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## NOTES ON THE GALVESTON DAILY NEWS

Maury Darst

*The Galveston Daily News* celebrated its 126th birthday April 11, 1968. It is the oldest continuously published daily newspaper in Texas. Last year, the paper was purchased by Southern Newspapers Inc., of Montgomery, Alabama, who instituted new methods of operation. The year 1968 also marks the sale of its former quarters on historic Mechanic Sreet in downtown Galveston to a non-newspaper owner. Abandoned in 1965 for more modern quarters, the old brick News Building was the first constructed in the Southwest housing a complete newspaper operation. The year also will note the change in method of printing from letterpress to offset, the latter being a new, modern and more economical method of printing.



For many years this bronze plaque on the front of the old *Galveston News* building in downtown Galveston testified to the newspaper's long length of service to its community and to Texas. When the newspaper moved several years ago to newer quarters the plaque was removed.

The writer's association with *The Galveston Daily News* as a reporter from 1963 to 1965, gave access to the many clippings and bound files of its long and colorful history. The following is a condensed historical sketch taken and edited from these various articles, many of which are yellowed with age and water-soaked from various storms.

It also is a fitting tribute to "The Old Lady By the Sea," which has played an important role in the political aspects of the Lone Star State.

*The Galveston News* was born in 1842 in an era when American journal-

ism dealt lavishly in opinion. Throughout its 126-year history it has spoken its mind on many great and important public issues.

From its infancy as a small often-issued weekly publication, while Texas was still a republic, *The Galveston Daily News* has interested itself in political action mainly as a means to an end. The ends it sought have been closely identified with the economic and cultural progress of the State.

Galvestonians first read *The News* April 11, 1842, and it was announced the publication would appear daily, except Sunday, by George French. However, the newspaper can trace its beginnings to March 20, 1841, when Samuel Bangs issued the first edition of *The Daily Galvestonian*. According to sources, *The News* appeared every day for several weeks, dropped to a tri-weekly and soon a weekly publication.

Early in its career *The News* manifested an independence of political thought unusual in journals of that day. With its membership in the Union, Texas acquired a share in the political controversies which agitated the westward expansion of the budding Republic. When Texas was admitted to the Union as a state, the contest between Whigs and Democrats revealed the cleavage in principles which eventually led to secession and the Civil War.

Willard Richardson, whose editorship of *The News* brought him statewide acclaim, was an adopted son of South Carolina and was an ardent disciple of John C. Calhoun as well as a firm believer in states' rights.

Perceiving Texas was entering an era of great expansion, Richardson decided not to identify *The Galveston News* with either of the leading national parties, explaining that the interests of the new state will be better protected by keeping aloof from party contests.<sup>1</sup>

"We have never pretended to publish what is called a neutral paper. We believe it is our duty to have decided opinions upon all public questions and to declare them frankly, giving our reasons for them, regardless of whether they are considered as favoring one party or the other."<sup>2</sup>

Annexation was the leading public issue before Texans in the spring of 1842 and *The News* jumped into the battle. In espousing the cause for annexation, *The News* also became clamorously pro-Mirabeau B. Lamar. George H. French, first editor and partner with Samuel Bangs, heaped editorial criticism on the Texas commissioners to Washington for what he considered lack of diligence in urging annexation. This was the beginning of a feud between *The News* and Sam Houston, which lasted until the latter's death in 1863.

With the State's political future apparently assured by annexation, *The News* under Richardson's guidance, turned to economic problems. Hanging darkly over the new state's financial reputation was the unpaid debt of the republic. Richardson urged that \$10,000,000 received from the United States in satisfaction of Texas' claims to territory which was later incorporated into the states of New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado, be used to pay off the old debts. This was eventually done.

Success of another Richardson campaign of the post-war annexation period was longer delayed. This was for repeal of the state prohibition of banks, which had been taken from the constitution of the republic. Several years elapsed before the ban was lifted, but not before it was allowed to become a dead issue.

Texas saw its first mile of railroad built in 1851, though numerous railroad companies had been chartered before that time, including several by the republic. Realizing the importance of railroad transportation to the state's development, Richardson launched a crusade for a system of state-owned roads.

