

"John H. Mitten, Oldest U. S. Newspaper Man"
Carroll County Times article for 22 November 1998
By Jay A. Graybeal

When John H. Mitten died at age 87 in 1931, he was thought to be the oldest newspaper man in the nation. Mitten had been a founder of The Times Printing Company in 1914 and co-edited the paper with H. Peyton Gorsuch. Mr. Gorsuch devoted his September 30, 1932 "Front Page Editorial" to a gift of old local newspapers made by Mr. Mitten shortly before his death:

"John H. Mitten, Civil War veteran, at his death the oldest active printer, newspaper man and editor in the United States, who died September 4th, 1931, gave The Times two files, containing copies of The Carrolltonian, covering the years 1833 to 1840. The files are not complete, but contain some issues of each year.

We enjoy browsing over these old papers published in Westminster almost a century ago.

We find much of historical interest, and we like to read the news items, advertisements, editorials, political news, county, state and special articles.

This week we were searching the files for some data concerning the formation of Carroll county in order to answer a question that had been asked us. The Carrolltonian took a very active part in the campaigns for the formation of the county, in fact we have been told that the main purpose in founding the paper was to aid in the fight for a new county, out of parts of Baltimore and Frederick counties.

We found the information we wanted in the old files. In our search we read the estimated receipts and expenditures of the new county, which estimate was made by a committee of 54 leading citizens, favorable to the formation of the county. The figures may be of interest, and you will notice they knew something about a "balanced budget" back in those days.

They made the receipts and expenditures in their estimate exactly the same. Receipts \$8,909.36. Expenditures \$8,909.36. The estimated receipts were from taxes at 90 cents per \$100. The largest estimated items in expenditures were \$2,160 for 48 jurors, sitting 30 days, at \$1.50; roads and bridges, \$2,200; Orphans' Court, \$624; election expenses, \$242; county commissioners, \$360; county clerk, \$250; states attorney and court crier, \$212; pensions, \$470; criminal proceedings and physician in jail \$341; miscellaneous expenses, \$300.45. These items with smaller ones totaled \$8,909.36, the amount these men believed would be approximately the cost of administering the affairs of the county. We wonder what these gentlemen of 1833 would think, and say if they could read the last statement of the county commissioners, showing receipts and expenditures of about three quarters of a million dollars!

We have a hazy recollection that we published one or more articles, some years ago concerning the spirited meetings for and against and other facts of the formation of Carroll county as published in these old papers that were in the thick of the fight. If we did we are sure that all the interesting facts on the subject published in the Carrolltonian were not given and we may sometime in the future gather some items from the old files and publish.

We found in a number of these, nearly a century old papers, a column under the caption 'Ladies' Department'. We were interested and curious to learn the kind of articles as editor of the long, long ago, selected for his Ladies' Department.

We read some of them and will give you a sketch of two or three.

An article headed 'Well Done Ladies' states that 'fashion is a whimsical jade, but who ever dreamed that she would ever put canes in the ladies' hands! But so it is as the fashionable ladies of Boston exhibit themselves on Washington street with these little sticks, which they flaunt with becoming grace.' Gentlemen are warned to look out in the future and always give ladies with canes the inside of the walks or they may smart for it.

The most of us have thought the fad of ladies carrying canes, for display and not for service was comparatively of recent origin and we were inclined to ridicule. But we now learn from the old files of The Carrolltonian that the women, in 1833, paraded the streets of Boston, carrying canes and swinging them gracefully. A bit of circumstantial evidence that there is nothing new under the sun.

'Caution to The Ladies' is the headline of another in the Ladies' Department. Ladies are warned to be careful of what they harbour and conceal in the capacious sleeves worn. It tells of a woman, Sunday before last, who had a trying and uncomfortable experience in church. During the service she felt a commotion inside of one of the frames which kept up the expanded dimensions of her shoulders. It annoyed her and excited her nerves, but she managed to keep quiet until the services were over. She hastened home unloosened her gown and a rat jumped out from beneath her sleeve stiffener.

Truly this was a thrilling experience and not many women of our day would have remained quiet and if investigated then and there and a rat had jumped out there would have been a panic and the meeting broken up.

One thing that interested us was the 'Capacious sleeves' the 1833 women wore. It seems women's fashions travel in cycles; go from one extreme to another and then repeat. In our brief years we recall there has been at least two periods of capacious sleeves, big enough to house a whole family of rats. The large dimensions would start back the other way and by regular gradations eventually get so small that it was a mystery how they got their hands through them. Here is a camp meeting story that appears in the Ladies' Department. At a camp meeting a number of females continued standing on the benches, notwithstanding frequent requests from the minister to sit down. A reverend old gentleman noted for his dry good humor, arose and said—'I think if the ladies standing on the benches knew that they had holes in their stockings, they would sit down.' The address had the desired effect.

A young minister standing by him and blushing to the temples said, 'O brother, how could you say that!'

'Say that,' replied the old gentleman. 'It is a fact: if they hadn't holes in their stockings, I'd like to know how they would get them on and off.'

This old preacher had not lost his sense of humor.

Another story is of a charming girl who was engaged to be married to a man who chewed tobacco, but she was ignorant of his habit. Just a few days before the marriage ceremony was to take place she observed him with a quid of tobacco in his mouth and the sight had such an effect on her feelings that

she instantly swooned and remained in a state of insensibility for some time. When she recovered she avowed her determination never to marry a man who was or ever had been guilty of chewing tobacco.

Notwithstanding the entreaties of her family, friends and the young man, who promised that he would never chew again, she persisted in her resolution. The result was that the young man died of a broken heart, and she lived and died an old maid.

A sad ending of a romance, and one we think would not be possible or at least probable today, one hundred years later. We do not believe many young men of the present age die of broken hearts because they are rejected by charming or any other kind of girls. Nor do we believe many present day girls would break their engagement if the only cause was chewing tobacco, especially if they promised to reform.

Girls often marry men who drink to excess. Some promise to reform, some do not. Some do quit, more do not.

We have used all the space we could and will omit a 'special recipe for pickling cucumbers' and a discussion of the proper side for a gentleman to ride when horseback riding with a lady. Side saddles were used then. Now the few ladies who indulge in the sport ride as men do and we do not suppose it makes any difference whether the man rides on the right or left side.

We do not know whether you will find articles published a hundred years ago interesting, or worth reading, but we find them entertaining and enjoy reading. For that reason we may occasionally dig out and publish other articles from the ladies and other departments of the old issues of The Carrolltonian and add such comments as they suggest to us."

In his closing paragraph, Editor Gorsuch wondered if readers had any interest in newspaper articles from the past. During the Carroll County Centennial in 1937 J. Leland Jordan became an associate editor at The Times and soon began writing a regular column entitled "Time Flies" which often featured old articles. In fact, Jordan's work was an inspiration for this column and I occasionally reprint one of his articles from the 1940s. It may also be interesting to note that the Historical Society's collection contains nearly complete issues of The Carrolltonian, The Times, J. Leland Jordan's collection and also some of H. Peyton Gorsuch's personal papers.

Photo caption: John H. Mitten (1844-1931) served as a editor of The Times from 1914-1931 and at his death was considered the nation's oldest newspaper man. He posed for his portrait in c1910 wearing in Grand Army of the Republic uniform with a mourning ribbon from the Burns Post in Westminster. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Mrs. J. Albert Anders, 1988.