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Comment

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Comment by the Editor

NEWSPAPER MORTALITY

Twenty Iowa newspapers have ceased to exist during the last two years. Some have simply stopped publication and lapsed into the tranquility of job-printing; a few have been consumed by more venturesome or voracious competitors; while others have been consolidated under entirely new management. And the mortality rate is steadily rising. Newspaper mergers characterize the present era in journalism. Since the latest *Official Register* was issued three months ago the list of five hundred and seventy Iowa papers — weeklies, semi-weeklies, tri-weeklies, and dailies — has been further depleted. Nor have the casualties been chiefly confined to struggling country weeklies. Old and influential dailies like the Des Moines *Capital*, the Cedar Rapids *Republican*, and the Dubuque *Times-Journal* have succumbed.

From the earliest times newspaper competition has been very keen in Iowa. Potential subscribers have had no cause to complain of a dearth of aspiring journalists, while merchants have been overwhelmed with opportunity to advertise their wares. Before the Civil War it was a small town indeed that did not boast at least one paper. Sometimes the demand for a local journal outran its economic justifi-

cation. Public spirited citizens of Webster City paid five hundred dollars in cash and guaranteed five hundred subscriptions to secure the establishment of the *Hamilton Freeman* in 1857.

Under such circumstances the most prudential management and the ablest editing were necessary for success. Even so, the prosperity of a paper often depended upon contracts for the public printing. No wonder editors strove valiantly for the privilege of publishing delinquent tax lists and the dreary proceedings of county boards of supervisors. When bitter competition or the removal of a county seat did not prove fatal, financial depression occasionally levied a heavy toll, just as the panic of 1857 ruined the promising *Davenport News*. While Iowa has been a fertile field for journalistic enterprise, the failures have been many and fortunes very few.

Reasons for the present decline in the realm of the fourth estate are not mysterious. Hard times, that ever-recurring blight on better days, is part of the answer. When the farmers quit buying, the merchants stop advertising and the newspapers suffer acutely. But the principal cause is the fact that two papers will perish on the patronage that would support one. Circulation is at once the *sine qua non* of the publisher and the primary test of the advertiser.

THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE PRESS

There was a time when every newspaper in Iowa was partisan. Politics constituted their chief topic

of news and their reason for being. Each assumed to be an "organ" for its favorite party. Editors were men of strong political bias who knew the tenets of their faith and supported their convictions with a zeal that was often more vigorous than dignified.

Violent partisanship belongs to the past. While most of the Iowa newspapers classify themselves as Democratic or Republican, a surprisingly large number — over thirty per cent — claim to be politically independent. Perhaps Republican domination has removed the incentive for decisive partisanship. Certainly Iowa editors are relatively free from the dictation of party leaders. A study of the amount of space devoted to political issues would probably show a marked decline, particularly during the last quarter of a century, which would seem to indicate a shift of popular interest. The newspapers are simply reflecting the tendency of voters to support the candidate instead of the party, particularly in local elections. Personalities are more tangible and interesting than principles.

J. E. B.