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Booming the Town: Nebraska Newspaper Project

by

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Nebraska's nineteenth-century newspaper press, like those in other states along westward trails, had much to answer for. Town newspapers cheerfully boasted about their communities and were unabashedly enthusiastic. Land development was the order of the day, and editors and other town leaders collaborated to get as many new settlers ensconced as they could. This was called "booming the town," and some of the articles would make you think that small towns in Nebraska were up and coming cities on a par with New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.

Since the Nebraska State Historical Society began in the late 1870s, many newspaper editors have served on its Board. Among

these was J. Sterling Morton, owner/editor of the *Nebraska City News*. Morton, and others like him, urged the Society to begin collecting newspapers as early as 1890. The Society's efforts to gather papers from all over the state have resulted in a large and significant historical collection. Researchers use the Society's newspapers today to gather information about historical events, to study the development and demise of communities, and to trace ancestors. Now, the Nebraska State Historical Society and the University Libraries at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln are engaged in a project to preserve and catalog 4,500 Nebraska and ethnic newspaper titles in the collections of the Society and the University.

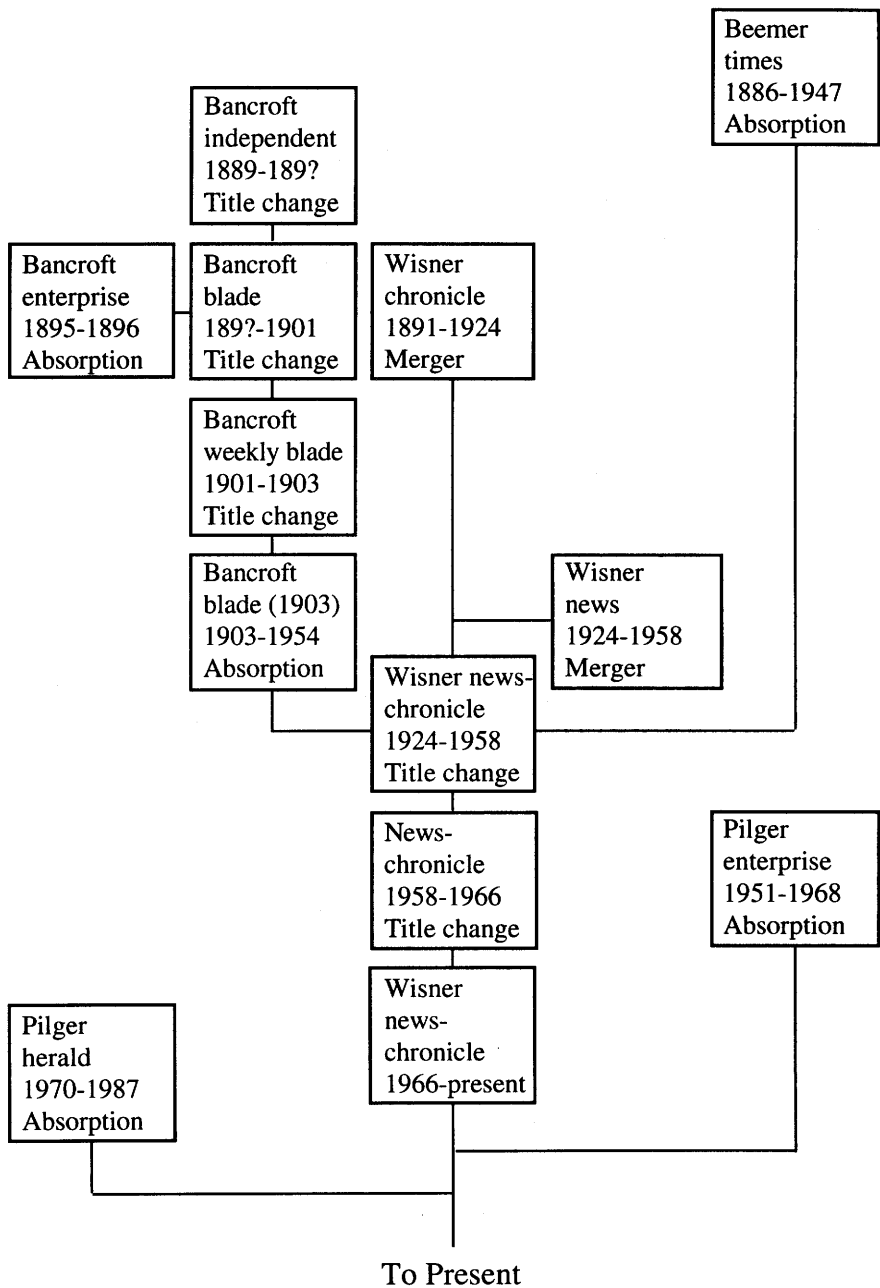
Preservation efforts actually began in the 1950s when, under Director James Olson, the Society began to microfilm its papers. Some were filmed in-house, and others were filmed by commercial vendors like Bell and Howell. Quality of early filming was mixed at best. Since then, preservation microfilming standards have developed so that film produced today that is stored under archival conditions may last as long as 500 years.

