Influence of the Press

Newspapers in the 1850's were rambunctious sheets which without shame promoted their causes and their friends and bad-mouthed the "other guys", their schemes, and anything else that threatened their own interests.

It was an era of personal journalism where those who owned the press used its power. They did not let facts stand in the way of their opinions. Objectivity and fair play were not in most editors' stylebooks.

Their subscribers became acquainted with only one side of the issues - the side the editor and his backers decided was best for their financial interests and their town. Newspapers rose and fell with the success and failure of their political and financial cronies during those tumultuous times.

Harrison Reed, Neenah's founder, knew how to pick his friends. He was a promoter of Judge James Duane Doty, who wielded the most political and economic clout of the era. Some labeled Doty "a consummate political manipulator, a master of chicane." But those words would not likely appear in Harrison Reed's Conservator, the most successful of the region's newspapers in the mid-1850's.

Reed was considered Doty's political echo when Doty served as the state's second territorial governor. Reed was one of the governor's staunchest allies when he ran the Milwaukee Sentinel and later the Madison Wisconsin Enquirer.

It was the Judge who enticed Reed, at age 30, to come to Winnebago Rapids in 1843. The federal Indian civilizing experiment had failed and there was money to be made from the spoils.

Doty, in his capacity as Indian agent, greased the sale of 562.44 acres for his friend at a bargain price of $600. The deal did not survive government scrutiny, however, and Reed had to find a backer to help pay the negotiated price of $4,760.

No, Reed would not badmouth his benefactor in print in Neenah's Conservator. But others would.
Influence of the Press

Each community on the grow spawned its own newspaper. It did not take a heavy capital investment to put out a publication and there were plenty of backers ready to put up money to promote their causes. Most of them had moved in from eastern states like New York and Pennsylvania, and many had the "moxie" and the drive to reap rewards in the developing territory that did not reach statehood until 1848.

The first newspaper west of Lake Michigan was the Green Bay Intelligencer, established in 1833 by Gen. A.G. Ellis, who had learned the printer's trade at Old Herkimer, N.Y. He declared as its purpose "the advancement of the country west of Lake Michigan". However, he did reserve the right to use the power of his press to "support old-fashioned democratic principles" while proclaiming he was "wedded to no faction, in bondage to no ambitious intrigue". He added, "An independent freedom is left us of speaking of men and measures according to our conception of their merits". His goal was in the highest of pioneer journalistic traditions, but even though he tacked the Wisconsin Democrat to the Intelligencer masthead, he only put out 26 editions in two years and ended up selling the paper in 1836.

By that time, another Green Bay newspaper, the second in the territory, already had risen and fallen with its cause. The Wisconsin Free Press was begun to advance the political ambitions of Morgan L. Martin, a rival of Judge Doty. The Judge, however, prevailed to become the territory's representative in Congress and the Wisconsin Free Press died three months after it was born.

The next newspapers were established in Milwaukee, the Advertiser in 1836, followed by the Sentinel a year later. The Wisconsin Enquirer made its debut in Madison in 1838. Neenah's founder, Harrison Reed, served as editor of both the Sentinel and the Enquirer, converting them to become proponents of Gov. Doty's causes.

When Doty moved his land developer's acumen and his power base to Winnebago Rapids (Neenah), Reed was not far behind. But it took more than a decade before Reed had established another political voice for Doty in the Conservator, established in Neenah in 1856.

In the early 1850's, spurred by competing developments and population booms, with newcomers streaming in from the eastern states, newspapers suddenly sprang up all over the new state of Wisconsin. Some were short-lived, like the Winnebago Telegraph, the Oshkosh Delegate, and the German-language
A Tale of Twin Cities

Phoenix aus Nordwestens. But others lived on, many forming the parentage for today's daily newspapers.

The Oshkosh True Democrat was established in 1849 and three years later the Courier gave Oshkosh readers another opinion option. Both soon went to daily publications and their rival editors carried on a bitter warfare until they both folded and the Northwestern was formed.

