FACETIOUS NEWS WRITING, 1833-1883

By Frank Luther Mott

Facetious news writing and witty editing were rare in the first half of American journalistic history. While an occasional editor indulged in a humorous fancy in playing with the news during the first 140 years of American journalism, it was not until the 1830's that a new type of journal, influenced by a novel concept of the news and of news reporting, began to break down the established rule of dull seriousness in the news columns.

This new departure was the penny press. It was a product of the Industrial Revolution in England and the United States. The large circulations which these cheap dailies had to develop to be successful would have been impossible without the new Napier presses and Fourdrinier papermaking machines. Nor would they have found increasing audiences among the mechanics and workingmen of the times but for that awakening social consciousness which they, in turn, helped to develop. Papers generally had been selling for six cents if and when they had a single copy price. They were not hawked on the streets. In New York they were called six-penny papers; in Baltimore, with a variation in currency, they were "fippenny" papers; and in New Orleans, the picayune was the coin which paid for a copy. The tiny penny papers began in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. The first successful American penny daily, the *New York Sun*, was established by the printer Benjamin H. Day.

The *Sun* was a very small sheet of four three-column pages. But its variance from the standard type of newspaper was not in size, format, and price only; in content its sharp divergence from the six-cent papers was striking. Appealing as it did to a new economic and intellectual level of readership, the penny press was far more direct, objective, frank, and local. The traditional stress upon foreign and political news was discarded in favor of an emphasis upon sensation, human interest, witty paragraphing, gossip, and local happenings. A contemporary critic named

these new cheap papers the "pepper-pot press,"[1] and they did indeed give their public a novel, pepper-pot concept of the news. The leading papers of this new departure were the *Sun*, *Transcript*, and *Herald* in New York, the *Public Ledger* in Philadelphia, the *Sun* in Baltimore, and the *Daily Times* in Boston.

Outstanding among the kinds of material which were found immediately adaptable to this pepper-pot news concept was the police court report. For several years there had been a kind of tentative experimentation with such reports by two or three of the New York papers, in imitation of a technique which had been very successful in English journalism. It was the *London Morning Herald* which set the pattern of the facetious police court report; and chiefly because of the popularity of this feature, it overtook and passed the *London Times* in the circulation race. John Wight was the reporter who first exploited the tragicomedy of the early morning hearings in the Bow Street court for the delectation of *Morning Herald* readers. In 1826 American publishers brought out a reprint of a volume in which some of these sketches had been collected for London publication two years before. The title page read: *Mornings at Bow Street: A Selection of the Most Humourous and Entertaining Reports which have Appeared in the Morning Herald, with Illustrative Drawings by George Cruikshank.* The popularity of this volume was attested by a sequel, *More Mornings at Bow Street.* It was inevitable that American papers should try the new journalistic technique, and a few of them did.

The police court reports consisted of short items about the various cases which came before the judge, sometimes with a bit of caricature, often with an ironic turn or some sidelight meant to be amusing, but never anything uproariously funny. An example from one of the earliest of such reports in an American paper comes from Mordecai M. Noah's *New York Enquirer* five years before the founding of the *Sun*, and it is quite possible that it was written by James Gordon Bennett:

> A beautiful young woman, whose name was Anne Jane ————, appeared to prefer a charge against William ————, her husband, for ill treating her, and "behaving like a brute," — and a brute indeed must be the person who could "raise in that innocent bosom a

[1] *Democratic Review* (New York), XXX, 1852, p. 365.

fear." Her eyes we verily, and in our conscience believe, were the brightest and darkest that ever sparkled.

"Sweet eyes! that make us sigh
Ever to have seen such."

As to her complexion,

"Go look at the pink of the Indian shell,
It will describe her cheek's hue well."

In fact, she was a perfect personification of "beauty in tears." She stated, that because she did not choose to get up at what she thought was an unreasonable hour this morning, her husband had thrown a pail of water over her while she was in bed, and thoroughly drenched her from head to foot. As the husband did not choose to ask her pardon for the outrage, and as he would not procure bail for his future good conduct toward his wife, he was committed to Bridewell. When "sweet Mistress Anne" Jane was requested to write her name at the bottom of her affidavit, she lisped out with a *naivete* indescribable, that she could not write because *she was left handed!* [2]

Mistress Anne, with the sparkling eyes and the late-rising habits, must have seemed to the obviously smitten reporter a welcome relief in the procession of bleary sots and sluts who dragged through the police columns. Moralists immediately objected; and the *Enquirer* and the *Morning Chronicle*, the chief offenders, after defending their course vigorously for a few weeks, gave up the game.

But when the penny dailies flooded in upon the streets of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia in the thirties, the police columns came into their tawdry and perversely amusing heritage. The *New York Sun*'s police report was not very funny, except to those who think a drunken person always a comic character and wife-beating a side-splitting indoor sport. But the *New York Transcript*, with livelier writing and frequent use of the dialogue technique, was more amusing. Thus:

Wife. Mr. Judge, Mr. Judge, I'm a poor dead and gone distracted creature that's cut all to pieces by my crazy husband and killed into the bargain.

