

Civil War, Newspaper Suppression

By Floyd J. McKay

Oregon's pioneer newspapers were also political organs, advancing their cause in news articles as well as editorials. The most prominent advocates were Asahel Bush of the *Oregon Statesman* (Salem) and T.J. Dryer of the *Oregonian* (Portland), Democrat and Whig, respectively. But as the nation entered the Civil War and demands for suppression of "traitors" appeared in the North, it was the editors at smaller weekly papers in Oregon and California who would pay for their outspoken views.

Newspapers in the early nineteenth century were fiercely partisan and attacked their enemies in dismissive terms of contempt. Even before the Civil War, violence was common against abolitionist editors. In 1837, for example, a mob destroyed the presses of the *Alton (Illinois) Observer* and killed abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy. When war began, violence in the North turned against Southern sympathizers, and federal and local officials closed newspapers across the North and even in distant Oregon.

The most vigorous attacks on press and speech were from military authorities, local politicians with scores to settle, and even mobs. "Editors of hostile journals were put in prison," historians Charles and Mary Beard wrote, "their papers suspended, their newsboys arrested. Peace meetings were broken up and their organizers sent to jail . . . editors accused of holding obstructive views were arrested on military order, and though they were charged with no overt act of any kind, they were held in jail and denied the privilege of a hearing before a civil magistrate."

By war's end, up to three hundred Democratic newspapers had been suspended at least briefly for anti-Administration or pro-Confederacy statements. Because newspapers were circulated primarily by mail, suppression meant loss of mailing privileges, a death knell to smaller papers.

In Oregon, Gen. George Wright, commander of the Department of the Pacific, proved to be a zealous foe of pro-Southern newspapers. "All these treasonable papers should not only be excluded from the mails and post-offices," he wrote, "but that they should be suppressed entirely." He urged subordinates to seek out offending publications in Oregon and the other states and territories in the Department.

Federal authority authorized the suppression of pro-secession publications; but according to historian Robert Chandler, local pro-Union officials were allowed "to choose the victims." Political partisanship often trumped "subversive language" as a rationale for suppressing newspapers in Oregon and California. Lincoln himself had expressed fear of "the fire in the rear," and, as the war ground on, attempts increased to silence his critics.

In 1860, Oregon U.S. Senator Joseph Lane was the vice-presidential candidate with John C. Breckenridge on the pro-slavery, or "Copperhead," Democratic ticket. A majority of the state's Democratic papers backed Lane, including the *Oregon Democrat* (Albany), the *Union* (Corvallis), *Jacksonville Sentinel*, *Eugene Herald*, *Roseburg Express*, and *Portland Daily News*. Union backers closed five Democratic newspapers in 1862, starting with the *Oregon Democrat*, which had been founded in 1859 by Delazon Smith (who later served with Lane in the U.S. Senate). Editor Pat Malone changed the paper's name to the *Albany Inquirer*, but it was also quickly suppressed.

Other victims of 1862 suppression were the *Union* (also edited by the hapless Malone), the *Jacksonville Southern Oregon Gazette*, and the daily *Portland Advertiser*. The *Advertiser* was the only Democratic daily newspaper in the state at the time (the *Daily News* had already folded).

By the following year, nearly all the suppression of newspapers had ended. Congress enacted a policy on arbitrary arrests, and even the energetic General Wright found himself resisting pressure from Union supporters to "arrest every man or woman whose sentiments do not coincide exactly with the government."

Most of the suppressed editors returned to their profession. In their histories, neither Robert Chandler nor George Turnbull report any imprisonment of Oregon editors; the punishment was limited to suppression from the mails.

Sources

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