Celebrating 200 Years of Newspapers in Michigan

If, as it has been said, journalism is the first draft of history, then newspapers are the original history books. Because of the close relationship between reporters and scholars, it is particularly appropriate that the Clarke Library’s current exhibit celebrates the 200th anniversary of Michigan’s first newspaper’s publication.

On August 31, 1809 the Michigan Essay; or, the Impartial Observer, appeared on the streets of Detroit. It was a small paper of only four pages, one of which was printed in French, and, in the end, a very short-lived enterprise. But those few pages opened one of the most important windows on Michigan and its people. Americans, then and now, learned about their world, exercised their democratic rights, discovered what was happening in their community, and planned their weekly shopping trips all from the same source at the same time. And when the rush of daily life passed by yesterday’s paper, it was taken up by historians, who continued to use it for their own purposes.

Newspapers are a peculiar institution because although they often assume a public function they are, nevertheless, privately owned, commercial enterprises. People often talk about “our paper” and towns sometimes celebrate and at other times bemoan the quality of their local newspaper. But the bottom line is that almost every newspaper has a bottom line, and if the ink printed there is not black the paper will disappear, however much the community may believe it to be theirs. Because of this dichotomy the history of newspapers is an unusual mixture of an institution which serves public needs and is often engaged in public education but which is able to perform these tasks because of private enterprise and profit. Although this appears inherently contradictory, Michiganders have lived with the contradiction, and made it work, for two centuries.

In creating an exhibit about Michigan’s newspapers, there are some significant limitations. One is that there is a dearth of easily found published information about Michigan’s...
newspapers. The irony that an industry that lives by the printed word should, in fact, be documented in scattered printed sources is obvious, but painfully true.

Another limitation is found in the geographic scope of most existing national newspaper histories. These histories tend to focus on newspapers along America’s eastern seaboard, with a particular emphasis on New York City. Without denigrating the importance of newspaper developments in that great metropolis, Michigan’s newspapers often prospered in ways either different from the New York City press or in a manner that reflected yet varied significantly from the trajectory of the Eastern papers. The history of America’s and Michigan’s newspapers is not simply a matter of New York City doing it first, and everyone else sooner or later copying the papers of that city.

Conventional newspaper histories also suffer from a narrative that is focused on the “progress” of newspapers from small weeklies to great metropolitan dailies. These mass-circulation papers are usually represented as the late nineteenth century’s arbiters of national policy. And it is certainly true that the leading newspaper publishers in the late nineteenth century, men like William Randolph Hearst or Joseph Pulitzer, were as well known to the public of their era as network television’s anchor newscasters are today.

But the mention of television reminds us of awkwardness in presenting triumphal histories of ever larger and more influential newspapers. By the late twentieth century, with a few very notable exceptions, America’s great metropolitan dailies, including those in Michigan, were in retreat. Radio, television, as well as the internet, could all deliver “the news” more quickly and with equal if not greater authority. Those same alternative media could also deliver mass audiences to advertisers, who no longer needed to rely on the pages of a widely distributed newspaper to sell their wares. As a result of competition for the public’s attention and for ad dollars, circulation fell. Formerly profitable papers began to lose money. Many dailies simply stopped publishing while others merged to survive.

The newspapers that more often flourished into the twenty-first century, were those most often ignored in the national histories: community newspapers with no national or international aspirations. Intensely focused on community news that was too voluminous to make the restricted time of a television news broadcast and often considered too trivial for the major metropolitan dailies, and serving as a vehicle for focused advertising, local papers survived and sometimes prospered.

The history of Michigan’s newspapers is a peculiar arc that begins with weekly newspapers, moves to a period when newspapers in the state’s leading cities became our first mass media, and then slowly returns again to local newspapers which find a continuing social and economic niche that allows them to continue and in many cases prosper despite the decline of the big city dailies.

The history of Michigan’s papers documents this story. It is our story to tell, and we hope you will visit us to view the exhibit which shares this story and will run through the end of August.
Thank You for Your Support

Each year the Library’s collections and activities are enhanced and supported through the generosity of our many friends. As in the past, we are pleased to acknowledge those who, through their kindness and concern, have made it possible for the Library to continue to grow. Thank you for your help.

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Wilbur Storey

One of Michigan's most colorful and controversial editors worked in Detroit in the years just prior to the Civil War. In 1853 Wilbur Storey became editor of the Detroit Free Press. In an era of partisan newspapers, Storey was a fierce Democrat and a bitter opponent of the emerging Republican Party.

Storey is often remembered for a particularly inflammatory essay opposing the Lincoln administration in the days leading up to the Civil War. "Fire in the Rear" criticized Republicans who sought to take the nation to war. Speaking of the likelihood of war between North and South, Storey wrote:

...if the troops shall be raised in the North to march against the South, a fire in the rear will be opened upon such troops which will either stop their march altogether or wonderfully accelerate it... We warn it [the Lincoln administration] that the conflict which it is precipitating will not be with the South, but with the tens of thousands of people in the North. When Civil War shall come, it will be a war here in Michigan and here in Detroit, and in every Northern state.

