

Newspapers – Will they survive?

In today's fast paced world of instant news on twenty-four hour news channels, radio, and the internet, are newspapers a thing of the past? Some would have you think so, and apparently many newspapers have fallen on somewhat hard times of late, but in all likelihood they are here to stay. One example of that would be one of our local newspapers, the *Sentinel*, and the fact that it has a truly rich tradition that is inextricably linked historically with the daily events of this area since its inception in 1874.

So, how did this all happen to take place? You'll have to go back to the year 1874 when a Mr. Frank Day and a Col. C. H. Bullard launched the *Martin County Sentinel*, the forerunner to our local daily newspaper. It was July 3, 1874, and for the second year in a row those ravenous grasshoppers were devouring everything green in sight in Martin County. Nevertheless, Frank A. Day, at the tender age of twenty-one, was energized and determined to get his start in the newspaper business.

Day, originally from Wisconsin, moved with his family to Webster City, Iowa, at a young age. Day didn't consider himself to be an "ardent student." Therefore, he left school before graduating from the eighth grade to pursue a position with the Webster City newspaper. He worked in Webster City for slightly less than one year, and from there he spent two years with a partner publishing the "*Northern Iowa Vindicator*" in Estherville before moving to Fairmont.

Day traveled to Fairmont from Estherville because he had heard that one Col. Bullard wanted to start a newspaper in Fairmont. This venture, if it came to pass, would follow the fact that three previous newspapers in the city had been doomed to failure. Upon arriving in Fairmont, he became captivated by the lakes, the woods, and the prairie of this area. As a result of what he saw and liked in Fairmont, he decided to visit Bullard at his office. Bullard happened to be the sheriff at that time. Day introduced himself and he proceeded to ask if Bullard was interested in having a partner for the potential new newspaper that he was considering to launch. Bullard's answer to Day's question was a swift and resounding "no."

Consequently, Day left Bullard's office and spent the night in a Fairmont hotel. The following morning, he started back to Estherville. At noon, he stopped at a tavern in Tenhassen for lunch and, to his surprise, Col. Bullard overtook him there and told him that he had changed his mind about a partner. They shook hands, rode to Mankato the following day to purchase equipment, and thus began a six year partnership that has since led to 136 years of newspapering. Incidentally, Mr. Day is said to have been quite

amused by the fact that while in Mankato he and Bullard were arrested for horse stealing. It was soon straightened out as a case of mistaken identity.

The *Sentinel* started as a weekly newspaper, and it had no other newspapers as competition for its first eight years of operation. The price of the paper was at that time \$1.50 annually, \$1.00 for six months, and five cents per copy. Competitor newspapers were mostly short-lived, however, late in the century several newspapers merged to become the *Martin County Independent*, which then became the *Sentinel's* principal competitor. Yet, major changes were about to occur. On May 20, 1901, Day introduced the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*. The company continued to publish the *Martin County Sentinel* on a semi-weekly basis as well, and eventually purchased the *Martin County Independent* in 1929.

Perhaps three of the most noteworthy and influential individuals employed by the newspaper during its early and formative years were Frank Day, Major Arthur Nelson, and Claude Swanson. Frank Day, who founded the newspaper, headed it for fifty years until his death in 1928. He was first and foremost a newspaper man; however, he enjoyed politics, which he referred to as "A great game." Day had a very lengthy political career which can be divided into two stages. Initially, he rose to prominence as a leading republican, serving fifteen years as chairman of the Martin County Republican Committee. Day appeared quite upwardly mobile in the Republican Party; however, he and several other republican leaders of the time left the party in 1896 to follow William J. Bryan. Soon, Day became a full-fledged democrat. The *Sentinel* supplement of May 13, 1874, stated that "The Sentinel, originally launched as 'republican' in 1874, became 'democrat' shortly after the turn of the century. As time went on, it supported or opposed candidates of all parties, until it could finally be regarded as an independent newspaper." Day was succeeded by Harry Fairly as publisher whose chief contribution was his experience with metropolitan newspapers.

Major Arthur Nelson joined the paper in 1905 as an apprentice and actually lived with the Day family for a time. Nelson continued with the *Sentinel* for forty-three years as a public relations man, writer, and finally as part owner and editor until his death in 1947. His impact and influence on the newspaper and local area was significant. Nelson was considered a staunch Democrat who headed the party in Martin County and also helped organize and form the Martin County Historical Society.

Claude Swanson began in 1914 as a printer's devil, a position that initially provided him no pay. It's interesting to note that Day fired him the day after he was hired because he slept through the town's biggest fire up to that date. However, he rehired him shortly thereafter because Swanson had turned in a bag of money that he had collected from

selling *Sentinel* subscriptions by walking from farm to farm. During his employment with the newspaper, he worked his way up to become a reporter, an advertising salesman, the advertising manager, the managing editor, and finally publisher in July of 1950. He continued at the *Sentinel* until his semi-retirement in 1962, after which he was a contributing editor until his death in 1972.

The *Sentinel* has had several locations during its history. According to the May 13, 1874, edition of the *Sentinel* supplement, its printing office was first located in Col. Bullard's residence across the street from the Bullard House Hotel. The hotel overlooked Lake Sisseton on Lake Avenue just south of Profinium. It later moved to the second floor of what is now the Davidson's store, formerly Miller's Fashions. The *Sentinel's* third site was about a half-block north of First Street on North North Avenue, now Downtown Plaza. In 1897, the *Sentinel* moved to its present site which was expanded through the consolidation of an adjoining building in 1954.

So, are newspapers going to become obsolete? Probably not, and facing competition from other news sources may serve to make them more efficient and newsworthy. Love them or loathe them, newspapers provide an invaluable service and resource for society in addition to providing essential historical documentation of daily events for the benefit of the present and future generations.

For more information about the *Sentinel's* history and those individuals involved from its inception, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.