

William B. Harris and His Newspaper Chain

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One morning in July, 1872, "‘Old No. 6’ came steaming in¹ with her little dinky wood burner engine blowing off with a full head of steam, shrill, screechy bell clanging, and the brakeman twisting the brakes so tight that he had to use his brake stick for leverage and an extra man to let them off."² Howard Morris, a printer from Cincinnati, alighted from the train. He had come to Ellettsville, Indiana, hoping to organize a stock company to publish a local newspaper. As the election of 1872 was approaching, Mr. Morris convinced the Republican leaders of the need for a paper.³ He also used the "trade-booster" argument on the merchants of the community. The \$600 necessary was soon raised and a hand printing plant was ordered from Cincinnati.⁴ The plant consisted of an old Franklin press and a "shirt tail full" of type.

Before the paper was started, however, the company "got cold feet" and the outfit was about to be shipped back. At this point, Samuel B. Harris, a miller in Ellettsville, decided to put up the money and the Ellettsville *Republican* was started, the first issue appearing on August 18, 1872. Howard Morris was hired as the editor, but since he proved unsatisfactory, he was shortly replaced by John F. Walker.⁵

James Harris, grandfather of Samuel B. Harris and a wealthy North Carolina slave owner, migrated to Monroe County, Indiana, and invested heavily in the flatwoods land near Ellettsville.⁶ In 1848, Samuel B. Harris moved into town and constructed a store building. He built an addition to the store in 1864 and put in a woolen mill. Mr. Harris prospered to such an extent that he decided to build a gristmill which was completed in 1870.⁷

Although Samuel B. Harris added the new newspaper

¹ "Old No. 6" refers to a train on the Louisville, New Albany, and Chicago R. R., referred to locally as the "Longest, Nastiest and Crookedest" road in Indiana. Since 1881, it has been generally known as the "Monon." The town into which the train steamed was Ellettsville, Indiana.

² From a reminiscence account of his journalistic career by William B. Harris, *Ellettsville Farm*, March 9, 1939.

³ Dr. Jim McCarley, a prominent Republican leader and candidate for township trustee, was especially interested.

⁴ *Indianapolis News*, June 18, 1940.

⁵ *Ellettsville Farm*, February 22, 1928.

⁶ *Ibid.*, December 23, 1937.

⁷ *Ibid.*, July 7, 1938.

to his other enterprises, he was too busy to look after it. During the first week in December, therefore, he decided to initiate his sixteen year old son, William B. Harris, as editor and manager of the paper. On the following day, young William appeared at the office in a "cut away coat, a plug hat and a cane." He was given about twenty-five lines of reprint, but had to set them over because he had substituted several polysyllabic words which were not in the original. As his father threw the proof out the window, he told his son that if he made such a blunder again "he would follow' the proof through the aperture." It was in March, 1873, that the young man became the actual editor of the *Ellettsville Republican*.⁸ A libel suit during the first year caused the younger Harris to "settle down." He learned to fill up the vacant places with ads "as to our ability to print sale bills, horse and jack bills, etc."⁹

Bloomington, the nearby county seat, had, in 1873, two weekly papers the *Bloomington Progress* published by W. A. Gabe and the *Democrat*, by Tom Purcell. Both newspapers were printed on hand presses. The *Indianapolis News* then consisted of four pages with the type set up by half a dozen men.

After editing the *Ellettsville* paper for three years, Mr. Harris moved to Cloverdale and started the *Thursday Morning Bee*. Because of eye trouble he was forced to return to a farm about three miles west of Ellettsville. Later, in 1879, he went to Spencer to publish the *Owen County People*. After two years, this venture not proving successful, he returned to Ellettsville. In December, 1882, Harris reestablished the *Ellettsville* paper as the *Monroe County Citizen*.

One of the good friends of William B. Harris was John W. Cravens of Bloomington.¹⁰ While engaged in a friendly conversation with each other on the street one day in the middle 'eighties, Mr. Harris stated that, as he had done about all that he could hope to do in Ellettsville, he was considering removal to some larger place where it would be possible to expand his business from time to time. Mr. Cravens suggested that Harrodsburg wanted a newspaper, and asked

⁸ "My Sixty-Five Years in a Print Shop," *Ellettsville Farm*, September 2, 1937. In another article, W. B. Harris gave his editorship as dating from January 1, 1873. *Ibid.*, February 22, 1928.

⁹ "Boiler Plate" had not been invented at that time.

