

Democrat and Herald Rivalry

by
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The *Democrat* and the *Herald* do not come from a background of unity, as the hyphen in the present name, *Democrat-Herald*, may indicate.

In the years before the 1929 merger of Baker's two daily newspapers, the *Morning Democrat* and the Republican evening *Baker City Herald*, an intense rivalry developed out of their different political persuasions and competition for readers.

That rivalry may have reached its high point, or more appropriately low point, in 1903 during the political scandal surrounding ex-sheriff Alfred H. Huntington's \$12,000 shortage in the tax collection fund.

The *Herald* and the *Democrat* naturally ended up on opposite sides of the Huntington controversy. The *Democrat's* allegiance went to the courthouse Democratic regime of County Judge Wallace W. Travillion and District Attorney Samuel White, head of the local Democratic Central Committee. Neither of them would even talk to a reporter from the *Herald*, because of its sensationalized articles charging them with criminal conspiracy in the Huntington case.



Mastheads of the two rival newspapers



Documentation of the rivalry is lopsided, because no *Democrat* newspapers from 1903 have survived. But the *Herald* responses to attacks in the *Democrat* show that the enmity was mutual.

The *Democrat* was sympathetic toward Huntington, who, although a Republican, was a crony of Travillion and White. It published an interview with Huntington in which he accused the *Herald* of telling "unmitigated lies" about him simply because he did not subscribe to it. Huntington said, "The dirty sheet was born in iniquity and was not fit to be patronized."

The *Herald* itself was not at all bashful when it came to making pejorative remarks about the *Democrat*. Since the *Democrat* supported Travillion, White and Huntington, and was awarded county for printing contracts, the *Herald* referred to it variously as “the official organ of the Travillion ring,” “the Morning Grafter,” or simply “the Grafter.” On yet other occasions the newspaper’s title was reduced to “the Morning Handbill.”

Typical of many abusive articles was one in which the *Herald* compared its own “complete” news coverage with that of the *Democrat* whose “skeleton news report furnished its handful of local readers is so rotten, so incomplete, and disjointed, that the minds of its readers is muddled by reading it.” In another article, the *Herald* said the *Democrat* “as a newspaper has no excuse to exist at all.”

In January 1903, at the height of the Huntington controversy, the *Herald* found evidence of misuse of county funds which struck much closer to home than the tax fund scandal. The county awarded the *Democrat* the job of printing the delinquent tax list at a cost of 3 ½ cents per line without first advertising for bids. The *Herald* cried foul long and loud, claiming that by law the county must call for competitive bids.

The *Democrat* ended up sending the tax list to Portland to be printed because of problems with its presses. The Portland printer charged just one cent per line with the *Democrat* pocketing the difference. The *Herald* claimed it would have charged just one cent per line and kept the business at home to boot.

The profit-making did not stop with inflated per-line cost, according to the *Herald*. Instead of printing the legal property descriptions using abbreviations such as NW ¼, the *Democrat* spelled out “northwest quarter,” etc., thereby doubling the length of the tax list and also its profits.

The result, said the *Herald*, was that a job it would have done for \$200 ended up costing the taxpayer \$1,400. The *Herald* charged that the printing contract was a way for Judge Travillion to reward the *Democrat* for its loyalty and thus another example of graft in Baker County government.

The *Herald*’s muckraking articles apparently made their point with the Grand Jury. When it met in February 1903 to indict Huntington, it recommended that in the future the County Court award its printing contracts to the lowest bidder.

The *Herald* was by far the more aggressive of the two newspapers. It paid off in subscriptions. In just two years under the new direction of manager Charles W. Hill and editor L. Bush Livermore, the *Herald* gained a larger readership than the much older *Democrat* and all other eastern Oregon newspapers combined.

That aggressiveness also had its negative side, as seen in a July 1903 article in which the *Herald* told of the hazards of the newspaper business. The article complained that a woman had recently broken an umbrella over the head of *Herald* city editor Col. J. W. Headen. And a few months earlier, editor Livermore had been attacked by a member of a family whose name appeared in print. The *Herald* jealously noted that the “conservative” *Democrat* had “escaped this tirade of abuse.”

The stormy relationship between the *Herald* and the *Democrat* in 1903 had one brief clearing. In November a fire broke out in the pressroom of the *Herald*. Before even receiving a damage report, the *Democrat* immediately phoned to offer the use of its presses. