

Man who built newspaper empire started in Ellettsville

This is the story of a young man who reported for work because his father said so and fell in love with the smell of printing ink and the power of language. His name was William B. Harris.

Born near Ellettsville in 1866, Harris was the son of a prosperous businessman and the great-grandson of a wealthy North Carolina slave owner. William's father, Samuel, had assumed the ownership of a printing press and type after the original investors had lost faith in the enterprise.

The first two editors of the Ellettsville *Republican* had proven unsatisfactory. Owner Samuel had other businesses to oversee, and young William suddenly became editor and manager.

In an article entitled "William B. Harris and His Newspaper Chain," in the June 1940 edition of the *In-*



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

diana Magazine of History, Robert D. Bickett described the young man's first day of work. "On the following day, young William appeared at the office in a 'cut away coat, a plug hat and a cane.' "

His first assignment was to set some reprint copy into type, but in an apparent attempt to show off his command of the language, substituted several-syllable words for ones in the original copy. Continued Bickett, "As his father threw the proof out the window, he told his son that if he made a blunder

again 'he would follow the proof through the aperture.' "

By March 1873 young William was editor in fact as well as in name. A libel suit against the *Republican* undoubtedly contributed several years to his professional maturity.

Three years later, William Harris began to look farther afield for readers. In Cloverdale he founded the *Thursday Morning Bee*, but eye trouble forced him to return to the Ellettsville area. In 1879 Harris fathered the *Owen County People*, but it failed after a few years.

Other men might have told themselves to find another profession. Not William B. Harris. The Ellettsville *Republican* rose from the financial ashes with a new name — the *Monroe County Citizen*.

Bickett wrote that Bloomington newspaperman John Cravens put

an idea into Harris' head — that the people in the Harrodsburg might like to have a newspaper. It is likely that Cravens had no idea what his suggestion would lead to, but the slightest encouragement was all Harris needed. As Bickett put it, "The Harrodsburg *Review*, established in June 1886, was the first of a series of 135 newspapers, each operated for longer or shorter periods, in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio and Kentucky."

Early entries into the highly competitive publishing ventures of the state were the *Mulberry Mail* and the *New Ross News*. Harris sold advertising in Lafayette and Frankfort and in Crawfordsville and Lebanon to support the publications.

To support the technological aspects of his modest newspaper empire, Harris bought a seven column Quarto Chicago Taylor Cylinder

press. It was the first one in Monroe County to be powered by a steam engine.

While growing up in Ellettsville, Harris had absorbed the mechanics of free enterprise and the ways of competition. For the locations of his newspapers he chose towns situated between two county seats. Bickett wrote, "Competition between merchants of such county seats produced abundant advertisements. The system worked 'like the Dutchman's mousetrap,' said Harris, 'I got 'em a comin' an' goin.' "

Harris' first stage in establishing a newspaper was a survey of merchants to see if they understood the value of advertising. If prospects looked favorable, he began looking for a local editor.

Next week: Harris' professional philosophy.