Husband. She lies, Judge, she's an ungrateful creature, besides, I never hit her in earnest, but only by way of *coaxing* her.

Wife. Oh, you dreadful villain, was it coaxing you was when you cut my cheek asunder, when you knocked my eye out, and took all my drink away and swallowed it yourself?

[2] *New York Enquirer*, May 22, 1828.

Magistrate. Did he knock your eye out?
Wife. He did so, sir, he knocked it clane out wid his dirty fist.
Magistrate. But you appear to have two very bright blue eyes today.
Wife. It's blue they are now, sir, but it's black they were a short time since. . . .[3]

Rowdy and ribald these items often were, and a tawdry sort of humor. But it was the first time in the history of American journalism that the papers had made a practice of printing the domestic tragicomedies of the lower classes; it was better than a play, and readers were vastly amused.

Irish immigrants figured prominently in these items; and Irishmen were always funny, anyway. The reporter on the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* added an extra fillip by punning on the names of some of the drunks, as:

> John Songster, it would appear, does not always sing the right tune. His "better half" complained of mal-treatment from him this morning. She, however, relented, and after an admonition from his honor, he was discharged.[4]

Occasionally there is a little word-caricature, as in this one of a sailor on shore leave:

> James Holmes, a rough-looking tar, with a pair of James Watson Webb whiskers, was found last night in a court which leads down to Water st., drunk and asleep; he was arrested. He stated that he came home on the U. S. ship Delaware, took a drop too much, and "lost his reckoning and got out of his latitude," as he expressed it. He was permitted to clear out.[5]

So common as to be almost a convention of such reporting was the incidental sermonette against strong drink. The *Public Ledger* man had a new way of presenting the idea when he quoted an "oration on whiskey" which had been delivered by one John Corbit, an old offender, in the Mayor's Court. This speech bears a resemblance to other bibulous disquisitions:

> Whiskey is a curious article; it is both sweet and sour, a poison and an antidote. It creates war and is used in making peace, it breaks heads and mends them. Governments encourage its use and punish

[3] *New York Transcript*, August 29, 1835.
[4] *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, May 31, 1836.
[5] *Ibid.*, May 19, 1836.

people for using it. It is paradoxical and contradictory. I cannot understand it."[6]

In spite of this effort, Corbit went to jail, there to pursue his philosophical reflections further.

The *New York Sun*'s police court reporter was George W. Wisner, a printer, whom an admirer called "the Balzac of the daybreak court."[7] Day hired him at four dollars a week to rise every morning at three and cover the court proceedings. When he realized, after a few months, that he would have to raise Wisner's salary, Day decided to give him a half interest in the paper instead, and allow him to pay for it out of his profits. When Wisner became ill a year and a half later, Day bought him out for $5,000. Out in Pontiac, Michigan, the journalist's health improved. He became editor of the *Pontiac Courier* and was elected to the state legislature. On the *Sun* he was succeeded by Richard Adams Locke. The *Transcript* police court man was William Atree, an Englishman, a printer, and a wanderer. The *Sun* accused him of faking his reports, which, it says, were "concocted from an English publication called 'Mornings in Bow Street'."[8] Atree later left the *Transcript* for the *Courier and Enquirer*, was once assaulted on the street and severely beaten, and seems to have dropped from sight when he departed for turbulent Texas in the late thirties. It has been surmised that Jesse D. Reed was the police reporter on the *Baltimore Sun*,[9] and it is possible that the man who did similar sketches for the *Boston Daily Times* was the junior partner, William H. Garfield.

The facetious police court column ran its course within a decade and a half, after which, having lost its novelty, it was succeeded by other and more sensational kinds of news. Even in 1835, James Gordon Bennett, founding the *New York Herald*, felt that police court stuff, with the same old drunks and wife-beaters, had been rather worn out and announced that he would exclude "all such folly" from his columns. But neither Bennett nor the papers that dropped the night court columns renounced the attitude which Wight, Wisner, Atree, and the others had made almost a journalistic convention; they still inclined to

[6] *Ibid.*, August 15, 1836.

[7] Frank M. O'Brien, *The Story of the Sun* (New York, 1928), 17.

[8] *New York Sun*, May 26, 1835.

[9] Gerald W. Johnson, *et al.*, *The Sunpapers of Baltimore* (New York, 1937), 61.

make fun of the offenders appearing before petty magistrates. For more than half a century wife-beaters and alcoholics made journalistic comedy in many papers, and the phenomenon is not quite unknown today.