¹⁰ Registrar of Indiana University from 1896-1936.

why it would not be possible for Mr. Harris to publish a Harrodsburg paper on his press at Ellettsville and mail it out from Harrodsburg to subscribers in that community. This inquiry set the ambitious young editor to thinking and resulted in a rather extensive chain of small town newspapers.¹¹

This Harrodsburg *Review*, established in June, 1886, was the first of a series of one hundred thirty-five newspapers, each operated for longer or shorter periods, in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio and Kentucky.¹² Early fall found Mr. Harris soliciting advertisements in Lafayette and Frankfort for a new newspaper, The Mulberry *Mail*. When this paper, started in November, became a success, the enterprising Harris of Ellettsville started another at New Ross, Indiana. The advertising for the New Ross *News* was obtained in Crawfordsville and Lebanon. The proprietor of the chain of little newspapers now bought a "big seven column Quarto Chicago Taylor Cylinder" press, attached a steam engine (the first in Monroe County), and the business expanded rapidly.

Gradually Harris evolved the details of his system of founding newspapers. He decided that the best towns in which to establish newspapers were those located between two county seat towns. Competition between merchants of such county seats produced abundant advertisements. The system worked "like the Dutchman's mouse trap," said Harris, "I got 'em a comin' an' goin'." The first step in the establishment of a local paper was a "dummy" survey of the advertisers in the county seats. If it promised to be profitable, Harris then visited the selected town of publication, presented the proposition to the local merchants and citizens, selected a local editor and started business. He preferred a school teacher or retired minister as the local editor. The latter was to send in local news and solicit subscriptions; his compensation was to be the total subscription money. Mr. Harris passed on his inevitable piece of advice to each editor selected—"If you can't say something good about folks, don't say anything."¹³

After some experimentation, he determined that fifteen

¹¹ Information obtained by Professor William O. Lynch in an interview with William B. Harris at Ellettsville, on August 20, 1939.

¹² Harrodsburg is a town in Monroe County, about ten miles south of Bloomington on the Monon.

¹³ Ellettsville *Farm*, September 2, 1937.

was about the proper number of weekly newspapers to operate successfully at one time. Subscriptions were taken for three months when a newspaper was inaugurated; if it did not prove successful by the end of that time, it would be dropped, and another started in a new place.¹⁴ Later on, he might start a journal a second time in the same town. At State Line (Warren County), Indiana, he revived the paper, the *State Line Pioneer*, three times after the first trial. His policy was not to sell any of these papers whether they were profitable or not.¹⁵

In the spring and fall, Harris was gone from Ellettsville for about half of each month, but during the other seasons, less frequently. After a number of years of such traveling, he knew not only all of the county seats of Indiana, but also their railroads, industries, important business men and satellite towns; thus becoming a veritable encyclopedia of state information. The business attained such a volume that fourteen men were employed regularly for many years in the Ellettsville shop, where all of the printing was done. About 1900, when the print shop caught fire, the one hundred thirty-five columns of advertising which were set up, were saved from destruction by the masterful directing of the volunteer firemen by Mr. Harris. To show the efficiency of the establishment, it may be mentioned that within one hour after the disaster, the type had been moved to another place, cleaned and the work resumed.¹⁶

Each newspaper in the chain at any time gave the appearance of a home-town product since the copies of each were mailed at the local post office rather than from Ellettsville. After printing, the papers were sent in large rolls to the local editor *via* mail or express at the rate of one cent per pound. The editor then folded the papers and took

¹⁴ A partial list of places where newspapers in the chain were established from 1886 to 1907: Indiana—Bainbridge, Bloomington, Brownsville, Colburn, Craigville, Flat Rock, Gilman, Harrodsburg, Independence, Jonesville, Lakeville, Linden, Manilla, Milgrove, Mt. Summit, Mulberry, New Paris, New Ross, New Waverly, Osceola, Patricksburg, Prairie Creek, Reelsville, Rich Valley, Sedalia, State Line, Staunton, Stinesville, Stockwell, Switz City, Terre Haute, Upland, Whitestown, Yeoman; Illinois—Alvin, Big Rock, Elliot, Loxa, Midland City, Ogden, Oswego, Tower Hill, Vermillion, Wayne; Ohio—Farmersville, Trenton; Kentucky—Gracfenberg, Keene, Pine Grove, Shawhan, Stamping Ground. The following six names will serve as examples of the ingenuity of Mr. Harris in providing names for his local newspapers: *Yeoman Localizer*; *New Ross News*; *Oswego Reporter* (Oswego, Ill.); *Gilman Hustler*; *Tower Hill Breeze* (Tower Hill, Ill.); *Mulberry Mail*.

