

TEACHING THE GILDED AGE AND PROGRESSIVE ERA

Teaching GAPE History through Amateur Newspapers and Adolescent Storytelling

Brian Rouleau 

Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA
Email: brianr@tamu.edu

Abstract

Beginning in 1867 with the invention of the miniature (or “hobby”) press, young people in the United States began to publish their own amateur newspapers. Within the pages of those publications, adolescents included news articles, editorials, short stories, serialized fiction, poetry, and jokes. The collective result of their literary efforts was referred to as Amateurdom, or “the ’Dom” for short. Included in this teaching supplement are several representative short stories and editorials published by adolescents during the 1870s and 1880s. After reading the primary source material, students might be prompted to address some the questions for discussion included below.

Keywords: teaching; primary sources; amateur newspapers; adolescence; childhood

Beginning in 1867 with the invention of the miniature (or “hobby”) press, young people in the United States began to publish their own amateur newspapers. Within the pages of those publications, adolescents included news articles, editorials, short stories, serialized fiction, poetry, and jokes. The collective result of their literary efforts was referred to as Amateurdom, or “the ’Dom” for short. Ordinarily, amateur newspapers were printed on small sheets of cheap paper and circulated throughout the country’s towns and neighborhoods. In addition, editors used the postal service to exchange their papers with those produced by other juvenile journalists around the nation. In this sense, Amateurdom somewhat resembled an early form of social media. Authors responded to one another’s writing—alternately complimenting or insulting it—and sometimes became involved in rather heated dialogue.

Young authors wrote about a variety of subjects. But one of the most common themes was the American West. The fiction penned by juvenile authors often fixated on territorial expansion and the violent conquest of American Indians. America’s young citizens transformed settler colonialism into a series of thrilling adventures.

Below you will find some representative samples of the material circulated in amateur newspapers. The short story “A Trapper’s Tale” was written by a teenaged boy named Edgar Slade. The next piece is an editorial on the “Indian question” written by another boy editor named F. A. Partenheimer. A second short story follows, this one written by a girl

who published under the pen name “T. E. LeGraph,” though we know the author’s sex because she was elsewhere referred to as a “female correspondent.” And finally, we have another editorial, this one written by a Philadelphia boy on the subject of women’s rights.

As students read through this material, a few questions might be posed to them:

- What themes and images did the young authors of frontier fiction emphasize in their writing? Can you hypothesize as to why American youths—in their stories and poetry—obsessed over the West and its inhabitants? In thinking about these questions, please also consider the editorial titled “The Red Man.”

- How were American Indians portrayed in the literature and essays written by the era’s white adolescents, and why do you think that was the case?

- What seems to have distinguished the stories written by boys from those written by girls? What do you think might have been the appeal of the imagined West to young women (as authors and audience) in particular? What can the editorial on women’s suffrage tell us about the politics of Amateurism (and the Gilded Age and Progressive Era) more generally? In particular, how does it help explain why many girls chose to anonymously contribute to the ‘Dom?

- Most of the authors who published using the miniature press were white, male, and middle-class. How did that fact shape the content and tone of Amateurism?

- Some American Indians—particularly at the country’s Indian boarding schools—had access to their own miniature printing presses. What sorts of stories do you suppose those young people wanted to tell? How would literature written by American Indian youths have differed from its more “mainstream” counterpart?

Edgar P. Slade, “A Trapper’s Tale,” *The Novelty Advertiser* (Tullahoma, TN), vol. 1, no. 9 (Sept. 1876), in the Edwin Hadley Smith Amateur Journalism Collection, University of Wisconsin Library, Madison, WI.

“Tell us that story about your scrape with the Pawnees, Uncle Sim,” I asked of Sim Foley, an old and experienced trapper, as we sat around the camp-fire enjoying our pipes. “All right,” he replied, “if you would like to hear it, I’ll tell it then.”

“It was nearly a score of years ago when I and Dart Brandon pitched our camp on the bank of a little stream which empties into the Missouri. We were out on a trapping expedition, and for the first two weeks we had a very good success.

One night we were sitting in our shanty comfortably smoking our pipes, when, crack—whiz a rifle bullet came through a crevice in the wall, and poor Dart, with a terrible groan, fell full length on the floor.