One of the most important contributions which the penny dailies made to the American press as a whole was their emphasis on local news. Before about 1840, the editor, with an assistant or two in the case of the larger papers, prepared the copy for his four-page issue with shears and pastepot, adding a few editorial paragraphs, an occasional original letter on public affairs by a would-be political leader who signed a pen name, and a half-column of local happenings of the courts, accidents, important deaths, and items of city government. But when the leaping circulations of the penny papers showed how much readers liked local news, it suddenly became necessary to employ a man who would spend all his time picking up items in the paper's home city. This new staff member was called the "local man" or more simply the "local." On the larger metropolitan papers additional "locals" were soon added, and then shortly they had staffs of reporters with city editors in charge; thus occurred the most important change in editorial organization which our newspapers have ever experienced — a change which doomed the old "personal" journalism because it set up sub-editors more important than the editors-in-chief of the Greeley-Bennett tradition.

What, then, was the status of the "local"? For two or three decades after 1840 the small-city daily commonly kept one man to look after the local news. He had to be active, to cultivate a very wide acquaintance, to have a "nose for news," and to be able to fill his column on a dull day. As the "local" of the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City, Nevada Territory, wrote:

> Our duty is to keep the universe thoroughly posted concerning murders and street fights, and balls, and theaters, and pack-trains, and churches, and lectures, and schoolhouses, and city military affairs, and highway robberies, and Bible societies, and hay-wagons, and a thousand other things which it is in the province of local reporters to keep track of and magnify into undue importance for the instruction of the readers of this great daily newspaper.[10]

[10] Quoted in A. B. Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography* (3 vols., New York, 1912), I, 228.

This quotation illustrates not only the variety of the reporting, but also the fact that the "local," when he had a turn for humor, was sometimes permitted to give it free rein. That is precisely what occurred on not a few papers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and many a city column was the more eagerly read for the coruscations of the "local's" quips and quiddities. Moreover, the system of exchanges among newspapers being still at flood, the watchful editors of journals in other cities, scissors always in hand, would clip the comicalities of their "contemporaries" to enliven their own columns. The spreading fame of his rivals would stimulate the local humorist to greater effort. Thus began the fame of Sam Clemens, soon to be called Mark Twain, on the *Territorial Enterprise*; and that of Artemus Ward on the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*; and that of Orpheus C. Kerr, reporter on several eastern papers, in whose pen name the pun-lover may recognize "orfice-seeker." There were many other newspaper wits less closely connected with local news reporting whose pseudonyms and whose papers became famous in these years, such as Petroleum V. Nasby of the *Toledo Blade*; Bill Arp, of the *Southern Confederacy*, Rome, Georgia; M. Quad, of the *Detroit Free Press*; and Brick Pomeroy, of the *La Crosse Democrat*.[11]

Artemus Ward and Mark Twain were two leading examples of "locals" who employed humor to enliven their columns of news items.

Charles F. Browne, having served an apprenticeship on New England papers, set out for Ohio in 1853 as a tramp printer. Jobs were easy to get and easy to leave in the printing business of those days, and Browne worked in several Ohio towns before he found himself in Cleveland as a full-fledged local reporter on the *Plain Dealer*.

One day when he was making up his daily olla-podrida of matters about town, which was appropriately headed "City Facts and Fancies," his habitual interest in shows and menageries led him to put a chuckle into his column in the form of a ridiculously spelled and absurdly concocted letter from a fictitious manager of a nonexistent sideshow. This paragraph was tucked in among

[11] Artemus Ward was Charles F. Browne, Orpheus C. Kerr was Robert H. Newell, Petroleum V. Nasby was David R. Locke, Bill Arp was Charles B. Lewis, Brick Pomeroy was Mark C. Pomeroy.

theater announcements, death notices, police items, and reading notices for Boerhave's Holland Bitters and Prof. Wood's Hair Restorative, in the issue of January 30, 1858:

> LETTER FROM A SIDESHOWMAN. — Mr. Artemus Ward, proprieter of the well-known side show, writes us from Pittsburgh, as follows:
>
> "PITSBURGH, Jan. the
> 27 18 & 58
>
> To the Plane Deeler Sir i write to no how about the show bisnes in Cleeveland i have a show consisting in part of a Calforny Bare two snakes tame foxies &c also wax works my wax works is hard to beat, all say they is lifelike and nateral curiosities among my wax works is Our Saveyer Gen taylor and Docktor Webster in the ackt of killing Parkman. now mr. Editor scratch off few lines and tel me how is the show bisnes in your good city I shal have hanbils printed at your offis you scratch my back and i will scratch your back, also git up a grate blow in the paper about my show dont forgit the wax works. yours truly,
>
> ARTEMUS WARD.
> Pitsburg, Penny.
>
> "P. S. — pitsburg is a 1 horse town. A. W."
>
> We believe Mr. W. would do well with his show here, and advise him to come along immediately.

So Artemus Ward was born. A week later he wrote again, his spelling having grown worse in the interim. But there were other bits of fun in Browne's column, too.

