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SOME PROBLEMS OF EARLY TEXAS NEWSPAPERS

By JAMES W. MARKHAM*

THE rough frontier of the Republic of Texas was not calculated to sustain newspaper enterprises. More than seventy-three newspaper publishing ventures are known to have been established during the ten years between 1836 when the Texans won their independence from Mexico, and 1846, the year of Annexation. Yet one could count on his fingers those papers which survived.

A comment on journalistic conditions in the Republic by an "emigrant, late from the United States," says: "That the Texans are a reading people is manifested by the fact that there are now twelve newspapers published in the Republic. One of these is a daily paper published at Houston, and one or two others are, during the sessions of Congress, semi-weekly ones. In a population so small, and with such imperfect post routes, to sustain so many papers must be admitted to be an astonishing circumstance."

This encouraging picture, in the early 1840's, was more a manifestation of the thriving press at a particular time than a true statement of the situation over the whole period of the Republic. Few of the twelve papers were actually published long and regularly enough to be called periodicals. On the other hand, after 1840, so many papers were started that there must have been excellent prospects.

Among the attractions would-be publishers and editors found among the sparsely settled communities spreading fan-like from Galveston and Nacogdoches inland along the rivers was a great need and insatiate desire for news. "Journalism meets the first tribal need after warmth, food and women," Kipling said. This basic hunger of civilized man for news was whetted among Texans by their lonely, isolated lives.

John C. Duval, recorder of early times in Texas, yarns about the news-hungry proprietor of the Coyote Ranch. The

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rancher, the story goes, leveled "Old Bess," his doubled-barrel shotgun, on a traveler passing by, forcing him to stop over until he had relayed the latest intelligence.

"He was green from the States and chock full of news, and as he was a slow talker and the weather was bad besides, he didn't get away from Coyote for a week!"

In addition to the opportunity for selling newspapers, there were possibilities for community leadership. The desire to attract settlers to Texas, and the lure of political power were other well-tested rewards for successful journalism which attracted some of the leading citizens into the newspaper business.

While an unusually large number of periodicals were started, the death-rate was appalling. Of the 13 newspapers started before 1836 and the 73 started during the Republic, less than a dozen were being printed at any one time during the period. Only a handful¹ survived to print an account of the Annexation of Texas. This is a survival rate of about one out of every ten papers and not many of these published long enough to establish a degree of permanency. Though some two or three of these surviving papers enjoyed a comparatively long period of continuous or intermittent publication, there were many that appeared for only a few issues; others got no further than a prospectus published in several neighboring papers. Though there were no cases of censorship after the Republic was established, several first issues

1. *Texas Newspapers, 1813-1939*, San Jacinto Museum of History Association, Houston, 1941, lists the newspapers and their known period of publication. According to this source, the following newspapers were being published in the year 1846:

The Civilian and Galveston Gazette, 1838-1862.

Houston Morning Star, 1839-1850.

Galveston Weekly News, 1843-1893.

Telegraph and Texas Register, 1835-1846 (Houston).

Northern Standard, 1842-1888 (Clarksville).

Weekly Dispatch, 1843-1846 (Matagorda).

Red Lander, 1841-1847 (San Augustine).

National Register, 1844-1846 (Washington).

LaGrange Intelligencer, 1844-1847.

The fact that some of these papers were short-lived may be seen from their dates of publication. A. C. Gray in *History of the Texas Press*, Wooten, Dudley G. (Editor), II, p. 384 lists only six papers started in Texas prior to 1845 that lived through the era and into the decade beginning with 1850. These are the *Telegraph*, *Morning Star*, the *Civilian*, *Galveston News*, the *Red Lander* and the *Standard*.

of attempted publications under Mexican rule, like Benjamin Harris's *Publick Occurrences*, were censored and suppressed.

Why was the death-rate so high when the population was so eager for information? The answer in part may be found in the social and economic conditions of the frontier communities which presented almost insurmountable hazards to the publishing business. Shortages were multitudinous in almost every field of operation—lack of operating capital, of skilled printers, of paper and ink, and even of news. The poor transportation facilities worked against the newspapers in two ways: incoming news failed to reach the paper and subscribers often failed to get their copies. Skirmishes with Indians and battles with Mexicans often disrupted or stopped publication.

