

Helena's Controversial Newspaperman: Will Campbell **By Jon Axline**

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As goes Helena, so goes its newspapers. No industrial, commercial or financial institution is so closely intertwined with the destiny of a community as is the press. Where newspapers grow and thrive, there it may be taken for granted there are contented people, prosperous business men, bustling industry and happy homes. A newspaper is a mirror of life.
-- Will Campbell, 1917

In the days before radio and television, newspapers were, for most Americans, the only source of international, national and local news. The newspaper editor enjoyed a special status in the community based on his control of the media. The editor determined what would be included in that day's edition and how it would be presented to its readers. Like the media today, those early spin-doctors were far from unbiased about the information they provided and much less subtle about how it was presented. There was never any question about what they thought about political, social or community issues. Unquestionably, the most influential and intriguing Helena newspapermen of the 20th century was Helena *Independent* editor Will A. Campbell.

Will Campbell expanded the *Independent* from a small democratic daily into one of the most politically significant Montana newspapers of the early 20th century. He did it, however, by infusing his own sometimes extremist opinions into the paper. He reached his editorial zenith during the tumultuous years of the First World War and into the early Twenties. For Campbell, World War One was not just a crusade against an overseas monarchy, it was also an opportunity to silence radicals, traitors, socialists, Bolsheviks, and other politically dubious individuals. The *Independent*, through Campbell, also supported the policies of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company (ACM). He used the war in Europe and the fears it generated to promote bigotry and extremism at home. Today what many people remember most about Will Campbell is his newspaper career during the latter years of the 1910s.

Born in Lincoln, Nebraska on May 8, 1881, Will attended the University of Nebraska where he worked as an editorial writer for the *Nebraska State Journal* in the late 1890s. From 1900 until about 1909, he worked on a variety of newspapers including the *Omaha Bee*, the *Denver Post*, *Chicago Chronicle*, and the *Sioux City Tribune*. It was probably while at the *Denver Post* that he developed a loathing for labor unions when he mediated an end to a particularly ugly strike against the paper. For several years, he was employed by Great Northern Railway promoter Louis W. Hill to develop and implement the company's publicity program to bring homesteaders onto the Great Plains of North Dakota and Montana. It was while employed by the GN that he acquired a love for Montana.

In early 1913, a cartel of Montana democrats headed by capitalist Lewis Penwell purchased the *Independent* from publisher John S. M. Neill. Penwell immediately recruited Campbell to serve as the publisher and editor of the daily. Within just a few months Campbell was also part owner of the newspaper. Founded in Deer Lodge in 1866, *Independent* was relocated to Helena in 1874 by Addison Smith and J. C. Kerley after a fire destroyed the offices of the *Rocky Mountain Gazette*. A democratic publication, the *Independent* provided the counterpoint to the republican-owned *Helena Record-Herald*. In his first issue as editor on March 6, 1913, Campbell published a statement of purpose for the newspaper. He wrote,

THE FIRST THING THE HELENA INDEPENDENT WILL LOOK FOR IS NEWS, not one-sided, prejudiced, tainted nor lacking. It is quite essential to be fair and give all the news as to be truthful editorially, as the greatest untruth may be conveyed to readers.

By 1917, this policy was largely discarded to accommodate the exigencies of World War One.

Within three months, Campbell lowered the subscription rate of the paper from an annual price of \$10 to \$8. He also managed to become embroiled in a quarrel between Augusta and Gilman in the northern part of Lewis & Clark County. Both communities had vied for a position on the Great Northern Railway extension to the upper Sun River valley in 1912 with Augusta the loser of the contest. When Gilman petitioned for a new school district against the opposition of Augusta, Campbell threw his support behind Gilman likely because of its association with his old employer, the Great Northern Railway. Augusta retained its school district, however, eventually winning its war with Gilman, which has since disappeared from the map.

Campbell hit his editorial stride during the chaotic years of the First World War. He did not just report the news, he editorialized it and exaggerated some of it to make it appear that Germany directly threatened Helena. On the front pages of the newspaper appeared stories suggesting that German airplanes regularly circled over the Capitol City and that secret cabals of German saboteurs lurked in the nearby mountains waiting for the opportunity to strike. Much of this reporting was based on rumor or was a pure fabrication to stir up support for the war. What Campbell's stories also did, however, was increase tension at home by preying on the fears of Montanans about becoming embroiled in what many perceived an internal European problem. The problem was aggravated by a labor strike in Butte supported by the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an organization that advocated violence against the ACM. By the late July, 1917, Campbell turned his attention away from German saboteurs instead focusing on the IWW, a loose organization that inspired dread among most upper and middle class Americans.

