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Article Summary: This article presents the remarks of D W Carpenter to the Historical Society in session January 11, 1898, regarding the establishment of newspapers in both rural areas and in major population centers.

PIONEER JOURNALISM.

Presented to the Historical Society in session January 11, 1898.

Written by Mr. D. W. Carpenter.

Realism in pioneer journalism can only be contemplated by those who have not been engaged in the publication of a newspaper in a new and sparsely settled country, and then only in a very crude way. There are a great many difficulties to be encountered and surmounted in a newspaper enterprise that are only known to those who have been through the trying ordeal, who have been acting and working participants in the establishment of a newspaper in a country where the inhabitants were "few and far between," to patronize your efforts.

The idea to start a newspaper on every crossroads or section of land is truly a brilliant thought by those who have no conception of the great amount of labor to be performed, the miscellaneous worry and tribulation. There are a thousand details that never enter the head of the amateur proprietor, unless he is a thorough and practical man from top to bottom. If there is any business enterprise that requires close and devoted attention and mathematical precision, that business is the establishment of a newspaper in a sparsely settled country.

The establishment of a great metropolitan paper, in a large and progressive city, with a large and unlimited capital behind it, with all facilities for gathering and disseminating news, is not a hazardous undertaking—you have sharp competition, it is true, but the best paper will always win out. Not so in launching a still-born, so to speak, at the crossroads. There you have nothing to get and all to lose.

But to draw this realism down to your understanding I

will undertake to demonstrate by a figurative illustration of what has transpired a number of times over, under the observation of the writer in Nebraska since he has been a squatter sovereign, now since October, 1854.

A few enterprising pioneers get together, and arrive at the conclusion that right here (naming some point) is to rise a Mighty City, visionary or otherwise, and the more they think of it the more enthusiastic they become, until their minds become infatuated that there are Millions in it. But the next question that perplexes the town-owners is how to "boom the town." Why, of course we must have a newspaper. But here comes the rub. How are we to get one? There is not money enough among the stockholders, singly or collectively, to purchase a printing outfit, but that question is soon solved, for soon you will see a very beautifully executed lithograph of a new town in Nebraska—it looks grand and magnificent on paper—it is to be the great commercial and railroad center of the State. Fine, very fine. It catches the eye of the eastern investor in western lots. A few suckers invest in western "gold bricks," and at last a sufficient amount of money is raised to purchase the necessary equipment for a small printing office. A college-bred tenderfoot drops in just in time to secure the editorship. What he don't know about running a printing office is not worth knowing; he is young and ambitious, he desires to distinguish himself—but all the time keeping in sight the bull's eye of an office; wishes to become a great party leader—that is his golden ideal dream.

Finally, after a time, the new born paper is launched upon an admiring public of a few dozen citizens, with a flaming introductory, giving a graphic description of the future of the great metropolis, its enterprising and liberal minded citizens, great chances to invest in city lots (on paper) that will increase to untold wealth, and all that sort of tommy-rot. But the paper is a great success—everybody is overjoyed and are singing the praises of the new Editor. He is the high

muck-a-muck, and is already slated for congressional honors; born in the bloom of morning. In fact, nothing is too good for him.

For a few weeks all goes on well, high hopes and great ambition—but, mark you, by and by a great tidal wave comes sweeping along and disturbs this great engine of intelligence—the pay rolls are due and unpaid, the exchequer is gone, credit gone, and, to use a western phrase, “the thing is busted.” The next week the editor sums up his case in a valedictory, and says the paper don’t pay, it is not supported, and for the present is discontinued. That ends the first chapter.

Now any damphool, who has got a thimbleful of brains ought to have known that would be the inevitable result of that enterprise, in a town that was only mythical at best. But the ambition of the young man who desired to become a distinguished editor, party leader, and a statesman were soon satisfied, and his crown of glory dismantled; and, as soon as he could pull himself together, he quietly packed his grip and took the first cow path for other fields of glory and renown. He is satisfied with the newspaper business.

But the end is not yet. Along comes another ambitious fellow who thinks he knows a little more about the printing business than the other “feller,” and so he purchases a “gold brick.” They say lightning never strikes twice in the same place, but it does all the same. The same routine is gone through with, and in a very short time another aspiration is bankrupted. And so it goes, and will go, as long as misguided ambition can be found ready to pick up a live wire.

I have not intended in these few scattering thoughts to discourage any one who has the nerve and the ambition from embarking in journalism, but, on the contrary, I like to see pluck, ability, and practical knowledge succeed. But I tell you, my friends, you have got to have good staying qualities and lots of practical experience, with a little money thrown in, to make journalism a success in a new country.