I sprang for my rifle, and just as I reached it Dart said: ‘I’m done for Sim! Avenge my death!’ and with these words, he rolled over dead.

It was not yet dark and throwing myself down, I peeped through a hole in the wall near the floor. I caught a glimpse of several shadowy figures—flitting here and there among the bushes a few yards distant, and there was one redskin in plain sight, and the reckless fool was coolly reloading the very weapon that had given Dart Brandon his death wound.

Rising to my feet, I placed the muzzle of my rifle at one of the cracks, and fired at the warrior. A shriek of mortal agony followed the report, and the savage tumbled over upon his face. But he was up again the next instant in an endeavor to save himself, but once again he fell and this time he laid still. Not an Indian was now in sight, but for all that I knew they were up to some deviltry. Soon there came a shower of bullets against the walls of the log shanty, and some piercing the crevices, went whistling across the room.

I had thrown myself flat to the floor, for I expected something of the kind, and not a bullet touched me.

Hardly had the noise of the report ceased when I gave vent to such a cry as would lead the Pawnees to think that I had been hit. Yelling with delight at their supposed victory, they made a rush toward the door.

When they reached it, I gave them no time to bust it in, but let the contents of my gun into the crowd of them. It made a fearful havoc at such short range, for two dropped, while a third danced around yelling with pain. I picked Dart's gun up and fired again, bringing one more to the earth. There were only eight of the reds left, and these supposing I had no more bullets, went crash against the door smashing it in.

I had backed across the room and braced myself against the opposite wall, and when the savages came swarming through the doorway, a brace of revolvers leveled upon them gleamed under the faint rays of the moon that struggled in.

Crack! Crack! Crack! The deadly weapons rang out in sharp and rapid detonations, and at every report an Indian fell dead or wounded. Six shots had been fired in as many seconds, and the two remaining reds frightened out of their wits sprang out of the house and ran towards the river. Stepping to the door, I fired once, and one fell headlong to the earth.

The other had nearly gained the bushes when I again fired. The bullet struck him and down he went, but as I looked he sprang erect, plunged headlong into the bushes and escaped. But as you see, boys, I most terribly revenged poor Dart Brandon's death." The trapper's narrative was finished.

F. A. Partenheimer Jr., "The Red Man," *The Forest City Spark* (Ithaca, NY), vol. 1, no. 5 (October 1885), in the Edwin Hadley Smith Collection, University of Wisconsin Library, Madison, WI.

The red man is, and has been, a source of great destruction to the white man from the discovery of America to the present time. To-day our country supports over 50 million of people while it supported only 250,000 Indians at the time of its discovery. And as long as our country is able to support fifty million people, as well as all the Indians, why should he still rebel? We find accounts of his outrageous slaughter of whites in the far west, in nearly every paper. Why does he continue to do this? Has he the least idea of the vastness of the population? We think not: if he has he would certainly give up his murderous attempts to exterminate the pale faced inhabitants. The Indian rode over the mountains but he did not value the coal therein; he rode over the prairie but did not dream of the golden grain which could be raised thereon. But such is the case to-day. It is what the white man is doing and what the red man might do and has been given a chance to do, but he still clings to his barbarous habits. What is to be done? We look forward to the time, not far distant, when that race shall be extinct.

T. E. Le Graph, "Mad Betsy, the Scourge of the Apaches," *The Western Shore* (Oakland, CA), vol. 1, no. 2 (August 1875), in the Edwin Hadley Smith Collection, University of Wisconsin Library, Madison, WI.

I was seated in one of the peculiar institutions termed "Western Ranches" after a hard day's ride, sipping my glass of native wine, quite oblivious to what transpired around me, when suddenly I was startled by an outburst of some dozen voices shouting, "Welcome! Betsy, welcome!" Looking up in astonishment, I beheld the recipient of this hearty demonstration, who was a young woman of French caste, apparently of some twenty years of age.

She walked up to the bar, and although a dozen glasses of whiskey were offered her, she drank but one, and then with a wild laugh mounted her horse and was off.

I rushed to the door in hopes of catching another glimpse of the strange creature, but could discern nothing but a cloud of dust.

Returning to my seat, I questioned a rough looking individual in regard to her.

