

THE BUSINESS PRACTICES OF THE FRONTIER EDITOR: INDIANA IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

John W. Miller

University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

ABSTRACT

Frontier editors faced numerous challenges in the attempt to set up a newspaper operation on the American frontier. The editors had to determine which community offered the best possibility for success and then transport a printing press and equipment to the new locale. A minimum number of subscribers, advertisers, and job printing contracts had to be secured to sustain a fledgling newspaper operation. Once underway, the frontier editor had to coax payments from delinquent subscribers and advertisers and contend with an irregular postal service, which was the primary source of news from the outside world. The editors who succeeded were those who found sound business solutions to the many obstacles.

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, the American press had emerged as a significant social, political, and economic force in the young republic. Several individuals were attracted to the newspaper profession and looked to growing frontier areas like the Indiana Territory as a place to succeed in their efforts. The first journalist to arrive in Indiana was twenty-two year old Elihu Stout, who had served as an apprentice and journeyman for newspapers in Kentucky and Tennessee. Stout visited the territorial capital at Vincennes in the spring of 1803 to confer with Territorial Governor (and future U. S. President) William Henry Harrison and others to assess his chances for success in that frontier community. The young entrepreneur evidently received the assurances he sought and proceeded with plans to establish the Vincennes *Indiana Gazette* the following year.¹

Governor Harrison and the Vincennes business community were very aware of the benefits that a newspaper could offer the aspiring state territorial capital. Harrison surely informed Stout that if he became the first newspaper editor in the Indiana Territory he would receive several lucrative government printing contracts.² It is not clear if Harrison or others provided Stout with monetary incentives to induce him to locate in Vincennes – business leaders in Lexington, Kentucky, had given a free town lot to the editor of the first newspaper in that community. Stout's father evidently loaned his son several hundred dollars in 1804, and Governor Harrison did provide Stout with a small boat to help transport printing equipment from Kentucky to Vincennes.³

Political leaders on the American frontier acknowledged the tremendous potential of newspapers as editorial mouthpieces for the advancement of political party platforms and candidates. Likewise, community business leaders embraced the press for its value

as a town promoter (or “booster”) to draw new settlers and merchants.⁴ Every village on the American frontier had to contend for a limited supply of immigrants and industry, and a newspaper that could successfully promote the local area over outside competition was of critical importance. In choosing a frontier community for a newspaper site, the editor had to assess the potential value of these political and town booster opportunities along with the traditional business considerations of potential subscribers, advertisers, and outside printing.

Once they confirmed their intention to launch a newspaper venture, the first major business decision the editors faced was where and how to obtain and transport a printing press, equipment, and newsprint to an isolated frontier community. Most of the early nineteenth century Indiana editors used second-hand printing presses they obtained in the eastern United States. These small, hand-operated presses cost a few hundred dollars and were capable of printing about one page a minute. In the 1840s these excruciatingly slow presses were gradually replaced along the frontier by first hand-powered then steam-powered rotary presses, which were capable of printing up to three thousand sheets per hour.⁵

Elihu Stout shipped his printing press and some of his supplies from Kentucky to Indiana on a small boat along the Ohio and Wabash rivers and transported the rest of his possessions on horses over a primitive trail between Lexington and Vincennes. A few years later editor John Osborn of the Terre Haute *Western Register* was transporting his printing equipment to that community over a crude Indiana road when “the whole kit, press, type, and [printing] paper” for the first issue fell off into a stream. The subsequent delay in the initial appearance of the *Western Register* was explained by Osborn as due to “circumstances beyond our control.”⁶

The printing equipment used on the American frontier included composing sticks, iron frames, wedges, cases, leather inking balls, galley trays, washpans, and individual type pieces made of wood or metal. Printing ink was purchased from an outside source or made locally from a mixture of turpentine, lamp black, indigo, soot, and tar. The printing paper was purchased from Cincinnati or Louisville suppliers and was prepared from linen and cotton rags, which made it considerably more durable than modern wood pulp newsprint. If the editor ran out of rag paper, he was forced to use a substitute (such as wrapping paper) or wait for a new supply.

