are locked into the flatbed press. Alfred sits atop the press and feeds paper into the press sheet by sheet. In one hour he prints 950 papers.

The linotype, flatbed press, and other machines in the print shop date back to the early part of the century. Alfred said he's accumulated a lot of the equipment since papers started changing over to cold type -- setting copy with a computer -- about 25 years ago.

"I don't think anyone who buys the paper will want to do linotype," Alfred said. "This is outmoded."

"There will always be some kind of linotype printing for finer type. Some may continue it because it's quaint, but as a business it's out."

"I'd suggest that they hang onto all of it for a museum. They'll only need one piece of equipment."

The Polk Progress is one of two newspapers in Nebraska -- the other being the Spalding Enterprise -- that still uses the linotype process. Alfred mused that every once in a while a story is written about the last linotype paper in the U.S.

"There's still quite a few, but there's no question that it's ending," Alfred said. "What's really ending, though, is the independent newspaper. Most newspapers today are owned by chains."

Alfred said he'd like to sell the paper by Nov. 1 "because then I'll be out of newsprint."

He mentioned several projects he's planning to pursue once he sells. Alfred said one man is interested in publishing a book of 20 of the best editorials from the Polk Progress. A Lincoln woman is doing a book on weekly newspapers, focusing on the Polk Progress, he said.

"When you're 76, you don't plan too far ahead. I know what I'm not going to do is play pitch in the pool hall."

"There is a chance of going back to watercolor," he said. "See the

one's on the wall. They aren't very good, but they're mine."

There is much to enjoy in Nebraska. Look for the minute, the intimate, the detail and enjoy the colorfulness of prairie plant life while feeling the thrust of prairie winds in the face; sensing the ominous looming of dark clouds gathering overhead; watching the orange-black-white flight of an oriole from bush to tree. To stand centered in a 360-degree horizon is to experience a natural worldliness, colorful and complete.

-- from "The Weather," July 27, 1989

Alfred began working at the Polk Progress after he graduated from high school in 1931. He said the editor asked him if he'd work for him handsetting the paper for \$6 a week. He continued his job as he commuted to Nebraska Central College in Central City.

At Nebraska Central, he had his first and last class in journalism, which he failed.

"I was just fooling around," he said. "I really didn't learn anything then."

He eventually went on to Doane College and graduated with a degree in chemistry. While working on his degree, he worked in several print shops across the country, from John Day, Ore. to Hamilton, N.Y. He worked for a couple of years as a rubber chemist in Chicago and later a watercolorist.

Alfred worked as a watercolorist for about five years. He said he didn't make enough money with it to survive so when he was in need, he'd get a job at a print shop.

"Everything was hit and miss. When I was broke I'd go to work in a print shop."

"I never really settled down till I bought this thing," he said.

Alfred bought the "thing" in 1955, when he returned to Polk to take care of his parents.

"I gravitated to the Polk Progress because the person running it was a coach. The doctor told him to

get out of coaching (because of the stress)," he said. "He didn't know much about printing, so I helped out."

Alfred eventually bought the paper from the coach and later sold it to Jack Lowe, who was trying to buy up all the papers in Polk County. He bought the Progress back when the deal fell through in 1966.

At first Alfred ran the paper by himself, but for the past 19 years, Barbara Kennel has been his full-time help. Alfred said she started with him before she got married and with his help has raised two boys in the shop.

"I told her, 'I'll do the babysitting if you'll do the work.'"

The plan worked out and her son Stevie ended up being the Polk Progress apprentice while Timmie became the assistant apprentice.

"They were good for quite a few columns in the paper."

A lot of Alfred's notoriety comes from his editorials. Being a liberal Democrat in a conservative Republican state can bring about interesting observations.

"It intrigues people that I can get away with it," he said.

For an example, he cited this week's editorial: "The Bush administration is still fighting the Cold War because they don't believe Gorbachev is real. There is no use for the Stealth Bomber except in a war. And Star Wars depends on permanent enmity."

For background, he said he reads both of the Lincoln papers, The New Yorker, The Nation and sometimes the Christian Science Monitor. He also watches Washington Week In Review. But after 23 years of writing editorials, he said he thinks he's getting burned out on politics.

In addition to his editorials, he also writes three other columns -- "Polking Around," weather and the bird-watching column.

"That's standard fare in the paper," he said. "Outside of that I