CHAPTER X.
THE NEWSPAPERS OF POLK COUNTY.

BY W. E. McKENZIE, CROOKSTON TIMES.


The history of Polk County newspapers is largely within the period of the personal experience and observation of the writer. It is the period of the greatest evolution of the newspaper and publishing business of any similar lapse of time in the history of the world—the period of the perfecting press, and the linotype machine, of the big penny paper, and the rural free delivery, which has put the daily newspaper into the hands of the farmers and people living in outlying country villages all over the United States. It is a period coincident with the period of accomplishment in all lines of human endeavor in all climes and countries.

To go back to the early history of Polk County newspaperdom—not the earliest history by a few years—is to go back to my boyhood, and, with the aid of a halting memory, to recapture, so far as possible from the dim storehouse of things, half forgotten, the incidents connected with the propitious birth, the illustrious or inglorious career, and in many cases the untimely death, of Polk County newspapers.

Thirty years ago Polk County supported twenty-one newspapers. To-day there are but nine in the county, and twelve in the territory composing Polk County at that time, but now divided into the counties of Polk, Red Lake, and part of Pennington. The falling off in the number of papers is due to two main causes—the establishment of rural mail routes, and the loss of patronage derived from the publication of final proof and contest notices on Government Land.

LAND NOTICES PAID THE PIONEER PRINTERS.

In the early history of Polk County newspapers the final proof and contest notices were the chief, and in some cases practically the entire, support upon which the pioneer publisher leaned. Wherever there was a postoffice, and considerable quantities of Government land being proved up, there the intrepid editor, with a big case of nonpareil type for setting land notices, and a cigarbox full of long primer for setting the two or three inches of news and the editorial, pitched his tent, and began to accumulate a fortune.

Three dollars for final proof notices and five dollars for contest notices was the rate allowed by the Government. The notices had to be published in the paper nearest the land, so as to make no slashing of rates or dividing up with “the attorney in the case,” which has taken many thousands of dollars in money which belonged to the newspapers and distributed the sum among the “poor and needy” in the legal profession.
Some of the papers in those days carried as high as two or three pages of land notices, set in solid nonpareil, and their incomes from this source ran as high as $150 or $200 a week. No wonder those early publishers were optimists of the most virulent type! No wonder they were boosters of the brightest luster! No wonder the publisher at Red Lake Falls saw in his town, of one store and two saloons, a "Second Minneapolis," and the editor at St. Hilaire, with two stores, three saloons, and a blacksmith shop, went his rival one better, and christened his town the "Second Chicago," and in leaded long primer proved it, too, to his own satisfaction at least.

But their dreams of future greatness, colored by the roseate hue of their present prosperity, were not to be for long. The country was rapidly settled. The public land passed from the Government to the pioneer farmer, and the fat pickings from final proof notices began to dwindle, until now the publisher of a Polk County paper would not recognize a land notice, if he tripped over it. The rural mail carrier was the next shadow to be cast across the sunlit path of the early Polk County publisher. He pushed out daily into the highways and byways, where the local weekly had reigned supreme, and brought with him the daily papers of the neighboring towns and the big cities, and, with circulation decreasing and income diminishing, the life of the pioneer publisher began to be cast along hard lines. The big city papers, especially the weekly editions, competed with the local journals to the latter's great disadvantage. Many a established institution. The Crookston offspring of Polk County man, disgracefully deficient in public spirit and local patriotism, cut off his home paper and subscribed for a city sheet instead.

Some branched into other, and more profitable fields, others folded their tents and sought new pastures, and others hung on and on, and went down with their colors flying. Of the twenty-one papers that flourished in Polk County thirty years ago, but four are in existence today, and of the publishers of thirty years ago the writer of this article is the only one who survives in the business.

E. M. WALSH AND THE CROOKSTON PLAINDEALER.

E. M. Walsh was Polk County's first editor and publisher. In 1874 he established the Crookston Plaindealer. It was printed at Grand Forks in the office of the Grand Forks Plaindealer, which was established and then being conducted by his brother, George Walsh. The Crookston Plaindealer was conducted as a side issue to Mr. Walsh's other activities. He was postmaster, storekeeper, real estate dealer, land locator, and a few other things in those days, and when John McLean, now long since dead, but then in the hey-day of his youth, came up from Audubon to practice law and establish the Polk County Journal, Mr. Walsh gladly transferred the literary, social, and political burden to his shoulders, and the Plaindealer ceased to exist.