Printing paper shortages were a constant problem for Indiana editors throughout the pioneer period. In 1825 the Indianapolis *Indiana Journal* printed a lengthy editorial on the reason the newspaper had not been published for the previous two weeks. Editors Douglass and Maguire insisted that the printing paper had been ordered from Cincinnati well in advance, but the wagon which was to bring the paper was overloaded and the newsprint was left behind. The solution, according to the editors, was for delinquent subscribers to pay their bills so the editors could purchase a sufficient supply of paper. In 1827 South Bend *Free Press* editor William Millikan announced that he had obtained an eight-month supply of paper in an attempt to prevent any suspension of operations.⁷

THE BUSINESS PRACTICES OF THE FRONTIER EDITOR

Income for the frontier newspaper editor came primarily from subscription payments, advertising, and outside printing. Since receiving payment for their newspapers was a continual problem for most Indiana editors, they often provided their subscribers with a variety of payment plans. Editor Bethuel Morris of the Brookville *Plain Dealer* offered to accept "Wheat, Rye, Corn, Oats, Whiskey, Pork, Bacon, Sugar, Linen, Flax, Feathers, Wool, Beeswax, Tallow, Candles, Furs, Rags, or CASH."⁸

The frontier editors occasionally warned delinquent subscribers that their disregard for subscription payment notices threatened the very existence of the local press. In 1809 Elihu Stout told his readers that he had not received enough money from subscription payments during the preceding two years to pay his paper costs alone. In 1811 the *Western Sun* actually ceased publication for several months; following the suspension Stout wrote that if subscribers merely would do common justice to the editor, the existence of the newspaper would be secured – "but without money the press stops, and the *Sun* will be no more."⁹

When they began publication of the Salem *Indiana Farmer* in 1822, editors Ebenezer Patrick and Eleazer Wheelock offered prepayment discounts for their readers and issued occasional, gentle reminders about past-due accounts. By 1825, however, the notices to delinquent subscribers became harsher and prosecution was threatened against those who failed to heed the warnings of the editors. As late as 1846 South Bend *St. Joseph Valley Register* editor Schuyler Colfax (who later served as vice president under Grant) announced that over 200 of his subscribers had not yet paid for their newspapers. The following winter Colfax added that "Freezing is not very comfortable these days," and to avoid that prospect the editor begged his subscribers for "wood, or the money to buy [the wood]."¹⁰

Advertisements in the frontier newspapers filled from one-fourth to one-half of each issue. A typical advertising rate on the frontier was based on an ad approximately two inches square, for which the editor charged one dollar for the first three weekly insertions and twenty-five cents for each subsequent insertion. These rates were officially adopted in 1837 by the Indiana State Editorial Society.¹¹

Next to subscriptions and advertising revenue, public printing contracts and other outside printing provided the most income for the frontier editor. National government printing contracts were awarded by several agencies, including legal notices of laws, treaties, resolutions, and Constitutional amendments from the Secretary of State, local land sales conducted by the Secretary of the Treasury, and U. S. Post Office printing. The Indiana Territorial Legislature (which became the Indiana State Legislature after statehood in 1816) paid state newspapers to print abstracts of the House and Senate Journals and the territorial and state laws. Editors were paid between fifty and two hundred dollars for printing the legislative journals each year and were allowed to sell copies of the *Laws of the Indiana Territory* for a few dollars per copy.¹²

Job printing services available at the frontier newspaper offices included an offer by editor Bethuel Morris of the Brookville *Plain Dealer* to provide "blank deeds, cards, handbills, invitations, licenses, militia laws, or other fancy work, printed in either red,

ESSAYS IN ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS HISTORY (2000)

black or blue ink...executed in a superior style." Elihu Stout constantly reminded his *Indiana Gazette* subscribers that "All kinds of Printing" could be "Executed on the shortest notice."¹³

Some editors became book, magazine, and cookbook dealers, while others kept patent medicines, garden supplies, and miscellaneous products around the newspaper office in the hope of procuring additional income. Editors Armstrong and Jesse Brandon of the Corydon *Indiana Gazette* notified their readers that they planned to publish an "Indiana Gazetter," which would contain a description of the counties, towns, villages, rivers, creeks, "and other remarkable places within the state of Indiana."¹⁴

A few Indiana editors became so busy with outside printing that they failed to publish their weekly newspapers on a regular basis. After the *Delphi Oracle* was published late one week and half-size another week, editor James Coleman admitted the lapses were due to the "large amount of job work" to be completed.¹⁵ It is noteworthy that the business practices of such frontier editors favored job printing customers over the regular subscribers—the editors evidently were convinced that their regular readers would be more willing to accept delays and inconvenience.

Even when the editors were able to coax full payment from their subscribers and advertisers, the income they obtained was never substantial. The average circulation of frontier Indiana newspapers in the first half of the nineteenth century ranged between two hundred and five hundred.¹⁶ Those newspapers which collected payments from only two hundred subscribers at \$2.50 per year would accumulate only \$500 for the year from subscription payments. If the newspaper carried an average of thirty to forty advertisements during the year at twenty-five cents per issue, this would add another \$400-\$500 to the editor's coffers, and outside printing might add another \$200-\$400. This yearly income of \$1,100-\$1400 would leave only a modest profit after the editor deducted expenses for his office, equipment, labor, and supplies.