One *coup de maitre*, struck off about the time Artemus Ward was a-borning, was the Paulding County Hyena story:

> A HYENA LOOSE IN PAULDING COUNTY. — On Wednesday morning last, between three and four o'clock, a striped hyena broke loose from his cage in the barn of Mr. Eli Watson, a few miles west of Paulding, in Paulding county. The beast is the property of Mr. Ganung (formerly of the firm of Maybe, Ganung & Co., well known circus and menagerie proprietors) who quarters his collection of animals during the winter season at the farm of the above named Mr. Watson. The monster was not missed until daylight. Raising a numerous crowd of farmers, Mr. Watson went in search of him. Knowing the terrible instincts of the animal, the party proceeded to a graveyard about a mile distant and there found him. He had disinterred two newly buried bodies and mostly devoured them. He had also partly dug up other graves. To capture the monster alive in his then infuriated

state was, of course, an impossibility. Mr. Watson therefore fired a rifle at him but did not hit him. The monster sprang in among the men, pounced upon a German named Paffenberg, killing him almost instantly. A boy and two men in the crowd were also knocked over and considerably though not dangerously injured. The German was the only person killed. The hyena made for the woods. It was reported that he killed a man on his way thither, but the report is not authenticated. A large force was immediately raised, and the animal pursued, but at last accounts had not been found. The hyena formerly belonged to Van Amburgh & Co., and is said to be the largest one of his species in America. He had, we are informed, been reared in a cage and had always been considered as tame and peaceable as animals of his kind can be rendered. His escape, fearful work, and pursuit have, we need hardly add, created great excitement in the vicinity of Paulding.[12]

Three days later, this paragraph appeared:

THE HYENA — CORRECTION — A few errors occurred in our notice of the escape of the hyena in Paulding County, the other evening. In the first place, we are reliably informed that Paffenberg was not killed by the monster, nor injured indeed at all, because the monster did not get out of his cage, and could not therefore have done it. We were also misinformed about the monster's being in Paulding at all. He is not there now, never was there, and, it is firmly believed, never will be again. . . .[13]

The corrections continue, wiping out one detail after another until about all that remains is that there is a Paulding and a Paulding County.

A year or so later the *Plain Dealer*'s "local" was selling his sketches for simultaneous publication in *Vanity Fair*, a New York satirical weekly. This arrangement did not work, and in 1860 Artemus Ward, as he was now being called, left the newspaper for a staff position on *Vanity Fair*. But the point is that the job of local reporter, a comparatively new, unformed and informal institution, gave the humorist opportunity to "spread himself," as the phrase went.

So it was on many papers, and notably on the *Territorial Enterprise* at Virginia City, Nevada. The first paper printed in the territory, the *Enterprise* had been founded at the village of

[12] *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 6, 1858.

[13] *Ibid.*, February 9, 1858.

Genoa, moved after some months to Carson City, the capital, and in 1860 transferred to Virginia City to become the spokesman of mining and miners in the newly exploited Comstock Lode. William Wright, whose pen name "Dan De Quille" was soon to become rather widely known, was the "local" on the *Enterprise*. It was his fecund and playful imagination which conceived the "solar armor story," long remembered by western newspaper men. This told how a local inventor had devised a rubber coverall garment equipped with a refrigerating device to fill it with cold air, in order to make the traveler across the torrid desert comfortable on his trip. In view of modern aircooling mechanisms, it seems a good idea. But the inventor, who had started out across Death Valley, wearing his so-called solar armor, one day when the temperature was at 117 degrees, did not return. A searching party later found his body. The machine had worked all right, but he had been unable to get it turned off, so that he had frozen to death. When the body was found, the machine was still running, and an icicle eighteen inches long hung from the glacial nose of the martyr to science.

Sam Clemens, tired of mining, took a job as "local" on the *Enterprise* in August, 1862. Files of the paper for this period are not extant, but some of the humorist's pieces are reprinted in other places, and it is evident that he was not only permitted but encouraged to give free play to his exuberant fancy. He had a barrel of fun reviewing the plays presented by the touring companies which came to the local opera house. His burlesque handling of a San Francisco company's production of Maria Ann Lovell's *Ingomar the Barbarian* reached a wider audience when *Yankee Notions*, a New York comic, reprinted it with praise.[14] In Clemens' story of this play, which is based on Greek romance, the barbarians are Comanches; Polydor, the elderly suitor, is called "a wealthy, spindle-shanked, stingy old stockbroker"; and Parthenia is "the accomplished Greek maiden who speaks English without any perceptible accent." In the denouement, the Chief of Police makes a treaty with the Comanches, giving each of them a ranch.