"What! Don't you know Mad Betsy, the Scourge of the Apaches? Why, stranger, whar ye been?" exclaimed the man.

I informed him I had just arrived from the States, and begged him to tell me the history of this strange being, in whom I felt deeply interested.

Taking a sip of the water he began: "Wal, stranger, five years ago, when every one went crazy with the gold fever in California, a small party of emigrants started out from the States to their golden country, that woman yer saw ther was one of the party; but she was not then like what she is now; but she was as fair a piece of calico as ever strapped the prairie. All went well with them, until one dark night, when the Apaches, under Big Wolf, pounced upon them and murdered the whole party except that woman yer just saw, who lay beneath the wagon clinging to her dead mother and crying as if her poor little heart would break. The Indians were about to carry her off when a party of hunters came up, attracted by the firing, and rescued her.

Next morning, they buried her parents, and, stranger, that gal thar kneeled down by the grave of her murdered parents and swore an oath of revenge that made my blood curdle.

Years have passed away, and her very name has become a terror to the Apaches. Their braves warriors, who helped butcher that little emigrant train, tremble at the sound of her wild laugh.

In the Apache camp, stranger, there are twenty-four of the warriors who helped butcher those emigrants, and neither of them has a scalp or a right hand; and there remains only Big Wolf, the leader, to complete Mad Betsy's revenge.

I seed her lasso Black Bird. The Indian, finding he was cornered, fought like a tiger, and was about to finish her when she laid him low with a blow from her rifle. She let out a screech, and stooping, scalped him and then cut off his right hand. I saw him afterward, and he was the sickest Injun I ever saw."

As the trapper ceased, a wild, piercing shriek was heard from without, and hurrying to the door, I beheld Mad Betsy dragging a big Indian with a lasso. The woman dismounted and approached the Indian exclaiming: "Ha! Red dog! The last, and the leader of the hated gang, your time has come. You were reserved for the last. As she approached the Indian, he roused himself on his arm and hurled his tomahawk at her head, but missed his aim, owing to his weak state.

The wild woman sprang forward, and grasping his scalp-lock, scalped him in a twinkling. Stepping back, she viewed her victim, who uttered not a sound, but, nerving himself, arose, knife in hand, approached his deadly foe. Then came the tussle for life. The Indian made a lunge at his adversary, which was parried with a dexterity that was surprising. They closed, and we hurried forward to the rescue, but too late. The Indian, right before death, struck a blow. Betsy staggered forward with a ghastly look, the blood flowing from a knife wound below the shoulder.

We carried her to the bar and laid her on a couch. Last rites were administered and then the woman opened her eyes and exclaimed: "Father! Mother! You are avenged! I can now die!"

And she passed away.

Silently the tear drops slid down the brown, honest faces of the trappers as they gazed upon Mad Betsy. Let us draw a curtain on the scene; suffice to say, she was laid to rest by the side of her dead parents.

J. C. Heyman, “Women vs. Politics,” *Our Girls and Boys* (Philadelphia, PA), vol. 1, no. 12 (October 1878), in the Edwin Hadley Smith Collection, University of Wisconsin Library, Madison, WI.

The indestructible subject is once again agitating the press here and in England. Why a woman who has any respect for herself should want to march up to the polls, among a crowd of men of all classes, for the mere purpose of casting a vote, is what they are trying to determine.

The idea of a woman being a candidate for an office, and the opposing candidate of the male sex! The woman depending entirely upon her good looks and the male candidate upon his popularity. The result would not be dangerous but disastrous to the welfare of the country. We believe that we speak for the majority of the women when we say that they have no desire to take part in the elections and politics of the nation. There are, of course, a few babbling old maids, who for the want of some other occupation, and in search of unenviable notoriety, will stoop even to the shrine of politics to keep their tongues wagging. We have yet to see the woman, with the average amount of pride, who would like to be looked upon as a public official, to be praised for qualities of which she is ashamed, by some doting newspaper man, and justly rebuked by another whom she has deigned to snub.

Conscientiously, every woman with an evenly-balanced mind, cannot fail to perceive, without desiring to experiment, that as “politicians,” the female sex will never be a success.

Brian Rouleau is Professor of History at Texas A&M University.