POLK COUNTY JOURNAL FIRST PAPER PRINTED IN THE COUNTY.

The Journal, like the Plaindealer, was at that time a branch or offshoot of another publication. It was the offspring of the Audubon Journal, published by Harvey E. Cooke, and was printed in Audubon for several months after it was established here. But about that time Crookston began to assume the airs of a civilized community. Settlers were coming in, the trees had been chopped out of the ground on Main Street, and one or two other stores had been established; the Pioneer Hotel had been erected, the tin horn gambler, the tent saloon, and the dance hall were established institutions. The Crookston offspring of the Journal soon reached a stature, where it overtopped its parent. It looked as if Crookston was to be "some town," and Mr. Cooke wisely decided to leave Audubon to rot in ignorance and folly, and to move his plant to Crookston. The Audubon Journal was accordingly discontinued, and in 1878 the Polk County Journal, the first paper to be published and printed in the County, was born.

For over a quarter of a century Mr. Cooke was the guiding star in the Journal's destiny, and never was there an issue of that paper that was not made in-
interesting to a large family of readers while he was its editor and publisher. He was a ready and entertaining writer, possessed a great fund of dry humor, combined with much common sense; he knew, better perhaps than any other man who had ever occupied an editorial chair in this County, how to shape his editorial expressions, and present the news most effectively. He was not as good a business manager as he was an editor, and while the Journal prospered fairly well, it did not make any big fortune for its owner. Mr. Cooke died in the harness in 1900, and Mrs. Cooke took charge of the Journal for a few months, when it was sold to N. S. Gordon. He began, shortly after his purchase, the publication of a daily edition, which was continued with many ups and downs, and under various managements, until 1910, when it was finally discontinued and the plant was purchased and the paper merged with the Times.

BROWN AND HIS BROADAXE.

The next paper to embark upon the treacherous sea of Polk County journalism was the Broadaxe. "Broadaxe Brown" is the only name which the editor was ever known by. He was an itinerant printer of the tramp variety. The motto of the Broadaxe was "Hew to the line, let the chips fall where they may." The line was rather a crooked one in Brown's case; but the chips were plentiful, and many was the good citizen who was banged in the neck with one of them. The Broadaxe, under those circumstances, had a short and exciting career. It was started one bright, sunlit day in the spring of 1880; but before the frosts had nipped the foliage in the fall the Broadaxe had ceased to hew. In the last issue, which was printed on butcher's straw wrapping paper, Brown—in delightfully frank, if not overly elegant, language—expressed his opinion of the town, and of a lot of the leading citizens, and he then quietly disappeared. He left in the night, a proceeding which showed his comprehensive conception of the axiom that "discretion is the better part of valor." There were many looking for Broadaxe Brown the next day—those with bills to collect, as well as those with grievances to avenge; but Broadaxe Brown has been but a troubled memory from that day to this. There are people still living here who do not like the name of Brown.

THE TRAGIC TALE OF THE "NORTHERN TIER."

Captain Arnold was the next soldier of fortune to tilt a lance against the windmill of early day journalism. His paper was the Northern Tier, named for the four counties of large proportions, though limited population, that constituted the territory along the northern boundary of the State. The Northern Tier was started at the same time the Broadaxe was cutting the deepest gashes into the characters of leading citizens. Its life was also fleeting. Captain Arnold was a man of distinguished military appearance, and brilliant attainments. He was a good mixer, but a poor financier. The local columns of the paper were crowded with personal "jollies" for Tom, Dick, and Harry. Every citizen was mentioned by his or her Christian name, and they were all smilingly present when the roll was called in the local items each week. There was no room left for advertising, and the ghost failed to walk after the first few weeks—and then the Northern Tier's light went out.

A year or two later (in the year of 1883 to be exact), Captain Arnold came back. He had found a financier in the person of H. W. McCall. McCall was also a capitalist, in a limited way, but made no claims to being a newspaper man. Arnold and McCall had also gathered together a number of brilliant young fellows, whom they had induced to cast their lot with them and gather riches and renown in the revival of the Northern Tier and its publication as a daily.