Government ownership of public utilities ran counter to his general convictions, but the slow progress of building by private companies had convinced him that only the state could provide the sorely needed carriers. He opened his campaign with a seven column wide map on the first page of the April 17, 1856 issue, following it up with news stories, editorials and special articles. Though he went to Austin to lobby personally for his plan, the Legislature turned it down and adopted the loan bond plan. It is interesting to note, however, that pioneer railroad building in Texas generally followed the lines laid out on the editor's map.

Early in 1862 *The News* became a war refugee, moving its publication offices to Houston, as required by an order issued by Governor Francis R. Lubbock, that all civilians evacuate the Island. During the war years, *The News* employed its editorial influence in behalf of the Confederacy. Reporting the war and overcoming shortages of newsprint and other handicaps, Richardson and his editorial staff favored continuing the struggle west of the Mississippi even after Lee's surrender at Appomattox. However, in May, 1865, the newspaper admitted the Confederacy was dead.

Returning to Galveston after the war, *The News* looked to an era of peaceful reconstruction. The paper began daily publication, increased its size and appointed additional correspondents, who made liberal use of the new telegraph lines being installed throughout the state. But in thinking to push politics into the background, Richardson and his new partner, Colonel A. H. Belo, reckoned without the "radicals" in the North who were determined to treat the Southern States as conquered provinces. Disregarding threats made by the reconstruction regime, *The News* plunged into the fight to restore home-rule government to Texas. Although the newspaper remained independent, the paper found itself in a fight to return government to Texans and an ally of the Democratic Party, to which Richardson replied, "We support the Democratic Party because it is right."

For five years Richardson and his associates carried on the fight through columns of *The News* and sometimes from the public platform. Belo reported from the Democratic National Convention in July, 1872, which nominated Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, for president. Greeley, also the nominee of a liberal wing of the Republican Party, was badly beaten in the election, but *The News* helped carry Texas for

him. The election of 1873 carried the last of the carpetbaggers in Texas from office. "The Lone Star State," wrote Richardson, "had been redeemed from the rule of the alien, the scalawag and the thief."

As the economic situation improved toward the end of the 1870's, *The News* instituted a number of innovations in an effort to improve its service both to its readers and to the State of Texas as a whole. In 1878, it installed the first web-perfecting press in Texas and started its famous series of September 1 editions reviewing the progress of Galveston and Texas. About the same time, it began delivering its papers to Houston via its own dummy locomotive and in 1883, it became the first newspaper in the United States to use a train regularly, six days a week, to deliver its papers in outside cities.

The train was operated over the Galveston, Houston and Henderson Railroad to Houston. The newspaper also became the first to institute home delivery in an outside city, in Houston. By 1880, business and reporting offices were established in Houston, Fort Worth, Waco and San Antonio.

Now old and in failing health, Richardson left the business and editorial direction of the newspaper to his younger associate, Belo. One of the last editorials from Richardson's pen was a defense of *The News* against a charge of a contemporary that it was false to the Democratic Party. Asserting the paper had always been true to the creed of Jeffersonian democracy, Richardson wrote:

A generation has almost passed since the senior proprietor of *The Galveston News* entered upon that which has been his life's work—the management of an honest and upright and truthful journal. In reviewing that life's work as written in the files of this journal, he is proud to say that, he has always battled for the right, been the foeman of corruption in high places and the uncompromising advocate of the material advancement of the people of Texas.

Richardson's death July 26, 1875, elicited tributes of appreciation from newspapers throughout the nation.

With the establishment of *The Dallas News* in 1885, that newspaper became the spokesman for the northern half of the state, following the editorial policies of *The News* at Galveston, and for 38 years continued joint publication and transmitting editorial matter via a leased telegraph wire between the two points.

June 14, 1884, however, was the biggest day in the history of the newspaper as well as in the annals of journalism. It was on this date *The Galveston News* officially opened the first building in the Southwest constructed and equipped solely for the individual needs of a newspaper. The \$125,000 brick structure had a revolutionary impact in the world of printers ink and type.

A clipping from the Centennial Edition of the *Galveston Daily News*,

April 11, 1942, reported, "*The New York Herald* watched this move with interest and soon afterward it built a similar plant . . . ."