Another reason why newspapers could not be made going concerns was the fact that more papers kept springing up than the communities could support. Our early emigrant's astonishment that so small a population could sustain so many papers was shrewd overstatement. Many towns were newspaper poor. Galveston's 1,000 inhabitants in 1839 supported three newspapers; Houston, with a few more than 1,000 people shortly after 1840, boasted five newspapers including a daily. A few hundred subscribers in Austin in 1841 were receiving three local newspapers each week. A publisher who counted 200 to 400 paying subscribers considered himself doing well.

Though expenses of publication in comparison to expected revenue were not great, many of the publishers found it extremely difficult to make ends meet financially. A comparison of income with expenses of the best-known weekly paper is given by Gail Borden, Jr., revolutionary publisher, in a letter to Stephen F. Austin. He quoted his operating expenses to be in excess of \$250 per month while he took in only \$75. Later he was able to report a profit after achieving 700 subscribers after surmounting "great difficulties."

Publishers had as much trouble collecting balances due

as they did in getting new business. Past due bills were a most frequent and universal complaint. Publisher Charles DeMorse of the *Northern Standard* at Clarksville advertised he would accept beeswax as legal tender for subscriptions. Taking farm products in lieu of a year's subscription, a practice still in use, was customary. Unless payment for subscriptions arrived, empty-handed editors would not hesitate to remind readers of their "dire straits." During his first six months of publication he barely received enough money to buy food, and his printers had to borrow funds to continue, DeMorse confided to his readers.

"Those residents of Fannin and Lamar, who are indebted to us for subscriptions and advertising," DeMorse warned one time, "are informed that we shall attend District Court in those Counties for the express purpose of collecting little amounts due us."

The *Richmond Telescope* publisher was disappointed because he could not afford the literary paper he had planned. An early issue of the *Telegraph and Texas Register* remarked: "We frequently hear of persons complaining of not receiving papers which they had ordered. . . . The reason for our non-compliance, is the neglect on their part to accord with the terms of our paper, marked at the head—'payment in advance.'"

The scarcity of good printers was another difficulty which harrassed the trade. In one-man printing establishments service depended solely on the continued well-being and health of the compositor. Reason pled for a delayed edition of the *Matagorda Bulletin* in 1838 was illness of the type-setter. The *Colorado Gazette and Advertiser*, also at Matagorda, missed two weeks in 1839. Somewhat abashed, it explained in the September 28 issue: "We are under the necessity of apologizing to our patrons for the non-appearance of our paper for the last two weeks. Mr. Atwell, the publisher, (and our only compositor) accidentally fell through a trap door, from the second story of a building, which injured him so seriously as to disable him from attending to business within the last few days."

Similarly, the Clarksville *Standard* of October 15, 1842, apologized: "On account of the indisposition of the two journeymen employed in this office we were unable to get out the paper last week; but as all hands are now well, we shall now go ahead." "Want of hands" also held up the *Telegraph* for three weeks in 1836.

Lack of newsprint and ink delayed or suspended publication more often than the indisposition of printers. The supply shortage was so common and widespread that it caused omissions in almost every volume of every early Texas newspaper. The most resourceful publisher did not escape. No matter how far ahead of time he placed his orders, he was certain at one time or another to run low. When this happened he cut down the number of pages, and at times he was forced to stop publication. Most of the trouble was due to poor transportation.

The *Telegraph* stated that paper ordered in September, 1835, did not arrive until February, 1836. The "Belle of the Red River" took ten weeks to ply from New Orleans, thus holding up the *Northern Standard* for nine weeks. Most of the paper came by boat from Boston to New Orleans to Galveston, then inland by wagon train.

The *Austin City Gazette* explained after two weeks suspension, "We have five wagons at present loaded with paper, materials, and another press, on their way up; a part of them have already been twenty-seven days from Houston." (December 25, 1839). Supplies due the San Augustine *Red Lander* by boat up the Red River were delayed once because the river was too low for navigation.

The shortage of ink caused the editor of the *Red Lander* to suspend publication from December 18 until January 1, 1845. "The Christmas holidays come but once a year," he wrote, "and we are the more willing to avail ourselves of a little relaxation at the present time, as our printing ink has all been 'used up,' and the bad roads have prevented a new supply reaching us. We have brought out the present number with ink of our own making; and if our subscribers will

excuse its indifferent appearance, we shall make amends in the succeeding numbers."

Undependable transportation not only interfered with regular publication, but it also held up delivery of papers to subscribers. The *Telegraph* editor in 1836 with regret informed his subscribers at Brazoria, Velasco, and Quintana that their papers had been forwarded by a gentleman who omitted delivering them, but took them with him to New Orleans. In an effort to gain timeliness, offsetting in a measure time lost by slow mail deliveries, editors followed the practice of setting their publication date on the day mail left town. If the mail date changed, so did the date of publication.