¹⁵ The single exception was the sale of his paper in 1904, at Farmersville, Ohio, to his son. Interview by the author with Henry J. Harris, Kirklin, Indiana, April 5, 1940. This eldest living son of William B. Harris operates a printing establishment in Kirklin, publishing the *Kirklin Press*.

¹⁶ Interview with H. J. Harris, April 5, 1940.

them to the local post office. The papers were all non-partisan and contained no editorials.¹⁷ Because the papers were so similar, a description of the Stinesville *Review* for January 25, 1902, will indicate their nature. This issue of the weekly, four-page sheet was listed as volume IV, and had a subscription price of fifty cents *per annum*. The outside pages contained local news as well as advertisements from the rival county seats, Bloomington and Spencer. The inside pages were filled with "boiler plate" matter.¹⁸ The latter included: "The Story of a Stew," "Growth of our Postal System," miscellaneous jokes, sections on "Agriculture," "Doings of Women," and "Queer Stories." In one story, readers were informed that, "A writer in the *Cologne Gazette* declares that servants in the United State do only half as much work, demand twice as much free time and four times as much wages as servants in Germany."

W. B. Harris, in 1905, tried another publishing venture. He organized a company for the publication of a monthly youths' magazine, *Our Boys and Girls*. Harris wrote most of the articles and stories himself, using as subjects the doings of his own children. The company adopted a plan to increase circulation by offering a shetland pony (raised on the Harris farm near Ellettsville) to the boy or girl who sold the most subscriptions during the month. Although the circulation attained 35,000 after giving away eight ponies, this number was not large enough to make it a paying proposition, so the magazine was sold to Colonel Hunter of Chicago, publisher of *The Star Monthly*.¹⁹

As metropolitan daily newspapers increased their rural circulation, Harris found it more and more difficult to keep his chain out of the "red." By 1907, he gave up the scheme and took more interest in his Ellettsville *Farm*, which name the paper had received in 1895, besides deciding to do "job work." His interest in civic affairs grew until in 1924 he was elected to the Indiana house of representatives as the representative of Monroe County. While serving his term, he was exceedingly active for an elderly man, introducing a

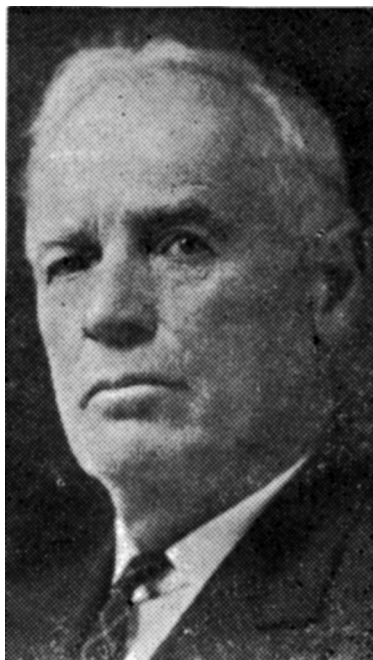
¹⁷ Interview with H. J. Harris, April 5, 1940.

¹⁸ "Boiler Plate," now known as time copy, was purchased at the rate of \$1.25 for six columns. The same material was used in all of the chain papers for a particular week.

¹⁹ The magazine was published from September, 1905, to May, 1906. The first pony was won by a boy in Rhode Island.

number of bills and participating freely in the house discussions.²⁰

In May, 1929, he started publication of *Quarries and Mills*. The latter was one of his lifelong ambitions, since there never had been a periodical devoted to the Indiana limestone field alone. Unfortunately for the undertaking, however, the depression soon "caught up" with the industry and the publication had to be abandoned in November, 1931. Harris also edited and published the *Monroe County Farm Bureau News* from April, 1923, to December, 1928.²¹ In this period, it was one of the best farm papers in the state. In his last years, Mr. Harris turned over most of the work in the printing office to his son, William B. Harris, Jr., but continued to write the editorials for the *Ellettsville Farm*. The latter took on more and more of the nature of reminiscences of his long and active life. In July, 1939, after a period of prolonged ill health, William B. Harris, retired as editor, and thus brought to a close his unique journalistic career of sixty-seven years. He died a few weeks after his retirement on November 9, 1939, at his home in Ellettsville.



William B. Harris

²⁰ *Indiana House Journal*, 1925 (Indianapolis, 1925), 4,938. *passim*.

²¹ Complete files of *Our Boys and Girls*, *Quarries and Mills* and *Monroe County Farm Bureau News* as well as scattering numbers of the *Monroe County Citizen* are to be found in the Indiana University Library. The Library also possesses a considerable part of the file of the *Ellettsville Farm*. All of these publications were given to the Library by the Harris family.