

Crusading Iowa Journalist Verne Marshall: Exposing Graft and the 1936 Pulitzer Prize

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Crusading Iowa Journalist Verne Marshall: Exposing Graft and the 1936 Pulitzer Prize, by Jerry Harrington. Charleston, SC: History Press, 2017. 141 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$21.99 paperback.

Reviewer Jeff Nichols is a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research has included investigating the role of newspapers in wartime Chicago.

On December 12, 1934, police raided a Cedar Rapids canning factory that housed an illegal bar. In addition to a slot machine, a punch board, and a stash of liquor valued at \$2,000, more than 200 Iowa state liquor seals were discovered. A letter from the chair of the Iowa Liquor Control Commission to J. Leroy Farmer, the owner of the cannery, explained that the seals were for Farmer's personal stock of alcohol. Farmer begged not be taken in, as it would "blow the lid off the state."

Jerry Harrington traces how Verne Marshall, the editor of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, subsequently uncovered a statewide protection racket in which public officials facilitated the illegal sale of hard liquor and shielded gambling and other forms of vice in exchange for campaign contributions and bribes. Marshall's exposés, which won the 1936 Pulitzer Prize, "ripped off the gentle fabric of Iowa life and exposed an undercurrent of graft and corruption few in the state knew existed" (49).

Well before he set out to investigate how J. Leroy Farmer could clear \$45,000 to \$70,000 per month running an illegal bar, Marshall had developed a statewide reputation as an implacable watchdog against graft, most notably breaking stories involving corruption at the Iowa State Dairy and Food Commission and the University of Iowa. At the time of Farmer's arrest, only beer could be sold by the glass in taverns. State-managed stores held a monopoly on bottled liquor. On paper a judicious compromise between wet and dry forces after the passage of the Twenty-first Amendment, in practice the state monopoly invited the sort of graft associated with Chicago or Kansas City, not Iowa.

Rather than limit his paper's reporting to Linn County, Marshall took his investigation to Sioux City. Then the state's second-largest city, Sioux City was a wide-open cattle town with a long history of indifference to dry laws. Hiring a private investigator, Marshall found which dozens of tavern owners paid local officials to turn a blind eye to gambling, prostitution, and the sale of hard liquor. Even the Sioux City press seemed to be on the take.

For all the recent talk about objective journalism, Verne Marshall was willing not only to throw the resources of his paper into building public pressure for prosecutions but also into reimbursing prosecutors for witness expenses. As Marshall testified before a Sioux City grand jury, it was a journalist's job "to go after any dishonest public official who is

pretending to serve the public, regardless of who it is. And when he gets the news he should print it, regardless of how much it costs" (7). Over a year of exposés in the *Gazette* led to 49 indictments, including that of State Attorney General Edward O'Connor.

But on the same day as the *Gazette* carried the story that it had won the Pulitzer Prize, it also shared the news that the Iowa Supreme Court had struck down the dozens of Sioux City indictments, based on an Iowa statute that prohibited prosecutors from accepting outside funding. Although many of Marshall's targets escaped prosecution, their political careers were destroyed and the political establishment of the state subsequently took greater care to enforce liquor and gambling laws.

The book ends with Marshall's involvement with the No Foreign Wars Committee, a disaster that pushed Marshall into a nervous breakdown, forcing his retirement. Harrington contends that the same combativeness that served Marshall well in rallying Iowans against compromised state officials backfired in building a mass movement against American intervention in the Second World War.

Skillfully weaving research from the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, the *Des Moines Register*, and the Verne Marshall Papers at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, Harrington avoids the sorts of pulpy clichés that usually accompany popular histories of 1930s crime and journalism. *Crusading Iowa Journalist Verne Marshall* is a welcome addition to the study of Iowa during the Great Depression. Readers accustomed to conceiving of the New Deal in Iowa entirely in terms of thoughtful technocrats, beleaguered farmers, and empowered workers will be in for a surprise. Harrington's study shows that the politics of alcohol did not disappear with the repeal of Prohibition. As a work of journalism history, the book also serves as a case study of the perils of checkbook journalism.

Wisconsin on the Air: 100 Years of Public Broadcasting in the State That Invented It, by Jack Mitchell. Madison: Wisconsin State Historical Society Press, 2016. xi, 226 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Stephen C. Coon is emeritus associate professor, Greenlee School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Iowa State University. He has written extensively about broadcast journalism.

Jack Mitchell, the first producer for National Public Radio's (NPR) *All Things Considered*, has compiled an informative and entertaining chronology of Wisconsin Public Broadcasting, an institution he helped shape as director of Wisconsin Public Radio for more than two decades from 1976 to 1997. He mixes material from the Wisconsin State Historical Society Archives, public radio files at the University of Wisconsin, and