

Newspapers covered it all, from local heat waves to the Battle of the Little Big Horn

If you were living in Carroll County during the last half of the nineteenth century, your choice of newspapers was likely either the Democratic Advocate or the American Sentinel. Both were published in Westminster, the county seat. Smaller communities often had their own papers which might last a few years, then change names, ownership, or disappear entirely, but the longevity of the Advocate (1865-1972) and the Sentinel (1855-1928) makes them wonderful sources for what was happening around the County and, to some extent, the nation and the world.

Each paper had local correspondents gathering news from their communities about weddings, illnesses, fires, accidents, or visitors. Each paper was unabashedly partisan. Democrats read the Advocate. Republicans subscribed to the Sentinel. The papers covered political events at every level. Recently a question arose about the coverage of Frederick Douglass' visit to Westminster in October 1870. By then the Black orator who escaped slavery was famous across the entire country, but you would never guess it if you read the Democratic Advocate. No mention of his appearance at Westminster's Odd Fellows Hall (also known as the Opera House) appeared in any issue — no announcement beforehand or what he said afterward. The only mention appeared in the American Sentinel following his speech. No one quite so famous spoke in Carroll County until Teddy Roosevelt many years later.

Those who love history will find tantalizing tidbits of all sorts in old newspapers. They jump out at you begging further investigation. Years ago we would have turned to our bookshelves hoping for an answer in an encyclopedia. I owned nothing more recent than an 1898 version passed down in the family, but heaven help me for 20th or 21st century topics! Today the internet offers more information than I need.

Recently I searched the Democratic Advocate hoping to discover whether the scorching heat we experienced this summer occurred here in the past. Yes, it had! From July 1876 came the following stories: "From Saturday until Wednesday an extraordinary temperature prevailed. The mercury ranged up to 98 in the shade, at noon. At 7, p.m. it did not fall below 90. We have heard of but three casualties here on account of the weather, but many are reported elsewhere, from other places." On another day, "The weather the past few days has been hot, hotter, hottest, hottentotest, and still a hotting. Another blow or two at the bellows will cause the mercury to knock the top out of the thermometer." From Finksburg, a correspondent wrote, "On the afternoon of the 11th inst. a farm hand named Tracey, employed by Mr. Henry Fitch, residing near the Finksburg depot, was prostrated by the heat while engaged in making hay. He received prompt attention from Dr. Moores. His condition though extremely critical, is not considered hopeless."

In addition to men and women overcome by the heat, often while harvesting, horses were succumbing to the extreme temperatures as well. "We mention the following losses in this neighborhood: Thos. Stevenson lost one horse, valued at \$125; James Beacham one, \$250; Abram Danner one, \$100; John Tracey one, \$150, all within a few days past."

The war being fought against Native Americans in the Dakotas must have seemed far removed from Carroll County in 1876, but that was the summer Custer and his men met their fate at the Battle of Little Big Horn. On July 29, 1876, a month after Custer's fight, the following article appeared in the Democratic Advocate: "Troops from the fortifications along the Atlantic seaboard are being forwarded to assist the United States forces in the Indian war, near the Black Hills. Two companies have been sent from Fort McHenry, Baltimore." It is highly unlikely any local men were ever involved in the wars across the Northern Plains, but this is one piece of history which local families may have discussed over the dinner table. Wars with Native Americans made it into history books, and issues involving the treatment of Indigenous People are still in the news today. Is October 14, 2024, called "Columbus Day," or "Indigenous People's Day?" It is a national holiday and I'm not sure which side is winning this battle.

Continuing to explore more issues of the paper, I hit upon the following bit of history which rightfully never made it into any history books. "So plentiful are the grasshoppers in Salt Lake City that the stench arising from the accumulation of their dead carcasses is terrible, and is seriously affecting the health of the city." "Engine drivers in Utah have to shovel off the grasshoppers from the track before their trains can move." On a more serious note, a report in 1870 mentioned one hundred women were studying law in the United States. To be sure, women had to wait almost 50 more years before they could vote, but this was a good start.

Just as today, readers were curious about the lives of the rich and famous in the 1870s. The annual income in 1870 for the following rich Americans was: for A.T. Stewart - \$1,420,000; for William B. Astor - \$1,273,000; for James Fisk, Jr. - \$65,000; and for Cornelius Vanderbilt - \$40,000. Stewart founded a department store in New York City that covered an entire city block. The other three men made or inherited their money in real estate, railroads, shipping, etc. Two of them are still remembered for their philanthropy – Astor for establishing the New York Public Library and Vanderbilt for founding a university. Fisk is remembered as one of the conniving robber barons who tried to corner the gold market in 1869 and was shot to death in 1872.

If these bits of history fascinate you, plenty more of them can be found in old newspapers from every state available online from a free website called "Chronicling America." In addition, the Historical Society of Carroll County has local newspapers on microfilm – some dating back to the 1840s and 1850s.

Mary Ann Ashcraft is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.

Image 1: Source: Chronicling America Caption: Banner of the Democratic Advocate, a newspaper published in Westminster between 1865 and 1972. Note the price for 52 issues a year.

Image 2: Source: Library of Congress Caption: This 1878 lithograph imagines Gen. George Armstrong Custer's final moments in the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Dakota Territory, 1876.

Link to lithograph of Custer: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/pga.04166/>