But Clemens, who fixed upon the pen name "Mark Twain" while he was employed on the *Enterprise*, occasionally amused

[14] *Yankee Notions* (New York), XIII, 1864, pp. 125-27.

the readers of his local column with tall tales of his own invention, such as that of the petrified man. When this strange natural phenomenon was found,

> The body was in a sitting posture and leaning against a huge mass of croppings; the attitude was pensive, the right thumb resting against the side of the nose; the left thumb partially supported the chin, the forefinger pressing the inner corner of the left eye and drawing it partly open; the right eye was closed, and the fingers of the right hand spread apart. This strange freak of nature created a profound sensation in the vicinity, and our informant states that, by request, Justice Sewall or Sowell of Humboldt City at once proceeded to the spot and held an inquest on the body. The verdict of the jury was that "deceased came to his death from protracted exposure," etc. The people of the neighborhood volunteered to bury the poor unfortunate, and were even anxious to do so; but it was discovered, when they attempted to remove him, that the water which had dripped upon him for ages from the crag above, had coursed down his back and deposited a limestone sediment under him which had glued him to the bedrock upon which he sat, as with a cement of adamant, and Judge S. refused to allow the charitable citizens to blast him from his position. The opinion expressed by his Honor that such a course would be little less than sacrilege, was eminently just and proper. Everybody goes to see the stone man, as many as 300 persons having visited the hardened creature during the past five or six weeks.[15]

Mark was delighted to find that some "exchanges" were "taken in" by this *jeu d'esprit* in spite of the gesture of derision made by the fingers and nose of this hardened old fellow. It is said, however, that Mark got his paper into trouble by another faked story — that of the massacre at Dutch Nick's. A. B. Paine, Twain's biographer, thinks that the immediate motivation for this grisly opus was the campaign on the part of the San Francisco newspapers to get investors to take their money out of local mining ventures and put it into utilities, and the theory seems fairly borne out by the final paragraph. In the story, a man named Hopkins followed this financial advice, lost all his money and went berserk, killing his wife and seven of his nine children — the other two might recover. In his unseemly perform-

[15] Reprinted from the *Territorial Enterprise* in the *San Francisco Bulletin*, October 15, 1862, quoted in Ivan Benson, *Mark Twain's Western Years* (Stanford University, 1938), 75-76.

ance he used an axe, a knife, and a club, finally scalping his wife.

> About ten o'clock on Monday evening Hopkins dashed into Carson on horseback, with his throat cut from ear to ear, and bearing in his hand a reeking scalp from which the warm, smoking blood was still dripping, and fell in a dying condition in front of the Magnolia saloon. Hopkins expired, in the course of five minutes, without speaking. The long, red hair of the scalp he bore marked it as that of Mrs. Hopkins.[16]

Mark Twain's "Petrified Man" and "Massacre at Dutch Nick's," Dan De Quille's "Solar Armor," and Artemus Ward's "Paulding County Hyena," belong to the type of story known as the journalistic hoax. Now, the line between the journalistic hoax and the journalistic fake is at once nice and important. It is nice because the distinction depends not upon any objective criteria or even upon the intention of the writer, but upon the reception of the story by the readers. If it fools nobody, but is amusing, it may be a good hoax story and worth two hundred words, boxed, on the front page. If it fools the more credulous, but allows readers of sharper wits to congratulate themselves on how much smarter they are than some others, it is a successful and memorable hoax. But if it fools everyone, it is a fake, and highly reprehensible from the point of view of ethical journalism. In this third case, the story is so good that it is very bad indeed and the reporter will probably lose his job. This is what would have happened to Mark Twain in connection with the massacre story had not his employer also been his sympathetic friend.

Historically, tolerance of hoaxes has declined as the ethics of reporting have advanced; no respectable paper today would print such famous coups as the Moon Hoax of 1835 or the Wild Animal Hoax of 1874. The permissible proportion of gullible readers for any elaborate, or in any way significant, invented story was reduced to the vanishing point a generation ago. There still are little stories of the nature of those which Louis T. Stone used to devise and send out in paragraphs under a Winsted, Connecticut dateline to make thousands chuckle over the latest absurdity perpetrated by "the Winsted Liar." Probably the

[16] Reprinted in the *San Francisco Bulletin*, October 31, 1863, from the *Territorial Enterprise* of October 28, quoted in Appendix C of A. B. Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography*, III, 1597-99.

Winsted masterpiece was the famous story of the hen that rode a locomotive into that city and then went about her business, leaving an egg on the cowcatcher to pay her fare. This was not the same hen that laid an egg in the bed of a Winsted housewife every morning and then cackled to wake her up so she could fry it for her husband before he went to work. One never knows whether the little oddities of the daily news — the so-called "dizzy" stories — are true, and one cares less. But the big hoax — except for an occasional broad burlesque or an effort in a college paper — is as rare as hen's teeth.

There will, of course, always be news fakes as long as there are dishonest journalists with axes to grind, and dishonest news sources who can impose on credulous reporters. Fakes are not funny, but the essence of a hoax is in its nature as a practical joke.[17]

Richard Adams Locke's Moon Hoax, which appeared in the *New York Sun* during the last week of August, 1835, is too well known to require summary here.[18] Based upon the popular interest in science characteristic of the period, this story of the flora, fauna, and human inhabitants of the moon, as viewed through a huge telescope, fooled a large proportion of its readers, including some rival papers which summarized or reprinted it. Some Yale men, the story goes, were at least interested enough to come down to New York to see the original Herschel articles from which Locke said he was copying. When at last Locke, over a too social glass, gave his secret away to a reporter from another paper, and the bubble burst, the whole matter was accepted as a clever practical joke. Apparently nobody was angry except some rival papers which were jealous because the *Sun* circulation had leaped to heights never before known in American journalism.