There was Billy Stark, a live wire reporter; J. A. McNair, an up-to-date advertising manager; an Englishman of studious mien, and Cockney accent whose name I have forgotten, who was to be city editor, and Albert Kaiser and E. U. Hauser, who were just printers. But the craft was too heavy—too many officers on the bridge, and too few seamen before the mast. When the waves of financial disaster began to roll...
over its decks Captain Arnold was the first to be tossed overboard. He drifted to St. Paul, and from there to the Soldiers Home, where he remained until he died. The others hung on a month or two longer. Then came the crash.

A fact worthy of mention in connection with the passing of the Northern Tier is, that the only two men whose whereabouts are known are the two who acted as deck hands on the wreck—Albert Kaiser and E. U. Hauser. The former is the wealthy president of the First National Bank of Bagley, and the latter is a millionaire member of the firm of the Grant Smith Company, one of the largest firms of railroad contractors in the United States.

THE CROOKSTON CHRONICLE.

Previous to the revival of the Northern Tier, or in 1881, W. R. Dunn, a young newspaper man in search of a location, drifted in this direction. He found Crookston a thriving town of over 1,000 people, the county seat of a county big enough, and rich enough in natural resources, to support a nation. Brother Crooke, with his Journal, was fighting the battle for education and reform all alone. Mr. Dunn was not deaf, or near sighted. He heard the call of duty and rushed forward and dug himself in with the Crookston Chronicle.

The Chronicle was a good newspaper, as newspapers went in those days—newsy, well edited, clean and able. Mr. Dunn was a lovable, upstanding, kindly man, an able writer, honest and straightforward in his convictions, and in his business methods. The Chronicle prospered, and in a short time became the leading paper in Northern Minnesota. Owing to the ill health of the editor the Chronicle was sold in 1884 to J. G. McGrew, and Mr. Dunn went to Washington, D. C., where he secured a government appointment in the census department, which he held until his death a couple of years later.

Mr. McGrew, who succeeded Mr. Dunn, was a lawyer. He had been practicing in Crookston for several years previous, and continued to practice for a year after making the purchase. The writer was then put in charge of the Chronicle until Mr. McGrew closed up his legal practice, and assumed personal control. Mr. McGrew was not a success as a newspaper man. He was a profound and able editorial writer; but not a good news gatherer or business manager. He soon realized this, and turned the paper over to a nephew, who was even more proficient in his inability to make ends meet in a financial way. W. H. Palmer and his son, Harry Palmer, were the next to try to rejuvenate the paper. They tried it as a daily; but it would not go so well, and in a month or two they discontinued it for good—with numerous creditors bewailing its loss.

In the meantime the County was filling up rapidly with new settlers. Towns were springing up, and what perhaps was the nearest approach to a boom ever known in this section was on.

THE FISHER BULLETIN.

In 1882 the Fisher Bulletin was started, by A. Dewey. He was a product of the celebrated Kindred-Nelson Congressional fight inaugurated that year. A politician, a political writer, stump speaker, and a man of recognized ability, but of questionable financial strength, he existed for a time on the returns from the plethoric Kindred coffers and then drifted back to a place on the staff of a Metropolitan paper from which he had emanated. He was succeeded by C. C. Knappen, and he by a son of Erin, named Shaughnessy, who conducted the last wake over the remains of the Bulletin. Fisher has not had a paper since.

THE PAPERS ESTABLISHED IN 1882.

The Red Lake Falls Gazette, the St. Hilaire Spectator, the East Grand Forks Courier, and the Fertile Journal were all started during the year 1882, and all are still in existence. The Red Lake Falls Courier, and the Fertile Journal, if my memory serves me, were founded by Fred Puhler, long since dead. The East Grand Forks Courier was started and conducted for many years by F. J. Duffy, who, by combining it with other business interests, made a fortune upon which
he is now living. The writer was responsible for the St. Hilaire Spectator.

THE THIRTEEN TOWNS.

In the year 1883 Albert Kaiser went to Fosston, and founded the well known journal called the Thirteen Towns. He possessed the rare combination of a good newspaper man and a good business man. In a year or two he had saved enough money to go into the banking business at Fosston, and sold the Thirteen Towns to W. A. Foss, who is still conducting it successfully.