Storey, however, was not just a partisan editor, he was also an inventive newspaperman. Storey took a "dull, spiritless montage of scissors and paste" and infused it with an unending supply of local news, much of it sensational.

Storey regularly printed articles in the paper about local society, theater, sports, and "commercial intelligence." But Storey found quickly that what sold best was sensationalism. The headlines that came from local court cases, as well as ones borrowed from other papers, gave a sense of what was to follow:

"Shocking Depravity"
"How to Get Rid of a Faithless Wife"
"Suicide by Swallowing a Red Hot Poker"
"Fountain of Blood in a Cavern"

Storey found news regarding executions was particularly well read. With dubious taste, but a sure instinct for sales, he included as a regular feature a column entitled "Scaffold Scourings."

Storey sometimes complained that often there were not enough local events with which to fill his paper. As he lamented in 1859, "There seems hardly stir enough among the public to keep up appearances of life..." To address this inconvenience, Storey printed as news articles stories that were undoubtedly fictional. The Free Press once ran an article entitled, "A Child Eaten by a Bear in Hamtramck" which proved very successful in selling papers, although it did call for the reader to ignore the small problem that the berries the child was allegedly gathering when he had his fatal encounter were not in season and there were no bears known to inhabit Hamtramck. Storey realized, however, like many newspaper reporters after him, that a good story sold newspapers.

In 1861 Storey left Detroit to edit a Chicago newspaper.
Speakers in the Library

During CMU's spring semester, the Library will sponsor several speakers and events on campus. These include:

• On March 18th, Hank Meijer, co-chairman and chief executive officer of Meijer, will present an illustrated lecture about the history of Meijer in the Park Library Auditorium beginning at 7:30 p.m. Informative, candid, and often humorous, this presentation documents the growth of one of America's most successful privately owned stores while at the same time honestly acknowledging and discussing ideas that did not quite work. Remember the Meijer fast-food restaurant? Probably not, but it seemed like such a good idea at the time!

• On March 24th, Richard Norton Smith will speak at 7:00 p.m. in Warriner's Plachta Auditorium. On the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, and at the beginning of a new presidency, Richard Norton Smith asks why Lincoln is the president by whom all others are measured. His answer may surprise you.

Richard Norton Smith has been widely quoted as saying, "There's no excuse for a dull book, a dull museum, or a dull speech." His knowledge of the past, combined with his sense of humor, shapes the commentary he provides regularly on C-SPAN and "The Newshour with Jim Lehrer." Mr. Smith has served as the director of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum, the Dwight D. Eisenhower Center, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, the Gerald R. Ford Museum and Library, and the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics. In October 2003 he was appointed the founding director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois. Currently, he is a scholar-in-residence at George Mason University.

Mr. Smith was a featured speaker at the congressional bicameral celebration of Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday, which was held at the U.S. Capitol on February 12th. He concluded his speech by saying, "Long before he was the President against whom all others are measured, Abraham Lincoln was the American we might all aspire to be."

• On April 6th, in conjunction with WCMI-TV, the Library will offer a sneak preview of "Tecumseh's Vision," a documentary that will air on public television later in the spring. "Tecumseh's Vision" is one episode of a five-part, public-television series that shows how Native Peoples resisted expulsion from their lands and fought to preserve their culture. The program will be shown at 7:00 p.m. in the Park Library Auditorium.

In the spring of 1805, Tenskwatawa, a Shawnee, fell into a trance so deep that those around him believed he had died. When he finally stirred, the young prophet claimed to have met the master of life. He told those who crowded around to listen that the Indians were in dire straits because they had adopted white culture and rejected their traditional spiritual ways.

For several years, Tenskwatawa's spiritual-revival movement drew thousands of adherents from tribes across the Midwest. His older brother, Tecumseh, would harness the energies of that renewal to create an unprecedented military and political confederacy of often antagonistic tribes, all committed to stopping white westward expansion. The two brothers came closer to creating an Indian nation that would exist alongside and separate from the United States than anyone ever has. The dream of an independent Indian nation may have died at the Battle of the Thames, when Tecumseh was killed fighting alongside his British allies, but the great Shawnee warrior would live on as a potent symbol of Native pride and pan-Indian identity.

Dr. Benjamin Ramirez of the CMU History Department will introduce the program and respond to questions about "Tecumseh's Vision."

• On April 14th, Brian Dunnigan will speak about his book, A Picturesque Situation: Mackinac before Photography, 1615-1860, which was published last year by Wayne State University Press and is essential reading for anyone interested in the history of Mackinac Island and the people who lived there. Dunnigan's impressive collection of prephotographic images of the Mackinac region draws upon decades of research. Rare maps, plans, drawings, sketches, engravings, and paintings, all in full color, are enhanced by the highly readable text. Mr. Dunnigan's book has been recognized by the Library of Michigan as one of its 2009 Michigan Notable Books. This presentation is made possible in part by the Library of Michigan and the Library of Michigan Foundation. The program will begin at 7:00 p.m. in the Park Library Auditorium.
The Library is deeply indebted to Chris McKee, who has given the Clarke Library a comprehensive collection of Leonard Oil Company publicity campaigns from the 1950s and 1960s, as well as many other company records.