On the other hand, uncertain postal deliveries seriously cut off the source of news—the life-line vital to every newspaper. All editors depended upon their mail, particularly from correspondents, and other newspapers, for valuable news. Once the *Northern Standard* failed to receive its mail, explaining, "We present our readers this time a paper but not a newspaper. We have been water locked for the last week and are without exchange papers from any direction." (December 2, 1843).

Some indication of the snail-pace communication system is reflected in the *Red Lander* of March, 1846, when the editors complained bitterly of their difficulty in getting election returns. "We had hoped that we should be able to publish a full list of the members of the Senate and house of representatives at least in a month after the legislature had convened, but in this we have been disappointed. We have made the most strenuous efforts ever since the election came off, to obtain the correct returns, and give the names of the members elected to the legislature; and now after that body has been in session nearly a month, we find ourselves minus the names of the members of Lamar, Brazoria and Milam counties. We will supply the deficiency as soon as we ascertain who the members are."

Disruption of publication by Mexican invasions or In-

dian skirmishes also threatened the publishing business. *The Colorado Gazette and Advertiser*, after missing an issue, said on June 5, 1841: "We were prevented from getting out the *Colorado Gazette* last week by the Indian news, which induced the compositor and ourself to join the company that left this town for the west. Our readers, we know will excuse us; for under the circumstances it was but our duty to disappoint them."

Instead of abandoning his paper to go out to meet the enemy, Gail Borden with the *Telegraph* pulled up stakes at San Felipe in 1836 and fled before Santa Anna's invading Army. To advance the revolutionary cause with his publishing efforts, he moved his press to Harrisburg, temporary seat of the government, where on April 14, Mexican troops again overtook them. This time it was too late to get away. Mexicans seized the press in the midst of running off an edition, and sank it in the Bayou. Undaunted, Borden with new equipment was publishing the *Telegraph* at Columbia the following August.

The *Austin City Gazette* ceased publication for a few months in 1842 because Mexican raiding parties threatening a second invasion caused the removal of the capitol from Austin. However, the paper opened again for business with the return of the government to Austin.

"Pie-ing" of type is referred to several times in the stories of early print-shop hardships.

The *Telegraph's* type was pied, according to one account, when the paper first moved to Houston, at that time a sprawling village of tents and temporary structures. The publisher opened shop in the only place he could find, a dilapidated old building. One day part of the roof fell in, upsetting a table and pieing the type of an issue that was being made up for the press.

Another story whose doubtful ring detracts little from its appeal also concerns the *Telegraph*. It relates an experience of Dr. Francis Moore and Jacob Cruger, successors to Borden on the paper. The new publishers captured a

young cub which they kept as a pet until he grew up. The story, as told by A. B. Norton, in his *History of Journalism in Texas*, goes on:

“He (the bear) became quite mischievous, and very troublesome at times. . . . On one occasion, after the paper had been made up and the printers gone to their dinner, he got loose, concluded that he would go on with their work, and accordingly gathered up the forms in his strong embrace and carried them to the press, where he pried them, delaying that week’s issue. This is the first bear we have any account of in a Texas printing office.”

Many of the same hardships were encountered in other business enterprises of the Republic and hence were not confined to journalism. But the press, ever a mirror of the life and times of a given country and era, reflected as truthfully in its performance as in its columns. In the face of such problems, the press’s record during the Republic was indeed creditable. It laid the foundation for more stable and therefore serviceable journalism during the period of early statehood which followed.

The papers of 100 years ago followed a common pattern in make-up, organization, and content. Neatly printed on rag paper, they varied in size from two to six columns to the page and from two to eight pages. They carried classified advertising which often was displayed on the front page. There were no headlines. The news, printed and displayed continuously from left-hand column to right, was classified generally according to its source; namely, foreign, news from surrounding towns of the Republic, and purely local news.

They printed official communications, quotations from other newspapers, editorials usually concerning the political future of the Republic, and filler material, such as poems, fiction, and quotations.

Editorially the papers proclaimed the virtues of the new country—its soil, climate, and its people. Settlers from the states were invited. Large advertisements heralded the

opening of new towns. Editors were staunchly independent on political questions. They did what they could to keep down gambling and vices detrimental to the community morals as a whole, motivated by honest community spirit. They tried to make the country live up to the standards they had claimed for it.