In Menasha, Jeremiah Crowley, at age 24, established the Advocate in 1853. Crowley noted a few years later that "newspapers are getting as thick as mosquitos on the Wolf River". He made special mention of the Neenah Bulletin, run by W.H. Mitchell, "a regular red-mouthed Abolitionist. We cannot say much for its appearance or for its editorial ability".

The Advocate editor noted that Sam Ryan's Crescent in Appleton would have competition from the Democratic Free Press although he pointed out that the newspaper was "Shanghai in politics and the editor disavows being a Know-Nothing".

The stage was set for campaigns of personal journalism, where each newspaper in the region cheered its people and projects and railed against the others. When the Winnebago County Board cut the Town of Neenah into two parts, splitting off the Town of Menasha to the north, Crowley and his Menasha Advocate denounced it as "one of the most rascally acts ever perpetrated". The Crescent applauded the move, saying the two communities had nothing in common and should be divided. The Democrat remained neutral but reportedly was both amused and annoyed at the "excessive jealousies" exhibited by the twin settlements.

"We are accused alternately by the one and by the other of favoring the opposite place," James Densmore, editor of the Democrat, wrote. "The truth is that we are not conscious of having a preference for either place," he said. "The rivalries between them are things with which we have nothing to do. As public journalists we have no right to meddle with them."

On slow news days, the editors would attack each other, sometimes with overtones of their political affiliations. Harrison Reed was one of the founders of the Republican Party in Wisconsin at Ripon in the mid-1850's and his political allegiance was unquestioned.

Menasha's Crowley was fond of attacking Reed with faint praise. "Mr. R. is one of the oldest editors and best writers in the state and cannot fail to publish a tip top paper. Although a gentleman in every walk of life, he is a 'blooded Shanghai', and we presume will publish a paper that will suit most ultra of that
Influence of the Press

breed," he wrote. "We wish him all the success in the world, except in his politics."

Later, the Advocate warned its Democratic readers of inroads being made by the Know-Nothings.

We have it from the best authority that the Know-Nothings of this town organized on a certain night of this week, and nominated a ticket of their own stripe to be supported by themselves, and their allies, the Black Republicans, at the coming election. They also selected a committee to slink around the corners of the streets and saloons to belie and slander the prominent Democrats of Menasha. We say to our friends - be on your guard! Do not believe them!

Crowley also had a dig for Appleton's Sam Ryan, editor of the Crescent. Said Crowley, "Very modest is Sammy, who left the Whig party but a little more than a year since, to become the toady of a petty clique who furnished him his bread and butter upon condition that he quit drinking".

Ryan would take pot shots at both the "Menasha clan and the Oshkosh clique". The Oshkosh Democrat also jumped in the fray on both parochial and political issues.

The Neenah Bulletin and its editor W. H. Mitchell showed its colors on prohibition in the attack on Appleton, saying it was "no worse than very many other places. There are but few if any villages in northern Wisconsin but what are more or less cursed by the low filth and scum of the earth in the shape of grog shops". "Thank God we have not many of them in our village, and we hope ere long to have the pleasure of seeing the last one banished from our midst," he wrote. "There is perhaps no village in the West with the same number of inhabitants that can boast of more moral community than ours."

Some editors challenged others to keep up their end of the deal, especially when it came to advancing their interests. When Menasha's plank road was built up to the river, Reed chided, "Now, Brother Crowley, hurry up your end and let that bridge across the river be completed and our two villages will be as one".

Editors were wont to use exaggeration to make their points - for example, Crowley's Advocate celebrated the giant Williams Building by claiming "it was big enough to hold the entire village of Appleton and still leave room to operate a two-stone flour mill".
A Tale of Twin Cities

Reed was a booster and a boaster without parallel in his Conservator for Neenah and Menasha. While Crowley had considerable influence when he established the Advocate in Menasha - and at one time ran the Oshkosh Courier - he left Menasha after three years and was off to edit the Manitowoc Pilot.

Reed’s Conservator was the leading newspaper in 1856, with a reported circulation of 843 at a subscription rate of $1.50 a year. It was considered a lively weekly with a strong promotional and political tinge. The Menasha Advocate charged $2 per year for home delivery but apparently had trouble with advertiser and subscriber deadbeats. "Once for all, we call upon those owing us to pay up. If not settled immediately, we shall be obliged to resort to harsh measures, and we shall make no distinction," Crowley’s notice read. "We hope, too, that our subscribers are aware that our terms are in advance, and that it is necessary all payments should be immediately made for the coming year."

