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The Ottumwa Courier

Clarence S. Johnston

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Looking for a newspaper to buy in 1890, A. W. Lee had narrowed his prospects to Ottumwa, Iowa, and Hutchinson, Kansas. It was fortunate for Ottumwa as well as for Iowa that he decided to purchase the Courier, the weakest paper in a highly competitive field. This choice was destined to become a traditional policy in the expansion of the Lee group.

The first Lee paper was important historically for it was almost as old as Ottumwa itself. First issued by R. H. Warden as the Des Moines Courier on August 8, 1848, it appeared as the Daily Evening Courier on April 5, 1865. Originally Whig and then Republican, the Courier supported Des Moines River improvement, Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, and stood ever ready to uphold the home, the church, and the school. A. H. Hamilton became editor in 1869 and sole proprietor in 1878, continuing as such until 1890 when he sold to A. W. Lee.

In Ottumwa, Lee established the local-sharing investment policy of all the Lee newspapers as it has been developed in the last half-century. Several Ottumwans were assembled with him to buy the Courier for $16,000. Extremely painstaking in
all his business and financial relationships, Lee soon established himself in Ottumwa as a man of integrity and trustworthiness — a born leader. The Courier was profitable from the beginning of the Lee regime. It was also the beginning of the Lee group of newspapers.

In 1890 Emanuel P. Adler was a compositor in the mechanical department of the Courier and James F. Powell was a foreman. Adler asked Powell to go to Lee to persuade the publisher to give him a chance as a reporter. That started E. P. Adler on a meteoric career that quickly saw him become business manager of the Courier.

A. W. Lee early expressed his confidence in young E. P. Adler. In a brief note penned in December, 1893, Lee wrote:

"Mr. Adler—Your effort to open up much pleased with opportunity that you make. I feel that you deserve compliment you have earned. The information that firm 9% 12. 30 will be trading, you can begin Monday. I think have a fine opportunity. If you keep up your present work, success, etc. A. W. Lee, Dec. 1, 1893."
Mr. Adler—I am much pleased with your work & feel that you deserve congratulation & commendation. Your pay will be $12 per week beginning Monday.

If you keep up your present effort & spare no opportunity to acquire information (by that I mean the information that comes from study & reading) you certainly have a future in newspaper work.

Sincerely yours,
A. W. Lee

Meanwhile, to repay Powell for having assisted him, Adler persuaded Lee to take “Jim” out of the job printing department and put him in the business office. Thus, when Adler was sent to Davenport, after the purchase of the Daily Times, “Jim” Powell was ready to succeed to the business managership of the Courier. When Lee died in 1907, Powell became publisher, holding that position until his death in 1928.

James F. Powell’s name always will be associated with all that was good in Ottumwa community life. He was an untiring worker for all people. The door to his office was always open; his time was freely given to hear any problem. He did not always agree with what was presented. When he did not, his visitor knew it, quickly and without doubt. But Powell was essentially fair. Denied much formal education because he went to work early to help support his family, he was an insatiable reader. He was the keenest of students of government, politics, economics, and social changes. He always stood for the best in everything American. Like John Mahin, he was a fighter for principle.

Meanwhile, the public often saw E. P. Adler
OTTUMWA, WEDNESDAY EVENING, APRIL 5, 1885.  Price 5 cts.

EDWARD H. STILES, Attorney & Counselor at Law And Solicitor in Chancery.

B. J. BOULTON, Baker and Confectioner.

J. S. WALKER, Wholesaler and Retail Dealer in


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as a frequent visitor in Ottumwa, for the Courier continued to benefit by his wise counsel, his keen judgment, and his careful guidance. Meanwhile, too, the addition of Lee P. Loomis to the Courier staff forged another link in the chain of close association of that paper with the Lee group. First in the Courier business office, then reporter and city editor, Loomis went from Ottumwa to become managing editor of the Muscatine Journal. His ensuing success there and at Mason City earned for him the presidency of the Lee group of papers.

While never on the staff of the Courier, Frank Throop often visited Ottumwa in the Lee interests. Throop came from a newspaper family in Mount Pleasant. In later years, as he rose in the Lee group to positions of ever increasing responsibility, he looked forward to his Ottumwa visits.

Through the decades since A. W. Lee acquired it, the Courier has stood on the basic principles Lee held through his life. It has developed men who have gone far in the newspaper world. It is headed now by one who rose from carrier boy to publisher. He is Ottumwa-born John Huston, who has been with the Courier more than fifty-two years, and publisher since 1928. Huston has served as president of the Iowa Daily Press Association and stands high in the councils of the profession. Clarence S. Johnston, also an Ottumwa boy, advanced from the business office to the managing editorship by 1924.
The ideals of A. W. Lee, E. P. Adler, James F. Powell, and Lee Loomis are perpetuated in the Courier in 1950. Independence, financial stability, public service, alert and progressive journalism — these have combined to bring it from a daily circulation of 3,700, when Lee bought it in 1890, to 19,000 today. Now in its second century of publishing, with new metropolitan press equipment, the Ottumwa Courier is still as young in spirit as it is stalwart in traditions.

CLARENCE S. JOHNSTON