

## AS TIME GOES BY

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I recently had a speed-limit birthday. You know the kind I mean, where you see your age on speed-limit signs, have to check a higher age-category box on forms and applications, and watch your insurance rates go up. The kind of birthday that makes you feel more than one year older.

I'm not sure how the folks at Ancestry managed it, but for my birthday the Ancestry Daily News announced the posting of my hometown paper to the Historical Newspaper Collection. It is not the town where my ancestors lived, but the town in Iowa where I lived from fourth grade through high school. The three months of the *Ottumwa Courier* were from 1903, but speed-limit birthdays tend to make one feel elderly and look backwards, so even though there would be no ancestral research to do, I decided to read the newspaper.

Because I was a member of First Methodist Church, I searched for "Methodist" and picked a paper at random from the many hits. 26 September 1903 was a Saturday. The paper was 12 pages long and cost 3 cents. (The week-day edition was only 8 pages; home delivery by carrier was \$6 per year.) On my dial-up connection, the pages loaded slowly. At first I tried reading the paper on-screen, but I was pleased to discover that they printed out very readably.

My search for "Methodist" had highlighted a most interesting story, headed "Bigamy Is Charged. Rev. I. B. Taylor, Minister at Mt. Pleasant, Arrested. Is Declared to Have Two Wives." It appears that the supply minister for the Methodist Episcopal Church in a nearby town had come from Delaware, where he had left a wife and two children. In Delaware he had been a preacher, but "his license to preach was revoked because of unministerial conduct." He went west and did not contribute to his family's support.

In Iowa, he persuaded a gullible minister of "his struggle for an education," received a preaching appointment, and married "a young lady of high character and good family." His duplicity was uncovered after his brother visited him and upon returning to Delaware told the sister of the first wife about the new preaching appointment (and, we assume, the new wife). His defense was that he was not really married (no mention of his two children), but the Delaware wife reported an exact date and place of marriage and named the minister who officiated. Men abandoning their wives and family for younger women has been going on for a long time, it seems. His trial in Delaware was "awaited with the greatest interest" by the Iowa church members. I bet it was!

I spotted only a few items concerning birth, marriage, or deaths. There were two funeral notices (one for a child) and one marriage license. The most ink was devoted to a story, "Anniversary Brings Sorrow," in which a woman filed for divorce on her first anniversary, having been

abandoned by her husband four months earlier. The front page reported the death of a brakeman who apparently decided to take a nap on the rails and was run over by his own train. Stupidity is universal.

The weather was confined to a few lines at the bottom center of the front page. This seems rather unusual considering the agricultural nature of the area, but I suspect the farmers figured they could forecast the weather better than any weatherman. The second page reported what interested the farmers more—prices. Wholesale prices given included timothy seed and beeswax. There were retail prices for seven kinds of tea, seven kinds of coffee, and a variety of fruits and vegetables, including "mushmelons," pineapples, Michigan peaches, and Concord, Catawba, and Niagara grapes. They ate pretty well a century ago.

The list of letters at the post office were for some reason divided into the Women's List and the Men's List. Another standard feature was the railroad timetables. Newspapers were used to inform beyond current events; the third part of a History of American Tariffs was on the third page. The Table and Kitchen section devoted several columns to cooking instructions and meal planning.

Newspapers also entertained. Four columns of the twelfth page had a serialized book "Graustark" (the name of a fictitious country) by George Barr McCutcheon. This Saturday edition had a full page of comics and jokes. I must say that one thing that has changed in the last century is people's sense of humor. I don't think any of these would be considered funny today.

One thing was very different from modern newspapers. There was no sports section. Sports news was in several places. The baseball news was confined to a few inches in one column in which were reported the standings for the National League and American League, the scores for four American League games (the Boston-Detroit game ran eleven innings), and a list of the eight games scheduled for Saturday. A wire story reported that the mile trotting record of two minutes was tied, but not broken. The play-by-play for the high school football game in a neighboring town occupied a full column.

Numerous ads filled the paper, possibly because it was Saturday. There were display ads with a picture or graphic, want-ad-style ads, and "sneaky" ads, interspersed in the personal news that reported visiting relatives or recovering health of local residents. With the advent of fall, there was fierce price competition among the stores selling fleece underwear.

On Wednesday, the Grand Opera House was going to present Queen Dora in a rag-time opera in two acts. Dora was billed as a serpentine and fire dancer. You could see her for prices ranging from 25 to 50 cents.

Ads for patent medicines are always interesting. Illustrated with a Roman god on horseback (I can't imagine

why), Hostetter's Celebrated Stomach Bitters explained "Food that remains undigested soon ferments, causing pain and distress. A dose of the Bitters before meals will insure perfect digestion and prevent Belching, Flatulency, Heartburn, Dyspepsia, and Indigestion." Not so different from medications advertised on television, is it?

Just as today, beautiful hair was a goal. Next to a drawing of a woman with long flowing locks, Herpicide promised "hair like this," and assured that "gentlemen will also find it an inestimable boon to them, as it works like a charm on bald heads, bringing forth a growth of soft, thick hair." Yep, some things don't change.

I was surprised at the ads for breakfast cereal. Shredded wheat, "the most perfect of all foods," proclaimed that "as cream toast or with a poached egg it is never soggy." Ooh, ick! Grape-Nuts positioned itself in a pseudo news-story headlined "College Men Quite Universally Use Grape-Nuts."

My biggest surprise was in the image of a woman's place. Ads proclaimed that "motherhood is woman's

natural destiny" and "no woman's happiness can be complete without children." But a careful reading of the full paper showed independent women. In the ads for lawyers was one by A. B. Williams and Miss Keota W. Williams, of Williams & Williams, Attorneys at Law. On the half-page devoted to the Wapello County Republican candidates, the photograph of Miss Emma Nye stood out. She had been a teacher and principal, taken correspondence courses from the University of Chicago, attended one semester at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, and was running for county superintendent of schools. I hope she won.

As we gain access to old newspapers, it is a good idea to go beyond merely looking for names of ancestors. By reading the entire newspaper fully, as if we were those ancestors, we get a much better understanding of how things have changed, and how they haven't, as time goes by.