Crowley often went public with his financial problems. In 1855, he lamented the lack of loyalty for the hometown paper. "There is certainly ten times the amount of money paid out of this town for foreign papers than is applied for the support of the Advocate." He added, "We have paid out over $500 more than our receipts to keep the Advocate from sinking. No wonder that newspapers die out. We know men here who receive weekly through the post office at least half a dozen newspapers - unfit for the eyes of their wives or children - who have never paid one cent for the support of their own paper, and yet they are the first to whine at its non-appearance," Crowley wrote. "If the devil don’t catch such men, we see no use for the creation of that individual."

Newspapers did offer a vital means of communication within a community and sometimes editors offered a peek at what neighbors were doing, especially along the waterways. The editor of the Oshkosh True Democrat seemed to be a frequent visitor to Neenah and Menasha, periodically giving his readers an update. "Last Saturday we made a visit to Neenah and Menasha. Houses were going up on all sides and even to us who are somewhat used to such things, the change that has taken place in three months was somewhat astonishing," James Densmore wrote. Six weeks later, the Oshkosh editor again took to the waterways to inspect the twin communities. "At Neenah (or Winnebago Rapids) things are progressing so fast that we shall not try to chronicle them," adding that eight or ten new buildings had been raised since his last visit.

Newspapers offered a potpourri of information. They told of the steamships plying the waters of Lake Winnebago and the Fox and Wolf rivers, especially the
Influence of the Press

Peytona which recouped its $9,000 cost in the first three months of freight and passenger service. It offered daily (except Sunday) trips from Fond du Lac to Neenah, a seven-hour cruise, and claimed the best service in the "eating department and saloon".

The Oshkosh True Democrat ran brewery advertisements where the Oshkosh owners claimed "a superior article - better than is obtained from abroad under the title of 'Detroit Ale' and 'Milwaukee Beer'".

Republican Harrison Reed took out ads in the True Democrat, before he established his own paper, offering a $30 reward for the return of three mares which strayed from his estate in 1849. The next summer he offered his horse Lara one day each week throughout the area. "All who wish to improve their stock will do well to call and see Lara as he is one of the best bloods in the state."

Newspapers kept their citizens apprised of the progress taking place in the region, the new mills, factories, stores, and housing, the building of plank roads and the building of dams, canals, and locks along the Fox River.

Newspapers told of crime and of scofflaws who smoked cigars in court and of the improper dress of ladies at formal balls. "There were some ladies there - very pretty ones - whose dresses were cut extraordinarily low in the neck and bosom and were entirely without sleeves," the Oshkosh True Democrat reported of the 4th of July ball at the Oshkosh House. "Some of these were shocked at the want of modesty of the lady with the short skirt and openly treated her with contemptuous rudeness. She quietly remarked that if they would pull up their dresses about the neck as high as they ought to be, their skirts would be as short as hers", the editor wrote.

Ads were offered for physicians, dry goods, and machinery. Newspapers presented poetry and essays on such things as the perfect wife. They told of the criminal and social goings on, never failing to add editorial comments to the news.

The dominant theme in most newspapers along the Fox River was community promotion. They never failed to boost local efforts to draw attention, people, and money to their towns, instead of their rivals on the waterways.

Even 15 years after Harrison Reed came to Neenah, he was still hyping the area and hoping for outside investors. He kept his rosy outlook for Neenah and Menasha. "We believe the present state of things permanently advantageous to all our industrial interest, in that it will prove a salutary check upon the insane
A Tale of Twin Cities
tendency to overtrading and inflation, and will drive from our towns and villages
a class of unproductive and loafing speculators, whose subsistence has been
gambling and trading in lots and land - in paper towns and prospective cities."
The Menasha Advocate was no less a promoter for its community. According
to Crowley:

No town in the west has grown so rapid as Menasha, and yet no town
has met with more opposition from jealous neighbors. Its natural
advantages and commanding position has aroused the envy and malice
of those towns possessing neither, and like biting at a file, they have only
brought ruin upon themselves. From a perfect wilderness six years ago,
it has grown to be one of the most busy, populous and commercial
places in the north part of the state, while its manufacturing business far
exceeds any other town, except, perhaps, Milwaukee. That Menasha is
destined to be one of the largest towns in the Northwest cannot be
doubted by anyone who will take the trouble to examine its position, and
it needs but a small amount of capital and labor to prove this statement.