The business offices, counting room and a large vault occupied the front part of the first floor, with the pressroom immediately back of them and the engine room in the extreme rear. The second floor was devoted to editorial departments with space in the rear of the building for storing rolls of paper. The top floor was the composing room. The story also boasted of the new building's modern printing press which was regarded as a "mechanical marvel" turning out more than 15,000 newspapers an hour.

The year 1890 saw *The News* plunge headlong into another turbulent political campaign. This time its opponent was James Stephen Hogg, who was running for governor after serving four years as attorney general. Again it was the issue and not the man which was the crux of the controversy. *The News* regarded Hogg as a radical, opposing in particular his proposal to amend the state constitution to authorize a Texas railroad commission. After the warmest campaign the Lone Star State had experienced in years, the Rusk native won the Democratic nomination and the convention endorsed the railroad body proposal. Two years later Hogg was re-elected, again. *The News* had opposed his bid for the state's high post, aggravating the paper's distrust of his "radicalism." It was especially outraged by a law which the Legislature passed with his blessings that forbade foreigners from owning or holding land in Texas. Known as the Alien Land Law, this measure was responsible, in part, for the demise of one industrial town in Texas, New Birmingham, in Cherokee county.

This town had a large iron industry, a handsome railroad depot, a 15-block brick business district, graded streets, telegraph and express companies, a newspaper and a luxurious hotel. In 1889 the town was incorporated and claimed 3,000 citizens. When British industrialists, who had been expected to invest heavily in the ore mining business there became discouraged because of the law and decided against the venture, New Birmingham went into rapid decline and eventually faded from the picture altogether.<sup>4</sup>

Though it had leaned for a time toward the free coinage of silver, *The News* became convinced the gold standard was essential to the maintenance of sound monetary standard. It lined up with the gold champions in the free silver controversy which shook the nation in the last decade of the 19th century, strongly supporting President Grover Cleveland's stand on that issue. William Jennings Bryan's stand on this controversy caused the newspaper to break with the Democrats in the 1896 election campaign and support William McKinley.

As public sympathy spread throughout the United States with the struggle for independence in Cuba from Spain, the paper counseled moderation as the threat of war loomed. While expressing its own sympathy for the Cuban patriots, the paper saw no occasion for interference by the United States. Even after the sinking of the U.S. Battleship Maine in Havana harbor, *The Galveston News* continued to urge the public and the government to "keep

cool," but when Congress instructed the President to intervene, *The News* agreed "that in the presence of a hostile foe, every consideration of public safety demands that the people respond to the call of national duty and strengthen the hands of the constituted authorities."

Following the hurricane which struck Galveston September 8, 1900, *The News* rose to unsurpassed leadership. The storm struck on Saturday and raged throughout most of that night. When a telegraph line to the mainland was set up the following Tuesday, Col. R. G. Lowe, managing editor of *The News*, sent to the Associated Press in New York the first authentic estimate of loss of life and property, coupling it with an appeal for help and aid. He estimated between 4,000 and 6,000 persons had died in the storm and surrounding area with an estimated property loss of \$16,000,000.

The "Old Lady of Mechanic Street" witnessed another change in its history when W. L. Moody Jr., Galveston financier, purchased the newspaper from the Belo interests.

In February, 1963, *The Houston Post* acquired *The News* with William P. Hobby Jr. taking the position of president. In September of that year, negotiations were begun on a new site for the newspaper plant. The first edition was printed in the new building March 22, 1965.

In June, 1967, *The Houston Post* sold the paper to Southern Newspapers Inc., with major interests owned by the *Montgomery Advertiser-Journal*, Carmage T. Walls and T. Eugene Worrell.

*The News* continues today, looking forward to beginning its 127th year of operation. As in the past, *The News* retains its position as a dynamic force in Galveston County and the Texas Gulf coast.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Galveston Daily News*, Centennial Edition, April 11, 1942.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Roach, Hattie J., *A History of Cherokee County, Texas* (Dallas, 1934), 83; King, Dick., *Ghost Towns of Texas* (San Antonio, 1953), 73-78.