Edgar Allan Poe, who was at the time writing *Hans Pfaall* for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, felt that Locke had almost taken the words off the point of his pen, and broke off his tale, never to finish it. Poe later wrote in *Godey's Lady's Book* that Locke's performance was "the greatest hit in the way of sensa-

[17] This distinction is not accepted in Curtis D. MacDougall, *Hoaxes* (New York, 1940), an excellent collection of hoaxes and fakes, with a psychological inquiry into the public response to them.

[18] The best account of it is in O'Brien, *Story of the Sun*, chap. iii.

tion — of merely popular sensation — ever made by any similar fiction in either America or Europe."[19] Some two years before he wrote these lines, Poe had himself contributed his balloon hoax to the *Sun*. It appeared under the head "Astounding News," followed by the line "by Express via Norfolk," and then five more headline decks: "The Atlantic Crossed in Three Days! / Signal Triumph of Mr. Monck Mason's Flying Machine!!! / Arrival at Sullivan's Island, Near Charleston, of Mr. Mason, Mr. Robert Holland, Mr. Henson, Mr. Harrison Ainsworth and four Others / In the Steering Balloon Victoria, after a passage of 75 Hours from Land to Land/ Full Particulars of the Voyage!!!"[20] Vivid as the story was, readers were now more wary and were inclined to wait for the confirmation that never came, while other papers condemned the piece as conscienceless fakery.

But readers of the *New York Herald* on Monday morning, November 9, 1874, were equally unprepared for the attacks of hoaxers and the concerted assault of wild animals broken loose from the Central Park Zoo. They found the entire first page of the *Herald* devoted to a story of how the wild beasts had all burst out of their cages and, despite the heroic efforts of the Mayor and the police and three regiments of the National Guard to restrain them, had enjoyed, in the reporter's lurid phrase, "a bloody and fearful carnival." One of the lions entered a church where a congregation was worshiping and frightened everyone into hysterics with "his deep bass growl." A rhinoceros worked havoc until he fell into one of those sewer excavations which New Yorkers always place conveniently across some of their main streets, possibly for just such emergencies. General Chester A. Arthur, ex-Mayor Oakey Hall, and Editor Manton Marble of the *World* were among the distinguished New Yorkers who organized the fight against the wild beasts, birds, and reptiles. "Lester Wallack took aim . . . from behind the unfinished iron building on the East Side, and perforated the tiger to some slight degree." Governor John A. Dix shot a Bengal tiger on Madison Avenue. Nevertheless, some two hundred persons of

[19] Edward C. Stedman and George E. Woodberry, eds., *Works of Edgar Allen Poe* (10 vols., Chicago, 1894-1896), VIII, 144. The generalization may need amendment; cf. *Robinson Crusoe*.

[20] *New York Sun*, April 13, 1844, Extra.

all ages were killed or injured and "a partial list of casualties" is given. This is followed by a "List of Slaughtered Animals," which in addition to "2 Leopards, 1 Grizzly Bear, 1 Bengal Tiger, and 1 African Lion," includes such items as "1 Prairie Dog, 1 Woodchuck, 4 Pinkfooted Geese, 1 Derbian Wallaby, 1 Nvighan, and 1 Guanaco."

The story, which was written by Joseph I. C. Clarke, night city editor, was really a thriller. Those who read it through to its fine-print end, however, found the deflationary words:

> Of course the entire story given above is a pure fabrication. Not one word of it is true. Not a single act or incident described has taken place. . . . It is simply a fancy picture which crowded upon the mind of the writer a few days ago while he was gazing through the iron bars of the cages of the wild animals in the menagerie at Central Park. . . .[21]

But many readers were overcome by hysteria before they reached the end of the story, and the town was badly upset. Some of the men armed themselves and sallied into the street with the idea that here was the chance of a lifetime for big game hunting. There were no telephones; and the anxiety of wives for husbands downtown and for children at school was very real. The next morning the *Herald* had no boasts of its triumph, but published an article, apparently by way of alibi, urging the need of a better zoo and safer cages. Bennett, the *Herald*'s owner, had known nothing of the proposed hoax, and is said to have disapproved.

This was the last of the grand newspaper hoaxes. Comic relief continued to be furnished by an occasional witty reporter at the expense of police court derelicts, prize fighters, and actors, and by humorists in the provincial press. And by this time Charles A. Dana had come back to New York journalism as editor and owner of the *New York Sun* and had begun to make the country's cleverest newspaper.

