

CHAPTER XV

THE FOURTH ESTATE

This year the Montague Observer boasts 94 years of community service. The exact date of the founding of the Observer is not known to the present management, but history records the fact that the Montague Lumberman was started November 25, 1873. The Lumberman was taken over by the Observer May 23, 1889, thereby becoming its successor.

At the same time the Observer purchased the Montague Times, but has no record as to when the Times was founded. The oldest copy of the Montague Lumbermen in the files of the Observer office is dated April 1, 1876, and numbered Volume 3. At that time Otis Colwell was the editor. A later edition, also in Observer files, December 4, 1880, lists Frank Bracelin as the editor.

The oldest copy of the Observer in the files is dated November 22, 1888, and lists C. S. Austin as proprietor. Advertisements in that issue represent L. G. Ripley, Druggist and Stationer, C. L. Streng, cloaks and shawls, E. L. Dodge, holiday goods, Austin and Warnick, dry goods and groceries, Frank McConnell, restaurant and barber shop in connection, North Hill Grocery, Phelan, clothing. At that time the flour mills was named The Montague Roller Mills, and quoted prices on flour, meal, feed and grain. The town then had three physicians, and one dentist. The physicians included: L. W. Keyes, J. W. Switzer, and L. E. Jones. The dentist was F. D. Hollis.

An issue of the Observer dated May 31, 1894 lists O. H. Austin as the publisher. Edition dated October 22, 1896, lists Charles C. Coors as publisher, and an edition dated June 23, 1898 lists E. E. Brown and Company as publishers. The next oldest edition is dated May 19, 1899, and lists H. C. Floten as publisher. This edition relates the big fire which destroyed the Observer office, apparently then located in a part of the Ripley block. The fire also gutted the telephone office, and caused damage by smoke and water in several adjoining places of business. Date of the fire was May 13, 1899.

The Observer files start with this May 19th edition, and cover most of the balance of the year, and succeeding years. The exception being several editions with earlier dates.

The only other business or institution started here as far back as 1873 is the Franklin Hotel. All records indicate the hotel was erected in that year, but these records do not disclose when it started to operate. It may therefore, be that the Observer is the oldest business in Montague. The third oldest is Ripley's Drug

MOTOR SERVICE & SUPPLY
OCEANA CANNING COMPANY

PARSONS OF WHITEHALL
ROTHBURY HARDWARE

Store, which was started in 1876.

The date Mr. Floten became the publisher of the Observer is not indicated in any records now in the Observer office, but it is clearly indicated that he operated the paper for a much longer period than any other individual or company. January 1, 1937 he sold out to George E. Larkin. Larkin edited the paper until April 1, 1942 when he sold to The Muskegon County Printing Company headed by Ray L. Wright. July 1, 1945 Wright sold his interest to Frederick Gigax, the present editor of the paper.

That the newspapers played a leading role in the affairs of the town is evidenced by the fact that the editors were interested and active in all civic affairs. Mr. Floten took a leading part in many such activities, and likewise did Larkin and Wright.

The White Laker, formerly the Whitehall Forum, is only two years away from observing its own Centennial year.

The Whitehall Forum was established in 1869 and the first issue was printed October 28, 1869.

Elliott T. Slocum, son of Giles Slocum, who with Charles Mears platted the original village of Whitehall, financed the first publisher, Ben Frank, in founding the village of Whitehall's first newspaper, the Whitehall Forum.

First bound file of the Forum includes newspapers published in 1874-1875. The first newspaper in that year's file carried volume number "VI", indicating the paper was then in its sixth year. The masthead of the paper carried the name of Charles P. Nearpass, editor and publisher.

Nothing is known about owners or editors between the founding in 1869 and operation of the paper by Nearpass.

Publishers and editors changed rapidly in the first few years. An Ed. J. Smith published the paper from 1882 to 1897. The editorial page flag carried the slogan that the Forum was "devoted to the industries of White Lake with its dual communities of Whitehall and Montague."

Edwin J. Brown took over on January 7, 1898, and was succeeded by E. E. Brown on January 5, 1900.

M. W. (Montague Whitehall) Ripley, member of a pioneer White Lake family, assumed the editorship, January 3, 1901.

Beginning with the issue of May 2, 1901, the name of D. A. Seaman appeared on the masthead as "manager."