~ ~

Peter A. Geniesse
Lake Winnebago Steamboat Co.

STEAMER PETYOMA.

This splendid Packet, having undertaken a through voyage under the supervision of Capt. Everts, will run during the season on Lake Winnebago, every day, sundown to 8 a.m. as follows:

Leaves Fond du Lac and return 9 a.m.  
Leaves Menasha and returns 12 m.  
Leaves Fond du Lac and returns 3 p.m.

The Packet at Oshkosh 6th day.

Passengers arriving in the evening by stages and express have from Milwaukee, Watertown, Sheboygan, etc., will get the boat in the morning, and those arriving on the boat at Fond du Lac in the evening, can leave for stages and express in the morning for the above places.

Passengers on the boats leaving from Menasha to the Grand Chute in connection with the Pennsylvania and the St. Paul, forming a perfect line between Fond du Lac and Green Bay, and the intermediate places.

The Company has been at considerable expense in refitting and improving the boat in a handsome manner, and have arrived as soon in order that the Traveling Public may enjoy every comfort.

Arrangements have been made with Mr. JACKSON, operator of the "L. B. Cottage," Fond du Lac, who will take charge of the Catering Department and Saloon. With the part of the arrangements we have as deals the Packet will be well pleased. The Saloon has also been fitted up in a neat and comfortable style, and passengers will find in it everything to be desired. George Lewis, the well known Prince of Cooks, having been engaged by Mr. Jackson, to assume it has post. We need scarcely add that the table will be furnished with every luxury of the season.

E. W. HURST, President.
Fond du Lac, April 4, 1851.

THE IMPROVEMENT.—We learn from the Menasha Bulletin that the steamer Aquila, Capt. Holzamo, intends making the attempt to steam it down to Green Bay. The Cresent has gone crazy over the fact that a steam tug from Green Bay has succeeded in working its way up to Appleton. We hope for the Cresent's sake that nothing will happen to run all the bright hopes of regular communication between Green Bay and Appleton, into the mud. Favor we are as much as many advantages of going far ahead of our neighbors, we can afford to let them crow over such a matter as the arrival of a steam tug from Green Bay.

A NEW STEAMBOAT ROUTE.—The fine little steamer Knapp has commenced making regular trips between Menasha and New London, on Wolf River. She is commanded by Capt. John Roofy, a clever fellow and good sailor. This is an important route, and will draw a considerable share of the upper river trade to Menasha.

Three steamers arrive at and leave our docks daily, which is a sure sign of our increase in business and population.

Steamer Accidents.

On Tuesday last, at the Badger State was coming down from Beres, at Sacramento a hole blew out of its boiler. No serious damage was done, only causing a delay of a few days. It is expected here again to-day or to-morrow.

On Wednesday last, the Petyoma was coming over from Fond du Lac, when within about five miles of her, the main crank broke. It was pushed in with hoes by hand, and is lying there now. There were about forty passengers, and the mail on board. Capt. Everts promptly despatched one of his men to the place to get some one to go for the passengers and mail. All the steamers being gone, Capt. John Williams, with his little schooner, Star of the West, immediately went over, and returned just at evening with the mail and about half the passengers. It is a very rough, and the wind blowing severely, the others preferred remaining on board the Petyoma. The next morning Capt. Williams went after the balance of the company. The passengers gave him and his little craft many compliments, for skill, courtesy, good sailing, etc.

The injury is hoped to be repaired in a few days. Mr. Williams, of the foundry at this place, is at work with his whole force making a new crank. By Monday next it is hoped to get the boat sailing again.

The passengers speak highly of Capt. Everts' good nature, courtesy, and efforts to accommodate those who remained with him.

These newspaper articles indicate the importance of steamboats.