The Nebraska Newspaper Project is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities as part of the U.S. Newspaper Program. The goals of the project are to catalog newspaper titles at the Society and the University, and then in the next phase, to catalog collections around the state. In the future, onsite microfilming at newspaper offices may be a possibility. In 1994, an estimated 1,000 newspapers were cataloged and added to the U.S. Newspaper Program union list on OCLC. Interlibrary loan activity has increased at the Society, and more people are aware of the unique resources available for research.

One challenging aspect of newspaper cataloging is deciphering the relationship of one title to others, and fitting its life and times into a succinct catalog record. There can be quite a bit of intrigue in the life of a newspaper. Newspapers are born, often with a flourish, and many die, the editor signing "30" to a heart-wrenching valedictory. "30," we learned, is a term of mysterious origin used in journalism to denote "end of story." Often, when a community's paper died, the subscription list was sold to a growing paper at the county seat. In between birth and death, newspapers change title, absorb, merge with and separate from other titles, and give birth to numerous editions.

Sometimes determining a relationship is as simple as looking at the title on the masthead. Other times, however, a cataloger must look for notes from the editor, different titles in the publisher's box, and other clues.

Given the intricate relationships, it has proven helpful to diagram "family trees." Generally, the trees include titles from towns throughout a county. Sev-



Cuming County Newspapers

eral newspapers start in smaller towns, only to be absorbed by larger papers, usually in the county seat. Following is a tree which involves newspapers from several towns in Cuming County, one of which, the *Bancroft Blade* (1903), was edited by John G. Neihardt from 1903-1905.

In cataloging newspapers, one also encounters generations of families that have owned and edited newspapers. An example is the Edgecombe family, which has owned the *Nebraska Signal* in Geneva for more than 100 years. Frank O. Edgecombe (1864-1947) entered the newspaper business in 1889 at the *Falls City Journal*. Selling the *Falls City Journal*, F.O. purchased the *Fillmore County Republican* and the *Geneva Journal* in 1894. In 1896 he bought the *Nebraska Signal*, moved it from Fairmont to Geneva, and kept the name. By 1934 he had acquired papers from eight Fillmore County towns. F.O. was president of the Nebraska Press Association (NPA) in 1893 and of the National Editorial Association (now the National Newspaper Association) in 1925. He and the *Signal* won many

awards for editorial writing and community service.

F. O.'s son Tyler Edgecombe (1888-1972) edited the *Daily Nebraskan* for 3 years at the University of Nebraska and worked at the *Beatrice Daily Express* before coming home to the *Nebraska Signal* in 1913. Tyler's son John F. Edgecombe worked at the *Nebraska Signal* 1947-91, as co-publisher or publisher from 1954. John's son John Edgecombe Jr., publisher of the *Nebraska Signal* since 1991, joined the staff in 1970. Like F.O., Tyler, John, and John, Jr. all were active in the Nebraska Press Association and other professional organizations.

So what were the papers like in the nineteenth century? The *Nebraska Signal* of 1896 was an eight-page weekly when four-page weeklies were common. Nebraska newspapers of the time were typeset by hand, lending a rough-hewn appearance. The *Signal's* front page "County correspondence" consisted mainly of local gossip—who visited whom, marriages, illnesses, accidents, etc. "News of Nebraska" took up one column, and short

news items from all over the world filled the rest of page 2.

Page 3 had railroad schedules and local news. Many of the local news items were one- or two-sentences: “Good bedstead for sale. Apply at residence.—Mrs F. O. Edgecombe” or “Twenty Pounds Granulated Sugar for \$1.00 at Nickle Plate.” Other pages had more news, large ads, election results as appropriate, and a serialized novel. Sports coverage was almost nonexistent except for short, general items about the Olympic Games. The *Signal* provided court reports and weather reports as part of local news.

A typical 19th century newspaper was very much tied to a single political party, at times to the degree of being a house organ. It was common to list the party’s candidates, national to local, near election time.

Advertising was important to newspapers then as it is today. Some ads were hidden with news items, and the *Signal* ran a column of patent medicine ads. When the *Signal* ran a full-page ad in January 1898, Edgecombe noted that it was the first in any Geneva paper in over four years.

Aside from woodcuts in advertisements, illustrations were rare. Photography was rarely used before the 20th century except with short profiles of county political candidates—prototypes of political ads—near election time.

Also comparatively rare in the *Signal* were large patent medicine ads with testimonials and unselfconscious references to dysentery, constipation, hemorrhoids, biliousness, and boils. Students of Lydia E. Pinkham’s Liver Pills (“They cure constipation, biliousness, and torpidity of the liver”) are advised to seek out other Nebraska newspapers.

As the project progresses, we find evidence that Nebraska’s history is rich, entertaining, and enlightening. The hardest part of working on the project is wondering about the issues or titles that are missing. The Nebraska Newspaper Project hopes that you can help locate papers missing from the Nebraska State Historical Society’s microfilm. If you do, please contact Andrea Paul, State Archivist, at the Nebraska State Historical Society, (402) 471-4785.