Campbell accused the Wobblies of being traitors and, in one instance, suggested that a mass execution of the IWW's members would solve most of the country's problems. Campbell, like most Montanans (including the striking miners), opposed the IWW. Most Montanans, though, did not approve of the methods used by the ACM against the union. Campbell, on the other hand, applauded them in the pages of the *Independent*, suggesting that the corporation did not go far enough in its campaign against the Wobblies. He had, moreover, no sympathy for those who opposed the war or appeared to be dragging their feet in support of it. He relied heavily on the

tactics of the yellow journalists of the late 19th century by fabricating and embellishing stories calculated to make the danger seem more immediate.

When IWW organizer Frank Little was murdered by masked gunmen in Butte on August 1, 1917, Campbell editorialized “Good work: Let them continue to hang every IWW in the state.” Although the murder was anything but a vigilante-type action, he praised the killers by comparing them to pioneer vigilance committees: “It sort of quickens the blood in the veins of some pioneers of Helena to see the fatal figures in print – 3-7-77.” He began calls for a special session of the legislature to enact anti-sedition legislation because, he felt, the murder would inspire sedition and revenge killings by the IWW.

In March, 1917, Governor Sam Stewart appointed Campbell to serve on the Montana Council of Defense. The Council was formed at the request of the Wilson Administration to spread propaganda, motivate military enlistment, and promote the sale of Liberty bonds and contributions to the Red Cross. It was also responsible for supporting the formation of local “Liberty Leagues” and inspiring patriotism for the war effort. With the passage of the Anti-Section Act in 1918, the Council became responsible for the enactment of the new law. The act made it illegal to say or do anything that could be perceived as hindering the war effort or as treason. In effect, the Montana law and the national Sedition Act passed later that year, temporarily abrogated Americans’ First Amendment rights.

Through Campbell, the *Independent* became the ambassador of the Council and its policies. His attacks on seditionists, slackers and unions grew bolder and more noxious throughout 1918 and continued well into 1919. His connection to the ACM and its policies became so obvious during this period that Attorney General Burton K. Wheeler stated that the “*Independent* was absolutely subsidized and subservient to the mining interests of the state.” Indeed, even after the Armistice in November, 1918, Campbell continued his attacks on labor, labeling them agents of Bolshevism, thereby paving the way for the Red Scare in Montana in the early Twenties.

In April, 1921, Campbell and the *Independent* supported Montana State Penitentiary warden Frank Conley, who had been accused of corruption by governor Joseph Dixon. A progressive and virulent anti-ACM crusader, Dixon accused Conley of stealing \$200,000 of state funds. Campbell, however, was a long-time friend of Conley, who also enjoyed the support of the ACM. Although he had an annual wage of only \$4,000, Conley had managed to accumulate a fortune of \$500,000 – a fact that had drawn the attention of the governor. Conley was eventually acquitted of the charges, after several editorials appeared in the *Independent* defending the warden. Although Campbell claimed the *Independent* would support the ideals of progressive reform in 1913 and reiterated it in 1917, by 1921 the newspaper was a major contributor to the demise of progressivism in Montana.

In 1921, the *Independent* was purchased by the ACM, which by the end of the decade owned half of Montana’s 14 daily newspapers. While Campbell had boasted in 1913 that the *Independent* “should always fight for progress and reform and never tolerate injustice, corruption nor inefficiency,” within less than a decade it became, as preeminent Montana historian K. Ross Toole stated, a flagship of the state’s “Great, Gray Blanket”.

Because of his support of the ACM during the Great War and afterwards, Campbell remained as the *Independent's* editor. By all accounts a workaholic, he went to work each day as early as 5 a.m. sometimes not leaving his office until after midnight. An editorial published shortly after his death in 1938 stated that Campbell had a wide circle of acquaintances, yet he maintained no close friendships because of his dedication to the newspaper. While he was praised for his “big heart,” the editorial commended Campbell’s modesty, stating “his charity being the real thing was rarely known, but a book could be written about the kind and generous acts he performed.” Although the ACM had pulled Campbell’s fangs in the 1920s, the *Independent* became an influential and respected journal under his leadership in the Thirties.

In late 1937, Will Campbell stepped away from the editor’s desk of the *Independent*. His health broken, perhaps because of his punishing work schedule, had forced him to retire from the one thing he loved most, journalism. He and his wife, Maude, moved to Kirkland, Washington, where he died of heart disease on December 15, 1938. Pall-bearers at his funeral in Helena included fellow Montana Council of Defense member and ex-governor Sam Stewart and former Montana State Penitentiary warden Frank Conley. In retrospect, the legacy of the *Independent* during the Campbell years is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, it was representative of the influence and importance that a newspaper editor enjoyed in the early 20th century. While on the other, he left a legacy of intolerance and distrust generated during the chaotic years between 1917 and 1921.

One very positive legacy of Will Campbell remains – he passed his love of history and Helena on to his only son, William C., the author/compiler of two volumes of *From the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch* in 1951 and 1964.

Jon Axline is the historian at the Montana Department of Transportation.