Dana's *Sun* made its success by doing somewhat the same thing in the seventies that the *Sun* and the *Herald* had done in the thirties: it was pert, novel, and sometimes sensational. The *Herald*, indeed, had not changed its original policy; but it was now heavier on its feet than the rejuvenated *Sun*. Moreover, the

[21] The entire story is reprinted in Don C. Seitz, *The James Gordon Bennetts* (Indianapolis, 1928), chap. xiii.

Sun had an expertness, a sureness, a virtuosity which the *Herald* writers had seldom or never attained. The *Sun*, though rather more gentlemanly about it, was no more afraid of a dash of sensationalism than the *Herald*; indeed, moralists of the times were often pretty severe on the *Sun*. There was a familiar quip which compared the correct but sometimes dull *Evening Post* with the *Sun* as follows: "The *Sun* makes vice attractive in the morning, and the *Post* makes virtue unattractive in the evening."

Dana gathered around him a few sub-editors who, in turn, drew about themselves a number of clever, educated young men with a knack for writing whom they instructed in the *Sun* style and *Sun* ideas. These teachers were, chiefly, Amos J. Cummings, Selah M. ("Boss") Clarke, and John B. Bogart. The last-named promulgated what is perhaps the most famous of the many definitions of news: "When a dog bites a man, that is not news; but when a man bites a dog, that is news." This search for the unusual brought what soon came to be called the "human-interest story" into unusual prominence in the *Sun*.

Perusal of a file of the *Sun* of the 1870's is still an amusing pastime today. Every four-page issue yields a story or two which retains that freshness and sprightliness of which Dana boasted. "Boss" Clarke's young men sought out the color and variety and intimate vitality of the life of a city which had now grown to a million population. One of them wrote a story of hot-weather living conditions in the tenements in July, 1878, with no special attempt to point a social lesson or to be amusing or to be pathetic, but with a natural vividness and liveliness. Here is a bit of life, Mr. and Mrs. Reader; it will interest you this hot weather; the *Sun* shines for all. Another wrote a story of a gentleman burglar, which might have suggested (but probably did not) the character of "Raffles" to E. W. Hornung. Another, in 1872, wrote a wonderful story of a discreet Chinese servant for whom a half-daft sailor had conceived a malignant hatred that was half fear, and of the assault and trial which followed. Yet another related how a mob took possession of the ballroom of a hotel in Flushing for a 73-round prize fight; and a few days later came the story of the efforts of "The Mouse" and "Owney Geogeeghan's Rat" to find a place for a fighting match. The unknown writer of these fight stories caught the

very mood and color of these early, illegal ring contests — a mixture of cruelty, gangsterism, and sport.

This was not humorous writing. There was occasionally a flicker of wit, a bit of caricature. Yet the essence of caricature is exaggeration, and there was nothing broad or overdrawn in these sketches. It is clear that "Boss" Clarke instructed his young men not to overwrite, not to gild the lily, never to exaggerate; it is clear that the stories are amusing largely because of the selection of materials. For the most part, they are even severely objective, restrained, and unpretentious. Usually they are not more than a quarter of a column in length, and they almost never reach a full column.

Typical is a little story of a steamboat excursion. It begins:

> A small man with a yellow beard and a blue badge on his breast stood yesterday morning at 8 o'clock at the foot of West 24th st. and wiggled his fingers at all who passed. Some comprehended the pantomime and in response turned off to the wharf at 25th st. Others regarded the nimble fingers of the man in simple amazement and passed on. The man wiggled his fingers because the boat that was to bear the Manhattan Literary Association of Deaf Mutes to Columbia Grove lay at the foot of 25th st. instead of at the foot of 24th as had been announced. In a short time a hundred persons were gathered at the pier.[22]

The remainder of this story displays charm and a quiet humor in telling of the chattering of thumbs and fingers on board the boat, and of an after-dinner speech by the club's president.

The *Sun* rather specialized in stories of the excursions, picnics, and clambakes in which organizations of all kinds in the New York of the seventies indulged. There was one, for example, of the annual excursion of the Fat Men's Association, with a clambake, and a dance on shipboard. The charm of this occasion was somewhat marred, however, by an altercation between two of the oversize members in the course of which, the deck being a little slippery from spilled beer, some six hundred pounds of avoirdupois went down and an ankle was broken.

These reportorial techniques of the *New York Sun* were, in the course of years, highly influential on the development of American journalism. They brought circulation leadership to

[22] *New York Sun*, July 11, 1878.

the *Sun*, which in some years outstripped even that phenomenal but now forgotten paper of the tenement districts, the one-cent *Daily News*. Techniques that win circulation are always imitated. The *Sun* became famous as "the newspaperman's newspaper," and many editors held it before their young men as a model. Among others, the *Kansas City Star*, founded in 1880, made much of the type of amusing story so important in the *Sun*.

Thus far this survey has touched upon only those types of the facetious treatment of news which grew out of the so-called pepper-pot concept of news brought forward by the penny press in the thirties. They are all in one line of development — the police court reports, the city columns with their humorist-locals, the news hoaxes, and the *Sun*'s local-color reporting.

