

## The News from Lone Rock: Observations and Witticisms of a Small-Town Newsman

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*The News from Lone Rock: Observations and Witticisms of a Small-Town Newsman*, by Freeland Dexter, edited by Deanna R. Haney. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2016. xi, 227 pp. Illustrations. \$18.95 paperback.

Reviewer Robert B. Mitchell is an editor with the Washington Post News Service. He is the author of *Skirmisher: The Life, Times, and Political Career of James B. Weaver* (2008) and "'Get Ready for '96': The Decatur County Press, Partisanship, and the Presidential Campaign of 1896" (*Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, 2003).

From 1884 to 1912 Freeland Dexter reported on the news of Lone Rock, Wisconsin, for readers of the *Weekly Home News* of nearby Spring Green. Deanna R. Heaney's affectionate anthology of her great-grandfather's work offers a vivid, if sometimes disjointed and random, anecdotal portrait of the small Richland County community and insights into the editorial conventions of the small-town newspapers of the period.

*The News from Lone Rock* presents a thorough chronicle of municipal evolution in the little Wisconsin town. Dexter criticized foes of incorporation in 1886, applauded the formation of a local volunteer fire department, and heralded the construction of a high school. Throughout, he remained an unabashed cheerleader for efforts to improve local civic and economic life. "Don't be a block under the wheel of progress," he urged in 1905 as he endorsed bridge construction (160).

In this way, Dexter conformed to the style of journalism appearing in Leon, Bloomfield, and countless other market-town and county-seat newspapers published across Iowa at the time. He was a hometown booster who celebrated Lone Rock's virtues. Instead of acting as a neutral observer of events or an adversarial watchdog, he rejoiced when his neighbors wed and grieved when their children died.

Dexter differed from his colleagues in one regard. Unlike editors and correspondents who freely mingled partisan commentary with news, he kept his political opinions largely to himself. Not until 1908, when William Howard Taft defeated William Jennings Bryan, did he become explicitly partisan. "Well, the country is saved once more and Taft is elected," he observed on November 5. "It seems curious how so many people have prosperity forced on them every four years, but such is the case" (192).

The arrival of new technology figures prominently in *The News from Lone Rock*, often as a way of touting the town's advancement. Dexter enthused about the development of a new light bulb and the arrival of the telephone (94). In 1898, after having seen a depiction of the Battle of San Juan Hill, Dexter urged readers who have not seen "moving pictures" to do so (104).

Dexter, a Civil War veteran, brought an appropriately sober voice to the prospect of war with Spain, simultaneously rejoicing in the U.S.

victory while urging his readers to “stop for a minute and look at the other side. Yes, we feel sorry for the Spaniards. They fought bravely, and think of their homecoming” (102).

Such observations help make *The News from Lone Rock* an interesting, occasionally moving, work, but readers may well find themselves longing for background about the events of the period. The deluge of anecdotes and observations, offered without any context, is frequently overwhelming and, except perhaps for students of Richland County history, occasionally tiresome. Even so, this volume represents a fascinating compilation of small-town journalism that sheds light on attitudes about progress, economic development, and journalism that prevailed at the turn of the twentieth century.

*From America to Norway: Norwegian-American Immigrant Letters, 1838–1914*, volume 3, 1893–1914, edited and translated by Orm Øverland. Northfield, MN: Norwegian-American Historical Association, 2016. 630 pp. References. \$60.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Daron W. Olson is associate professor of European and world history at Indiana University East. He is associate editor of the *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* and author of *Vikings across the Atlantic: Emigration and the Building of a Greater Norway, 1860–1945* (2013).

The letters in this third volume of *From America to Norway* focus on the years of the last great exodus of Norwegians to the United States, providing translations of more than 300 immigrant letters. Orm Øverland’s superb introduction places these letters in appropriate context by noting what the letters often do not say or speak to. He notes how Norwegian immigrants played their role in the long struggle between defenders of land (Native Americans) and takers of land (who were often immigrants). The evidence is loud in its silence. As Øverland succinctly puts it, “The most important point to be made about the attention paid to Native Americans in immigrant letters is that they were rarely paid any attention at all” (28).

Yet it is certain that Norwegian immigrants had encounters with indigenous people, so why are the writers so silent on the topic? According to Øverland, there were several reasons, among them the high cost of postage that limited the amount of information the immigrants could provide. As such, Norwegian immigrants tended to focus on practical information, such as family holidays, weather, or steamship ticket prices. In addition, the Norwegian immigrants possessed little formal education and had poor writing skills. He also concedes that for the Norwegian immigrants Native Americans often had no practical