

# Amateur Newspapers

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In the history of printing in America, a little-known genre is the amateur newspaper. Hidden in collections in various institutions, and often uncataloged, researchers miss using them. Literary scholars overlook the stories and poems published in these ephemeral productions. Those studying children's books look at publications written for children but miss these items written by children. Finally, many thousands of these issues are now readily accessible to those that previously didn't realize what they were missing.

What is an amateur newspaper? If you saw a pile of them on a table the first thing you would probably notice is that many of them are small. A majority of them are printed on sheets of paper between the size of a half to a full sheet of notepaper. Some are as small as two inches tall. Others are as large as a modern tabloid paper. But size does not determine the designation. Nor is it the content, typography, or the quality of the printing. It is not a physical feature. Intent is the guiding factor. An amateur newspaper is a serial publication produced for the love of expression rather than for profit. That is a basic definition. Others who actually published amateur newspapers gave better descriptions. Finlay Grant, who published the *Boys' Folio* in Nova Scotia, wrote, "Amateur journalism is an institution of youth who edit, publish, print or contribute to miniature journals as a means of self-improvement, as a pleasing pastime, and for the advancement of their own peculiar institutions."<sup>1</sup> James M. Beck, another amateur journalist wrote, "The love of literature, and not the love of lucre, is the *sine qua non*, the essential characteristic of the amateur journalist. In our acceptance of the term the idea of youth is unquestionably implied. An amateur journalist I would define as a young person who pursues literature, not as a profession, but for the pleasure of so doing."<sup>2</sup> And finally Will L. Wright, editor of the *Egyptian Star* of Cairo, IL wrote, "The true objects of amateur journalism are to cultivate a taste for pure and wholesome literature, to broaden the intellectual powers, to give one a practical knowledge of the world, and to teach one to think and act for himself."<sup>3</sup> It is the act more of intellectual and emotional drive rather than financial gain that drove them. There was something visceral about seeing your ideas coming off the press, inked on paper, then sharing it with someone else.

Before 1869 amateur newspapers were much more scarce. Before the invention of a hobby tabletop printer, the amateur journalist had to resort to one of three methods to get their publication printed. They could print it themselves if they had access to a print shop. A rare few managed to build their own printing press. Others had to pay a print shop to set the type and print off the copies. Yet despite these obstacles a number of titles were issued during the first seven decades of the nineteenth century. Because there is no bibliography or directory of these early productions, it is unknown how many were published, but every so often new titles are uncovered.

The *Thespian Mirror* is considered the first amateur newspaper in America. It was edited by John Howard Payne when he was thirteen years old. It was published in New York, and the first issue was dated Dec. 28, 1805. Using the print shop of Wouthwick and Hardcastle, he wrote and edited this 8-page periodical on theatrical matters (just the third theatrical magazine in this country), issuing it on a weekly basis for thirteen issues ending Mar. 22, 1806.

One of the most notable early amateur newspapers is the *Penfield Extra*. It was published by Nellie Williams, a girl of twelve years of age. She learned how to print in a small shop owned by her brother in Penfield, a small suburb of Rochester, NY. Unfortunately he was killed in the Civil War. Using his shop, Nellie established this publication, writing it herself, setting the type, and printing it using her brother's equipment. The first issue came out December 28, 1861 and was issued weekly through Apr. 30, 1866. The subtitle was "Little Nellie's Little Paper" and it attracted much notice from the professional press around the country. The *Paterson Daily Register* (NJ) of May 20, 1862 printed a review of this paper stating, "We have seen many a pretentious weekly, edited and printed by men of large experience which in point of typography are not so good as little Nellie's." The Universal Clothes Wringer, a product used for washing clothes even cited Little Nellie's review of it in its advertisements in newspapers such as *The World*.<sup>4</sup> The aim of Miss Williams was to create a newspaper in as professional manner as possible. Besides writing and editing, she sold advertisements, created exchanges with other newspapers, sold subscriptions, and worked hard to maintain deadlines. At its height, she claimed over 1,000 subscribers. After four years of work, she finally ended the paper with the issue of Apr. 30, 1866.

The tip over point for amateur printing came in 1867 when a tabletop hobby press was patented and manufactured for the public. In a very short time a variety of manufacturers were selling hobby presses to amateur printers and small shops across the country. These were very simple to use. Power was created by the mere pulling of a lever that created pressure between paper and inked type. First the type would be locked in a metal frame called a chase and mounted in the press. Facing it was a flat surface with thin strips of metal called galleys. These held the paper down and in a specific position. For the simplest (and cheapest) presses, the type would be inked by hand, the paper put in place and the handle pulled down closing the press and pushing together the type and paper. Reversing the lever would open it up and the printed sheet of paper removed. For the larger and more complex presses, there would be a disc to hold ink and rollers. Each pull of the lever would cause two things to happen. Pulling the handle in one direction would open the press, causing the rollers (covered in ink) to roll over the type and apply ink to the raised surfaces. Meanwhile with the press open, the printer could remove the freshly printed sheet of paper and put in a new one. Pushing the lever in the other direction would cause the rollers to move out of the way and over the inking disc picking up fresh ink onto the rollers. At the same time the press would close up pressing the paper against the freshly inked type; one motion for printing and recharging the rollers, the other motion for inking the type and replacing the paper. Some of the high end presses had a foot treadle and flywheel where the printer could develop a rhythm of taking out one piece of paper and inserting a new one allowing them to print hundreds of pieces in an hour (but watch the fingers!).