But one type of facetious news writing was not a penny-press development. The gossipy type of Washington correspondence did not originate with the "Washington Merry-Go-Round." It began with that greatest innovator of all American journalists, James Gordon Bennett. When Bennett was in Washington in the winter of 1827-1828, first as a free lance and then as the authorized representative of the *New York Enquirer*, he put in his spare time reading in the Library of Congress. There he encountered the letters of Horace Walpole, and was so charmed by those masterpieces of epistolary correspondence that he resolved to do for the court of John Quincy Adams what Walpole had done for the court of George II. His letters therefore contained much of Washington society, told in a half-bantering, half-poetic style, and much more of a light, satirical nature. For example, when the earthquake tremors of March, 1828, shook Washington, Bennett wrote that they

> produced the most dreadful alarm among the Adams party. Some very curious stories are afloat on the subject. Mr. Adams, it is said, in the agony of the moment, offered to refund the double salary which, for years, he has retained snugly in his pocket. Mr. Clay tremblingly muttered something in execration of bargain, corruption, and the uphill business in Kentucky. . . . Many of the Adams *belles* jumped from their drowsy pillows and protested on their knees they never would fling another jest upon the good lady from Tennessee. . . . You cannot conceive of the alarm which this earthquake has produced.[23]

[23] *New York Enquirer*, March 7, 1828.

Bennett was back in New York the following summer, but he had set an example of witty and gossipy Washington correspondence which has never lacked a few practitioners. It is a dangerous trade; horsewhippings and duels have grown out of pert paragraphs in Washington letters, editors have been officially rebuked, and reporters have been excluded from the press galleries as punishment for saucy words.

One of the most entertaining incidents of the business was the one which gave his nickname to "Sausage" Sawyer, a Congressman from Ohio in the forties. A correspondent of the *New York Tribune* one day gave the dining habits of Congressman Sawyer some attention as follows:

> Every day about 2 o'clock he feeds. About that hour he is seen leaving his seat, and taking a position in the window back of the Speaker's Chair, to the left. He unfolds a greasy newspaper in which is contained a chunk of bread and a sausage or some other unctuous substance. These he disposes of quite rapidly, wipes his hands with the greasy paper for a napkin, and then throws it out of the window. — What little grease is left on his hands he wipes on his almost bald head, which saves any outlay for Pomatum. His mouth sometimes serves as a finger glass, his coat sleeves and pantaloons being called into requisition as a napkin. He uses a jacknife for a toothpick, and then goes on the floor again to abuse the Whigs. . . .[24]

Sawyer, feeling that his dignity as a member of Congress, to say nothing of his rights as a free American sausage eater, had been impugned, succeeded in having all *Tribune* reporters barred for a time from the press gallery, including the famous "Richelieu" (William E. Robinson, himself later a member of Congress). But the *Tribune* easily got the news from sympathetic friends; while Sawyer got a roar of laughter from the whole country and a nickname that stuck to him even after his constituents decided to let him eat his sausages and pick his teeth in the peace of his own home.

The relation between facetious news treatment in its various aspects and journalistic sensationalism is so noticeable that it seems to require definition. If and when a proper history of

[24] *New York Tribune*, February 27, 1846. Ben: Perley Poore gives the wrong date and the wrong writer in telling of this episode in *Harper's Monthly* (New York), XLVIII, 1874, p. 230.

sensationalism in the American press is written, it will show nearly all the papers mentioned in this study as leaders in the facetious handling of news to have been definitely sensational papers during the years here considered. The same penny papers that gave the people the amusing police court reports exploited the first great murder stories of journalistic history; Mark Twain's "Massacre at Dutch Nick's" is itself the acme of sensationalism; the papers that perpetrated the great hoaxes were the leading sensational papers of the times; and Dana's *Sun* was, as has been indicated, hospitable to sensational news.

The correlation is by no means perfect, but there is a significance in this relationship which should not be missed. Newspapers used sensationalism for much the same reason that they injected fun into their news — to make it attractive. It was the old pepper-pot concept. The converse was also true: papers that had a high notion of the sanctity of news as such tended to keep their news columns free of both the morbidly sensational and the facetious.

Whatever may be said of the course of sensationalism in the more recent history of the press — and much may be said of it following the advent of the New Journalism in 1883 — the increasing respect for the accuracy of the news fact has resulted in separating humor and news in most modern journalism. Poking fun at unfortunates and criminals and grand hoaxes are now uncommon, if not almost unknown. There are humors in the day's report, to be sure, and we are grateful for them; but they are set off in short news-features. Little "dizzy" stories and oddities there are in increasing abundance. Occasionally there is a great "hunt" of escaped wild animals, or something of like nature. But such "hoaxes" (if they may be called by that name) are burlesques and not intended to deceive or to terrify. On the whole, it is doubtless a good rule that humorists ought not to tamper with what may be called news *qua* news.