FIRST DEMOCRATIC PAPERS—RED LAKE FALLS DEMOCRAT AND THE CROOKSTON TIMES.

The same year F. J. Rothpletz, a Southern fire-eating Democrat, started the Red Lake Falls Democrat, but the surroundings were not congenial to one of his fiery temperament. The Chronicle was then started on its downward journey to oblivion, and he came to Crookston, and engaged the distinguished services of the writer to help launch a Democratic paper, which was named the Times.

This was in the summer of 1885. Things went swimmingly until the icy blasts of winter began to howl upon us. Then Mr. Rothpletz began to pine for his sunny Southern clime, and I nursed a lusty ambition to be the sole owner, and publisher of the Times. Mr. Rothpletz went to Tennessee, I went to work, and I also went into debt. In 1887 the Daily Times was launched. Both Daily and Weekly are still published at the old stand. Subscription prices on application.

THE McIntosh TIMES.

In the year 1886 there was a demand for a paper at McIntosh, and I joined with C. F. Lommen in establishing the McIntosh Times. After a year or two Mr. Lommen became obsessed with the idea that he was healthy and wealthy enough to monopolize the whole business, and I, in turn was magnanimous enough to let him—after I had gotten a good price for my interest. He conducted the paper successfully for ten or twelve years when he, aided and abetted by a frugal wife, and a growing family of boys, had gained sufficient intelligence and filthy lucre to own and stock a dairy farm, which he is now conducting with ability and profit. Since then the McIntosh Times has passed through various hands; but, though ancient, is not yet extinct.

THE CROOKSTON TRIBUNE.

The Crookston Tribune—first a weekly, then a daily, and then a memory—was a later Crookston venture. It was published by Hammond & Allen, the former a good practical printer, but not a trained newspaper man; the latter a humorist, whose forte was on the vaudeville stage instead of the editorial sanctum. After its demise Hammond went back to setting type, and at last accounts Allen was doing a monologue stunt in tank towns.

Then there was the Gully Sunbeam, established by Mr. Hunt, and noted for its phonetic spelling, and athletic English. It is still running, but under new management, and is to-day a well balanced and successful local paper.

THE VASTESHEIMEN.

The Vastesheimen is a Scandinavian paper, started in Crookston in the early nineties, by Adolph Bydal, and continued later by A. J. Johnson, and is now being published by G. T. Hagen. It is a paper of extensive circulation and much influence among the Scandinavian readers.

THE POPULISTIC PEOPLE’S PRESS.

When the Crookston Chronicle gave up the ghost, the plant was taken over by C. C. and Harry Knappin—the latter a well known political writer connected with the Twin City papers for many years—and was used in publishing the People’s Press. This was in the days when Populism was rampant in the political bull ring. From them it passed to A. R. Holston, an attorney with Socialistic tendencies, now of Los An-
geles, California. He was succeeded by Mr. Hagen, the present publisher of the Vastesheimen who added a prohibition hue to its editorial policy. Elias Steen­erson, then Postmaster, had it wished on him, and it became the distinguished exponent of pure and unde­filed Republicanism. Three years ago Crawford and Egley purchased the Press, and are now conducting it successfully as a semi-weekly.

OTHER COUNTY PAPERS LIVING AND DEAD.

The Erskine Echo, and the Climax Chronicle are the only two of the later-day weeklies not previously mentioned that are still in existence. There are sev­eral others, like the McIntosh Tribune, the Euclid Eagle, the Beltrami Chronicle, most of which died "aborning," and left hardly a scratch, on the tablets of fame.

There are many side lights and incidents connected with the history of Polk County journalism, proclaim­ing the joys of temporary victories or the sorrows of disastrous defeats, which would make a long and inter­esting chapter; but they cannot be recorded here. Sufficient to say that the newspaper history of Polk County is coincident with the material progress of the County itself. In every instance, in every sec­tion, the newspapers have been the advance guard in the march toward a higher and better order of things. They have had their ups and downs, their trials, temptations, and disasters; but their tendencies have always been cast on the side of better living, and better citizenship, for greater striving and bigger ideals.