At one time Leonard Oil, which was based in Alma, was one of Michigan's leading refiners and retailers of petroleum products. The company was founded in 1936 when it took over a refinery in Alma that had begun operating in 1934. In the 1950s and 1960s, Leonard Oil was one of Michigan's best-known companies. Its advertising campaigns were often innovative and built around the quality and high octane of its products. In 1956 Leonard marketed a gasoline whose octane rating was 105, powerful enough to fuel an airplane, or, as the ads clearly implied, make your Oldsmobile "Rocket 88" accelerate as if it was about to fly.

The company's advertising campaigns also encouraged customers to obtain regular automotive service at the firm's gas stations. In the winter of 1952-1953, the company built an ad campaign around the slogan "If your car won't start, we'll pay the bill." The "Leonard Winter Starting Plan" did have a few qualifications: the car had to pass a preseason check-up; receive oil changes every 1,000 miles, at which time an additional check would be performed by the owner's Leonard gas-station mechanic; and, of course, the vehicle was to be fueled exclusively with Leonard gas.

Not only were its products heavily advertised, but the company also took the unusual step of sponsoring major programs related to the outdoors. The best-known of these endeavors was the television show, "Michigan Outdoors." Season after season, each Thursday night at 7:00 p.m., this show celebrated the triumphs of Michigan's hunters and fishermen. Successful sportsmen routinely appeared on the show's set to tell their tales and often display their trophies. "Michigan Outdoors" reminded the viewers regularly of the free hunting and fishing guides available at Leonard stations and the importance of Leonard gasoline in getting viewers to their destinations, where they might find similar trophies to bring home.

After the company merged with Total Petroleum in 1970 Leonard Oil operated under the name "Total." In 1972 Total moved the firm's headquarters from Alma to Denver, Colorado. Total subsequently sold its Michigan holdings to Ultramar Diamond Shamrock (UDS) in 1997. In 1999 UDS sold its 179 Total retail outlets to Marathon Ashland Petroleum. Marathon, however, was not interested in purchasing the Alma refinery. Unable to find a purchaser for the refinery, UDS stopped production at the facility in 1999, and the plant was subsequently demolished.

We are delighted to add this wonderful collection of regional corporate history, and more than a few fond memories, to the Clarke Library.
Elsewhere in this newsletter there is printed a list of friends whose gifts helped support the library in 2008. These are tough times. Watch any news cast and the cascade of bad financial news is almost unavoidable. Unemployment is up. The stock market is down. Icons of American industry and core components of Michigan’s economy teeter on bankruptcy. And in the midst of all this turmoil history and libraries seem to slide into insignificance.

Without denying or minimizing the difficult economic challenges we all face, a moment of economic crisis is the wrong moment to forget our past, and the institutions that maintain it. Far too often far too many individuals, including those in positions of authority, relegate history to an interesting pastime, something to turn to when the pressing matters of the day have been addressed. History, however, is not simply an enjoyable antiquarian adventure or a way to divert ourselves from the problems of today. History matters, particularly in times of trouble.

The obvious example of how history helps us understand our current situation is the way the news media uses history to give stories context. History makes various financial numbers understandable. How high is unemployment – the worst since some year in the past. How low is the stock market – again, we measure the depth of the decline not by just a number, but rather by looking backward to the last time we have seen similar numbers. Knowing what it was like then helps us understand what may be in store for us now.

History, however, is not just a way to understand the depth of our difficulties. History is also a tool that points to ways through which we may ascend out of our challenges. From the Great Depression through the 1990s American economic history offers a wide range of policy solutions to hard times. Some have failed. Some have worked. Some have worked better than others. Knowing the approaches of the past; knowing how the New Deal dealt with the Great Depression; understanding how the federal government resolved the savings and loan banking crisis of the 1980s, knowing this and other aspects of our history inform and shape our current national debate about how best to shorten what is, by any measure, an economic storm.

Even in hard times, perhaps most significantly in hard times, history matters. Even in hard times the institutions that preserve history and make it available, to serve the interests of the casual researcher or the public policy maker, matter. Over the last few months I have been “making the rounds” asking donors for their continued support of the library. I readily admit it is not easy asking someone whose financial situation has declined to write a check for the library. But doing so is important, perhaps even essential.

I know it is a difficult time to ask for support, and I know that our friends may not be able to donate as generously as they may have even a few months ago, but I ask you to remember the importance of history, the importance of historical libraries, and the importance of the Clarke, and find a way to continue to share with us your support. I am always grateful to our friends, but never more so then now, knowing how hard it is to make a gift. Thank you for your generosity last year. And thank you, in advance for your continuing generosity despite these challenging times. I recognize the sacrifice it entails and pledge to spend every dollar as wisely as we know how.

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Richard Norton Smith will be speaking on March 24th at 7:00 p.m. in Warriner’s Plachta Auditorium.

On the 200th anniversary of Lincoln’s birth, he answers the interesting question of why Lincoln is the president by whom all others are measured.

Complete information regarding his CMU visit can be found on page 5.
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