In estimating the profitability of frontier newspapers, nineteenth century historian Isiah Thomas claimed that a subscription list of six hundred, plus "considerable advertisements," would be necessary to support a weekly newspaper. In 1837 editor David Gharky of the Muncie *Muncietonian* estimated his expenses at \$800 per year. If his yearly income was in the neighborhood of \$1,200, that would leave a profit of less than \$35 per month. Twelve years later editor John Osborn of the Muncie *Indiana Signal* wrote that "we care little whether we publish a paper in Muncie or not – and certainly do not mean to enslave ourselves for a small compensation."¹⁷

Whether to keep costs down or merely because they enjoyed the manual labor involved, a majority of the frontier editors performed the weekly newspaper composition duties themselves, with only the assistance of an apprentice or part-time assistant. If the editor was not inclined to do his own typesetting, the services of a full-time journeyman printer would cost from \$30-\$50 per month. In 1819 the Corydon *Indiana Gazette* offered partial ownership in the newspaper in return for the services of a "good printer."¹⁸

THE BUSINESS PRACTICES OF THE FRONTIER EDITOR

A substantial expense for modern newspapers—that of obtaining news and features from around the world—was not a significant cost for the frontier editor in the early nineteenth century. One of the provisions of the Post Office Act of 1792 was a free exchange of newspapers among editors, which meant that the frontier editor could obtain a complimentary copy of as many newspapers as he desired from other sections of the country. It was not until 1845 that this free news access was curtailed by new legislation.¹⁹

Since the editors depended on the mail delivery system for outside news (the telegraph did not arrive in Indiana until the late 1840s), they were quick to complain when the mail service was slow. Mail from Louisville to Vincennes was delivered only once a week in the early nineteenth century, and when the mail did not arrive at all one week, editor Stout accused the postrider of negligence, since he claimed that a number of other individuals had been able to cross the swollen White river.²⁰

When Armstrong and Jesse Brandon wrote an editorial in their Corydon *Indiana Gazette* in 1820 that the mail was taking longer to get from Corydon to Charlestown, Indiana (a distance of about thirty miles) than it did for mail to arrive in Corydon from the East Coast, the local postmaster issued a response that was printed in a rival newspaper. The postmaster explained the mail routing schedule in southern Indiana and added that to compare the length of time for mail service from the East with travel on the frontier demonstrated that the editors of the *Indiana Gazette* “had arrived at the important conclusion that in the old states, on direct routes, where the creeks are bridged and the roads good, the mail can be carried with more speed than where they are not.”²¹

Although mail service improved somewhat by the 1830s, South Bend *North Western Pioneer* editors John and Joseph Defrees wrote in 1832 that there was once again no mail – “In these brisk and stirring times how very perplexing it is to be without mail – to be shut out in ‘utter darkness’ as to what is transpiring in our country, is too much for human patience to bear.” As late as 1841 editor James Coleman of the *Delphi Oracle* was informed by the local postmaster that the lack of mail delivery in Delphi was because the postmaster at nearby Logansport was too lazy to get out of bed in the morning and move the mail on its way.²²

The vast majority of the newspapers established on the American frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century failed to survive.²³ In order to achieve success, the frontier editor had to overcome several obstacles, including the isolation of the frontier communities, which led to significant uncertainty in regard to supplies, equipment, communication, and transportation. With the newspaper due for publication once a week throughout the year, any delay in obtaining mail, newsprint, or replacement parts for the printing press often led to serious disruptions for the editor.

In the final analysis, success or failure often was determined by how well the editors reconciled their stated business *policies* with their actual business *practices*. For many, there was a sharp disparity between the printed guidelines for subscription and advertisement payments and the realities of irregular publication and collection, which

ESSAYS IN ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS HISTORY (2000)

invariably led to cries and threats from editors who begged for cash, wood, or rags from their subscribers in exchange for the newspaper. Until solutions were found for this disparity, survival was tenuous on the early nineteenth century frontier.

