

Main Stream Media & Fake News – circa 1860

In 1854 three Territorial newspapers were established in Lawrence, Kansas, headquarters of the abolition movement in the United States. Just as today the most prominent and widely read newspapers are the eastern newspapers; the NY Times, the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal. Prior to the Civil War Americans also valued reading the leading newspapers back east. Those in the west valued these New England Newspapers whose contributors were most notably a set of Godless and lawless men. William Lloyd Garrison, John Greenleaf Whittier, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau were eccentric, uncompromising, radicals, who turned their backs on religion in order to promote their eccentric uncompromising and bizarre viewpoints on abolitionism. And even religious Henry Ward Beecher took up funds to arm a rebellion in Kansas with crates of rifles labeled “Beecher's Bibles.” Newspapers in Kansas were far removed to how newspapers operate today. The first printing presses were brought to Kansas by the New England Emigrant Aid Society to be used as propaganda tools to espouse their abolitionist philosophy. The early members of the Society were representatives of newspapers in New England. A peculiarity that sprang up in Kansas was the idea of “special correspondents” representing New England newspapers. Their brand of fake news showed them to be always “hovering around certain distinguished personages in Kansas, who write as they are bidden, and whose correspondence is everywhere characterized by personal malice and detraction or who magnify every incident into gigantic importance.” These correspondents not only wrote biased articles from Kansas and sent them back east to be printed in New England papers but also were paid to sell subscriptions of the New England papers to pay for their anti-slavery activities.

New England newspapers hired these “special correspondents” to sell and distribute their newspapers in Kansas besides having them write articles and sending them back east for publication. In Lawrence papers reported fake news to get financial contributions from New England abolitionist supporters in the form of money for travel, lodging and weapons. They understood the connection between being able to disseminate ideas through print in order to mold an ideological perspective based on their political views. Therefore their editorial writings were not to be “conservative” but were transparently recognized as being vindictive and influencing armed conflict. Every skirmish, every contest, had to be described as a bitter struggle between proslavery and free-state men. In order to champion their cause the “special correspondents” sensationalized their accounts.

The Lawrence Tribune often completely fabricated the facts with falsehoods in attempting to glean sympathy from the Eastern press. A few of the descriptions of the Kansas newspapers show what their fake news were contributing to the tensions along the Missouri-Kansas border. An early free-state settler, Thomas C. Wells wrote to his father in Rhode Island explaining the true state of affairs in Kansas Territory. “We do not wonder that you are alarmed for our safety when you read the newspaper accounts from Kansas, they are frequently exaggerated however and more frequently inaccurate as to names of places and numbers of people engaged in battles etc. but they are more always founded in fact sometimes do not state the case nearly as bad as the truth would allow.” And William Smith, another early Kansas settler also admitted that getting to the truth was no easy matter. Smith stated, “The Eastern papers are teeming with misstatements.”

As a result ordinary citizens in Kansas were afraid to express a contrary opinion in private. John Vansickle living in the Kansas Territory wrote to his father back east about the border troubles caused by roving bands of abolitionists. “You hear a small sketch of this in the public papers. It is only on one side of the question. The people here is afraid to write the facts in the case to their friends for fear it might find its way to the public press as it has often done. Then it finds it way back, then the writer is a victim to be drove off. It is not worthwhile to write any more on the subject.”

Responding to false newspaper accounts in Kansas one settler retorted by writing, “Look at the outrages mentioned in their journals, of babies shot through the sides of houses, etc. There is nothing so

low or mean but abolition papers are found to tell it. We, the Union-loving and State-rights party, of Kansas, have kept too still, and allowed the nullifiers to proclaim millions of lies.”

Not even a murder charge kept foreign anarchist Richard Realf from becoming a correspondent for the New York Tribune. As soon as he came to Kansas in 1856 Realf made a raid along the Neosho River where he murdered a Mrs. Chris Carver, sister of John C. Van Gundy. Realf wrote a number of articles for the New York Tribune as well as the Springfield (Illinois) Journal and for a paper in Concord, New Hampshire. He also wrote for the Chicago Tribune. With so many noted Lawrence abolitionists known to be murderers and thieves writing for New England newspapers the view of what Lawrence was like and the sensationalized descriptions of Missourians gave an improper image to those back east.

Fake news precipitated the Civil War in not only newspapers but in books at the time. Uncle Tom's Cabin was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe who never set foot in a Southern state her entire life. Her dishonest view of slavery did not depict the truth but rather fueled the most radical of Northern abolitionist bias and prejudices. Abraham Lincoln attributed Stowe's book to helping lay the groundwork for the Civil War and fuel the abolitionist cause. Lincoln met Stowe at the start of the Civil War declaring, "So this is the little lady who started this great war."

Imagine, the Civil War where over 600,000 men were killed and wounded, started by fake news. Is it any wonder that with men like these in Kansas printing such false accounts with deception and lies that the feelings of Missourians were turned against the Yankees at every turn.

Article by Paul R. Petersen

Ref: Quantrill at Lawrence, Pelican Publishing Co. 2011; Thomas C. Wells, Letters of a Kansas Pioneer, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence; Letter from William Smith, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries; Article in the Kansas City Enterprise reprinted in the Herald of Freedom, February 2, 1856; Sara Robinson, Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life, Kansas Collection, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence; Charles Edward Stowe, Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Story of Her Life (1911) p. 203; Macon Telegraph, October 31, 1890; Kansas Historical Quarterly, vol 43; Letter of John Vansickle, Bourbon County, Kansas, December 28, 1858, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.