The Kelsey Press Company (1872-1990) was one of the largest and longest-lived manufacturers. The founder, William Kelsey (1851-1932) used a business model similar to one you see today with ink-jet printers. He sold his presses at near cost. Kelsey realized the profits were to be made in selling the customer type, paper, ink, illustration blocks and any other consumables that would be needed over and over.

In the nineteenth century, a teenager could order a small press for printing cards 2 ¼" x 3 ¼" for \$3, or move up to paying \$90 for a deluxe rotary jobber with three inking rollers and flywheel for printing a sheet of paper 8 ¼" x 12 ½".<sup>5</sup>

While the emphasis was on "amateur", the promotional material for the presses also touted the money that could be made with their equipment. The youth could make spare pocket money selling business cards, letterhead, invitations, and other short-run ephemeral printing to businessmen and individuals in the community thereby supporting their hobby. Some went so far as to print their own books. Others compiled and printed directories of amateur newspapers for their region or guides to the hobby.<sup>6</sup>

The world of amateur newspapers exploded within the first year of availability of the hobby printing press, and soon boys and girls around the country were issuing newspapers from their homes. Besides selling these papers locally, networks of exchanges soon sprang up and these young publishers were exchanging their papers with each other. This led to regional and finally a national organization. After a few early name changes, it settled on the National Amateur Press Association, and the decision was made to hold an annual national convention.<sup>7</sup> One of the more ambitious efforts of a regional organization was in 1873 when the New York Amateur Press Association passed a resolution and helped raise money to purchase equipment and send two representatives to the World's Exposition in Vienna. Their mission was to display examples of amateur newspapers published in this country and to issue a paper during the exposition. Despite the difficulties and the suspicions of the local authorities, they managed to issue a paper until the end.<sup>8</sup>

Once they took root, there was no stopping the output of amateur newspapers from all over the country. By the turn of the century, amateur printers had put out newspapers in all of the existing states, some territories and also across Canada. Perusing the collection at the American Antiquarian Society shows how varied the field was. Both boys and girls were caught up in the hobby. Varieties abound in size, quality of printing, mastheads, illustrations, and content. Some kids focused on specific subjects such as philately or puzzles. Many wrote reviews of other amateur newspapers they had received. Others wrote poetry or short stories. Many issues were adorned with jokes. One notable amateur paper, *Le Bijou* published in Cincinnati between 1878 and 1880 was published by Herbert A. Clark (ca. 1860 – ca. 1924). He was a great-grandson of William Clark (leader of the Lewis and Clark expedition) and was one of the first African-Americans to publish an amateur newspaper. He was well-respected among the Northern members of the national organization, but when elected third vice-president, many of the Southern members left the organization and started their own. Clark's publication is filled with articles advocating civil rights.

Amateur newspapers gave many young people a focus and an outlet for their creativity while also honing their organizational skills. It also gave them experience in printing, writing and journalism. Some of them went on to become writers, editors, or publishers when they became adults. They turned grass-roots journalism into a career. While their initial outputs were amateurish as the category of their production implies, it gave them the experience and confidence to explore the possibilities of turning professional.

So why read them today? The content is not monumental reporting of events. The poetry is not ground breaking. Some issues are filled only with material referencing other amateurs. Amateur newspapers are the voice of young Americans of the period. Without them printing their own newspapers, these writings would not have been preserved for researchers today. We would mostly have texts written by adults for them. Amateur newspapers are the authentic writings of the younger generation of the nineteenth century. In one sense, the papers are like the blogs of today, but in a different format. Today they have “likes” and “friends”. Back then they had subscribers and exchanges. Each one developed their own networks of distribution to reach an audience.

While the American Antiquarian Society has had nineteenth-century amateur newspapers as part of its collection for decades, here is a new opportunity for the twenty-first century. A full-text digital database of these publications first makes people aware they exist and second, provide easy access to the contents. The printers of yesterday would be astonished and pleased how many new readers their works will have today.

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## ENDNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Spencer, Truman J. *The History of Amateur Journalism* (New York: The Fossils, Inc, 1957), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Spencer, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Spencer, p. 3

<sup>4</sup> *The World* (New York, NY), Sept. 24, 1864, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Harris, Elizabeth. *Personal Impressions. The small printing press in nineteenth-century America* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> An excellent example is Richard Zerbe's *A Guide to Amateurdome: Being a complete and accurate synopsis of amateurdome and its manifold phases* (Cincinnati: Am. Book Publishing Co. [1883]).

<sup>7</sup> See *the Amateur Journalists' Companion*. Frank Cropper, editor (Louisville, KY: Frank Cropper, 1873), pp. 7-17.

<sup>8</sup> Spencer, pp. 22-25.

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