With the issue of May 16, 1901, a new name appeared as publisher, that of R. J. MacDonald, and with his regime the operation became more stabilized. D. A. Seaman continued as manager.

Under MacDonald's ownership, there was a succession of editors and managers.

Mr. Seaman's name disappeared from the masthead with the

B & J ENTERPRISES

Jim, Betty, Robert, Joy and D. Scott O'Brien

LIVINGSTON SHEET METAL COMPANY

issue of March 12, 1903, and MacDonald apparently served as editor and manager for about three years.

January 4, 1906, J. V. Nickless edited the paper and served for two years, leaving to become editor of a paper at LaGrange, Illinois, one that later was known as one of the outstanding weeklies of the country.

January 9, 1908, Charles A. Nickless was listed as manager but he served only for that month.

February 6, 1908, W. W. Bristol became editor-manager and he held that job for three years, being succeeded by S. W. Garnett. He was active from January 3, 1911, until he was replaced by Fred P. Clough, June 1, 1911.

Beginning July 6, 1911, Rex R. Royal's name appeared as editor and manager, still under ownership of R. J. MacDonald. Under Royal's management the paper boasted that it was "for Progressives in Muskegon County and elsewhere."

Early in 1914, MacDonald sold part interest in the Forum to his editor, Mr. Royal, but the partnership lasted for only a few months, when Royal went to Shelby to join the Oceana Herald.

The Forum entered on its second period of stable ownership when on April 16, 1914, MacDonald sold out to Ed. D. Skeels, of a widely known Whitehall family. Skeels was a member of the State Legislature and a prominent churchman and civic leader.

Following his death February 21, 1931, the Forum was operated by the Skeel's estate, his son Henry E. and his widow retaining management.

March 1, 1935, The Forum was purchased by Karl W. Coons and Louis J. Berman.

In 1936 Mr. Coons sold his interest to his partner and left Whitehall to publish a paper at Bridgeman, Michigan.

Louis J. Berman continued as owner and editor for over 30 years.

Finally, in the Forum issue of April 22, 1965, announcement was made that the newspaper had been sold to Don F. Seyferth, Muskegon industrialist and a former city commissioner and a supervisor. Wilfred H. Berman, son of L. J. Berman, and Leonard Anderson of Spring Lake were minor stockholders.

L. J. Berman became manager of the Michigan State University student newspaper, the Daily News, at East Lansing.

During the last few years of Mr. Berman's ownership the paper was edited by his son, W. H. Berman.

With the issue of May 7, 1964, the newspaper's name was changed to the White Laker, as it is known at the present time.

In early 1965, the publisher began experimenting with the offset process of printing and the newspaper later that year was converted completely to the new process. The commercial printing department was discontinued and the White Laker, under Associated Publications, Inc., was continued solely as the newspaper operation.

In December, 1965, Harold M. Jensen moved from the printing department to the editorship, and W. H. Berman assumed the post of general manager, with Mr. Anderson in charge of advertising.

June 6, 1966, Berman resigned to move to Hawaii, and Leonard Anderson was named by Mr. Seyferth as executive vice-president.

Through the years the newspaper was of varying format.

It was started as a full-size newspaper called a "broadsheet" and continued in that form until 1890. Then it became a tabloid and kept that style through 1898, at least. No file for the year 1899 is available.

In 1900 the paper was converted to an odd size, even larger than broadsheet, but it ran that way for only a year.

In 1901 it reverted to broadsheet and was printed in that form until the war years.

March 5, 1941, under the stress of a wartime newsprint shortage, L. J. Berman changed the Forum back to tabloid. He recalls that there was only one objection, when one woman ordered her subscription cancelled "because the paper is too small to wrap my husband's lunch in."

With the start of conversion to offset printing, the White Laker (Forum) started another shift in style, going from a five-column print to three wider columns, its present form. The change-over was completed with the issue of March 18, 1965.

In another change, the White Laker, for about a year from 1966 through early 1967, was distributed on a controlled (free) circulation basis.

Beginning February 1, 1967, the paper was returned to paid circulation and at that time started a companion strictly advertising paper called the "Vendor", with county-wide coverage.

This change was a landmark in Michigan newspapering; so far as is known, no other newspaper in the state has successfully made that change.