Notes

1. Elihu Stout was born in Newark, New Jersey on April 16, 1782. The family moved to Lexington, Kentucky in 1791 and Elihu began his newspaper career as an apprentice to John Bradford's *Kentucke* [sic] *Gazette*. Stout later moved to Tennessee and worked for Benjamin Bradford on the Nashville *Gazette*. Background sources on Stout and his Vincennes *Indiana Gazette* and *Western Sun* include the Cauthorn-Stout manuscript collection at the Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis; Frederick J. Walker, "Elihu Stout: Proprietor of the Indiana Territory's Fourth Estate," unpublished M. A. thesis, Indiana University, 1968; Douglas C. McMurtrie, "The Need of a Printer in the Indiana Territory," *Indiana Magazine of History* 32, no. 1 (March 1936): 34-37; Valerie C. Knerr, "Elihu Stout, Indiana's First Printer," unpublished M. A. thesis, Indiana University, 1953; Donald F. Carmony, "Elihu Stout, Father of the Hoosier Press," *The Indiana Publisher* 13, no. 7 (June 1949): 2; Henry S. Cauthorn, "Elihu Stout," *The Indianian* 5, no. 6 (June 1900): 351-55; Elizabeth M. Denehie, "Indiana's First Newspaper," *Indiana Magazine of History* 31, no. 2 (June 1935): 125-30; and John W. Miller, *Indiana Newspaper Bibliography* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1982), 211-15.
2. Since the early nineteenth century newspapers were almost always a one or two-person operation, the term "editor" will be used to designate the "printer/editor/publisher/owner/business manager."
3. Letter from Jediah Stout to Elihu Stout, August 8, 1822, Cauthorn-Stout manuscript collection; Judge John Law, *The Colonial History of Vincennes* (Vincennes, IN: Harvey, Mason and Company, 1858), 138.
4. Social historian Daniel J. Boorstin claimed that the existence of the booster press in the early nineteenth century significantly shaped the history of the nation. His thesis is detailed in *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965), 124-34.
5. The Indianapolis *Indiana Journal* announced on June 22, 1847 that they had acquired a Taylor steam press that could operate for ten hours on one-eighth of a cord of wood and print three thousand sheets per hour.
6. George S. Cottman, "The Early Newspapers of Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 2, no. 3 (September 1906), 114-15.
7. Indianapolis *Indiana Journal*, November 1, 1825; South Bend *Free Press*, February 7, 1837.
8. Brookville *Plain Dealer*, November 5 and 12, 1816.
9. Vincennes *Western Sun*, June 8, 1811. The title of Stout's newspaper had been changed from the *Indiana Gazette* to the *Western Sun* in 1807.
10. From 1822 to 1824 *Indiana Farmer* editors Ebenezer Patrick and Eleazer Wheelock offered a half dollar discount for advance payments and an additional fifty cent discount if paid in gold or silver. In 1826 subscribers were given the names of local merchants where corn and pork would be accepted and credited toward newspaper debts; South Bend *St. Joseph Valley Register*, December 4, 1846 and December 21, 1847.
11. Detailed coverage of the Editorial Society's convention in Indianapolis is available in the May, 1837 issues of the Indianapolis *Indiana Democrat* and *Indiana Journal*.
12. Clarence E. Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 7, 505-06; Franklin W. Scott, *Newspapers and Periodicals of Illinois, 1814-1879* (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Historical Library, 1910), preface; John G. Rauch and Nellie C. Armstrong, *A Bibliography of the Laws of Indiana, 1788-1927*, (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1928), 16, passim; Louis B. Eubank and Dorothy L. Riker, *The Laws of the Indiana Territory, 1809-1816* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1934), 169; and Walker, "Elihu Stout," 32-33.
13. Brookville *Plain Dealer*, November 5 and 12, 1816.
14. Corydon *Indiana Gazette*, late 1820 and early 1821 issues.
15. Dora Mayhill, *Postal and Allied History of Carroll County* (Knightstown, IN: Banner Publishing Company, 1954), 65. The editor of the Richmond *Public Leger* [sic] apologized to his readers in 1825 for neglecting his regular editorial duties because of the "throng" of job work to be completed. See Fredric Brewer,

