

The Eagle and the Rooster

Admit it, the title for this article made you think I was going to write about “Old Abe” the bald eagle mascot of the 8th Wisconsin Infantry. It’s a good story and maybe down the road we’ll talk about “that Yankee Buzzard” as the Confederates called him. Nor is this a story of a barnyard fowl that became some random soldier’s dinner.

No, this week we are talking about a pair of newspapers that were churning sheets off of the presses here in Corinth during the war; *The Corinth War Eagle* and the *Corinth Chanticleer*. Oh, and for those that have not caught on, if you look up the word chanticleer you will see the definition is, of course, a rooster.

There wasn’t a particularly long history of newspapers in Corinth prior to the war but it was certainly an up and coming industry. The first paper, *The Cross City*, made its debut in 1856, and it was the editor, G. W. Gibson, who suggested the city’s name be changed to Corinth. To celebrate and commemorate the change a new name for the paper was in order as well and the revamped paper was known as *The Corinthian Pillar*.

Another early Corinth paper, *The Republican*, made its debut in 1859 but the winds of political change were blowing across the South and the paper was sold and renamed *The True Democrat*. An additional paper, *The Young American*, had a short lived run the same year but it was the *True Democrat* that spread the word to its readers of a seceded Mississippi and the birth of the Confederacy.

The ink stopped flowing in the spring of ’62 when the Confederate army abandoned Corinth and left it to the enemy. The presses were not idle for long however, as the Federal soldiers, starved for news, were a ready

market for a new paper. The job as editor/publisher of the daily was passed to Private Eldridge D. Fenn of the 2nd Iowa Infantry.

Eight year old Maud Morrow recalled the flamboyant Fenn who left quite an impression on the young lady. “His name and handsome physique would have fitted him to figure as the hero of a two-volume novel. He was full of life and spirits.”

The first issue of *The Corinth War Eagle* hit the streets on July 31 and on page two Fenn declared the intentions of the new paper. “To-day we make our first appearance and claim from you a kindly greeting as a new, but earnest and faithful comrade in arms. We come among you with the determination to be a steady friend, to enter your mess and cheer your hearts with all the information we can gather from the four quarters of the globe to interest or amuse you. Our first great call shall be to try to remove from your hearts every feeling of discontent, to infuse into you a portion of the unlimited confidence which we have in the loyalty, the patriotism, and the ability of our commanding Generals. Thus will your arms and ours be strengthened.”

In keeping with the promise to keep the readers posted on all the important activities, the official order transferring Major General Halleck to Washington, D.C. was posted in the first issue. An editorial bade farewell to the unpopular commander and offered a description for those who had never seen “Old Brains.”

“General Halleck in the camp and in the field is hardly the same person who might have been seen gliding from the Planter’s House to headquarters in St. Louis. He looks, in his new and rich though plain uniform, as if he were in borrowed clothes. In truth, he bears a most striking resemblance to some oleaginous Methodist person dressed in his regimentals, with a wide, stiff-rimmed black felt hat sticking on the back

of his head. While on horseback his Wesleyan character is more and more prominent. He neither looks like a soldier, rides like one, nor does he carry the state of a major general in the field, but is the impersonification (sic) of a man of peace.”

In another editorial the paper portrayed Halleck’s replacement, Ulysses Grant, in a better light. “General Grant is a western man, thinks like a western man, fights like a western man and is the pet of the western army. Newspaper editors away up north have blown long and furious blasts at Gen. Grant, but they have had no other effect than to strengthen the confidence which his men have in him.”

If a reader hoped for real news about the nation and the war, he was in for disappointment. There was fluff and there were bad jokes but there was little else. One article gave a rather dubious argument for the use of the sap of the Sweet Gum tree for the treatment of diarrhea, boldly flux and cholera.

Much of the paper was given over to advertisements from local sutlers, hotel keepers, and entertainment venues. There was a section for unclaimed letters at the post office and a few lines of verse from poets of the day. By a strange coincidence, a number of advertisers had glowing reviews extolling the virtues of their wares.

Sadly, *The Corinth War Eagle*’s life was a short one. Private Fenn had enlisted for a year and before the Fall was over he was a civilian and the paper only a memory. Or was it?

Private Charles Hildreth, also of the 2nd Iowa Infantry, took up the job of editor and rechristened the paper *The Corinth Chanticleer*, “Our Motto: Death to Traitors.”

Why Hildreth revamped the eagle into a rooster is anyone's guess but the results were a far better product than the predecessor. The paper debuted in June of 1863 and was available "as often as the immense amount of work which is crowded upon us will permit."

The results of Hilbreth's hard work were obvious; there were local interest pieces as well as information on the war in other theaters. Updates on the Corinth Theatre and the Music Hall kept readers abreast of the entertainment options and a lengthy piece from a soldier at Camp Davies praised the capabilities and potential of Negro soldiers. "They are the most thoroughly and intensely loyal clans of people in the whole country, north or south."

Commentaries on local commanders was an unusual addition to the editorial page. Freedom of the press may have been pushed to the limit when a soldier/publisher made public his sentiments on superior officers. General Grenville Dodge, the garrison commander, received some favorable ink but not so for General James Tuttle who chose to run for Governor of Iowa on the Democratic ticket. The *Chanticleer* made it known the general would be wasting his time by coming to Corinth to court the soldiers vote.

There were plenty of advertisements for restaurants, saloons and sutlers. Champion & Colb Grocers was very pleased to announce their shelves were overflowing with boots, hosiery, dry goods, oysters, sardines, lobsters, and pickles, as well as "the most fashionable styles for ladies and gentlemen."

It was a good run but it couldn't last. *The Chanticleer* closed its doors in the Fall of 1863. The 2nd Iowa was transferred to Tennessee in preparation for Sherman's upcoming offensive against Atlanta. Private

Hildreth ended his sojourn as a man of the press and returned to his first duty as a soldier. His days as a newspaper man were at an end.