THE BUSINESS PRACTICES OF THE FRONTIER EDITOR

- "Against All Adversities: The Pioneer Printers of Brookville, Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 87, no. 4 (December 1991), 306.
16. James H. Butler, "Indiana Newspapers, 1824-1860," *Indiana Magazine of History* 22, no. 3 (September 1926), 303.
17. Clarence S. Brigham, *Journals and Journeymen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950), 20; Muncie *Muncietonian*, June 15, 1837; Muncie *Indiana Signal*, February 7, 1849.
18. The first advertisement for a journeyman printer in an Indiana newspaper appeared in the Vincennes *Western Sun* in the November issues of 1808; Corydon *Indiana Gazette*, May, 1819 issues.
19. U. S. Congress, *Senate Executive Documents*, Serial Set 027, no. 124, 354-55; Howard H. Peckham, "Mail Service in the Indiana Territory," *Indiana Magazine of History* 47, no. 1 (March 1951), 162-64; William H. Lyon, *The Pioneer Editor in Missouri, 1808-1860* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1965), 153; and David Dary, *Red Blood and Black Ink* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 127, 314.
20. Vincennes *Western Sun*, December 31, 1808.
21. Corydon *Indiana Gazette*, April 1, 1820; the postmaster's reply was printed in the nearby Salem *Tocsin* on April 8, 1820.
22. South Bend *North Western Pioneer*, February 1, 1832; Mayhill, *Carroll County*, 13-15, 63.
23. Of the 300-400 newspaper ventures that were launched in Indiana prior to 1850, only 107 remained in operation in 1850. Bureau of the Census, *Seventh Census of the United States* (1850), Table 12, 797.

References

Major Newspaper Collections Examined

Brookville *Plain Dealer*
Corydon *Indiana Gazette*
Delphi *Oracle*
Indianapolis *Indiana Democrat*
Indianapolis *Indiana Journal*
Muncie *Indiana Signal*
Muncie *Muncietonian*
Salem *Indiana Farmer*
Salem *Tocsin*
South Bend *Free Press*
South Bend *North Western Pioneer*
South Bend *St. Joseph Valley Register*
Terre Haute *Western Register*
Vincennes *Indiana Gazette*
Vincennes *Western Sun*

Manuscripts, Public Documents, Theses, and Bibliographies

- Bureau of the Census. *Seventh Census of the United States* (1850). Table 12, 797.
- Carter, Clarence E. *Territorial Papers of the United States*. Volume 7.
Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1939.
- Indianapolis, Indiana. Indiana Historical Society. Cauthorn-Stout family manuscript collection.
- Knerr, Valerie C. "Elihu Stout, Indiana's First Printer." Unpublished M. A. thesis, Indiana University, 1953.
- Miller, John W. *Indiana Newspaper Bibliography*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1982.
- Scott, Franklin W. *Newspapers and Periodicals of Illinois, 1814-1879*. Springfield, IL: Illinois State Historical Library, 1910.

ESSAYS IN ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS HISTORY (2000)

- Rauch, John G. and Nellie C. Armstrong. *A Bibliography of the Laws of Indiana, 1927-1927*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1928.
- United States Congress. *Senate Executive Documents*. Serial Set 027, no. 124, 354-55.
- Walker, Frederick J. "Elihu Stout: Proprietor of the Indiana Territory's Fourth Estate." Unpublished M. A. thesis, Indiana University, 1968.

Articles

- Brewer, Fredric. "Against All Adversities: The Pioneer Printers of Brookville, Indiana." *Indiana Magazine of History* 87, no. 4 (December 1991): 306.
- Butler, James H. "Indiana Newspapers, 1824-1860." *Indiana Magazine of History* 22, no. 3 (September 1926): 114-15.
- Carmony, Donald F. "Elihu Stout, Father of the Hoosier Press." *The Indiana Publisher* 13, no. 6 (June 1949): 2.
- Cauthorn, Henry. "Elihu Stout." *The Indianian* 5, no. 6 (June 1900): 351-55.
- Cottman, George S. "The Early Newspapers of Indiana." *Indiana Magazine of History* 2, no. 3 (September 1906): 114-15.
- Denehie, Elizabeth M. "Indiana's First Newspaper." *Indiana Magazine of History* 31, no. 2 (June 1935): 125-30.
- McMurtrie, Douglas C. "The Need of a Printer in the Indiana Territory." *Indiana Magazine of History* 32, no. 1 (March 1936): 34-37.
- Peckham, Howard H. "Mail Service in the Indiana Territory." *Indiana Magazine of History* 47, no. 1 (March 1951): 162-64.

Books

- Boorstin, Daniel J. *The Americans: The National Experience*. New York: Random House, 1965.
- Brigham, Clarence S. *Journals and Journeymen*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950.
- Dary, David. *Red Blood and Black Ink*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.
- Eubank, Louis B. and Dorothy L. Riker. *The Laws of the Indiana Territory, 1809-1816*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1934.
- Law, Judge John. *The Colonial History of Vincennes*. Vincennes, IN: Harvey, Mason and Company, 1858.
- Lyon, William H. *The Pioneer Editor in Missouri, 1808-1860*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1965.
- Mayhill, Dora T. *Postal and Allied History of Carroll County*. Knightstown, IN: Banner Publishing Company, 1954.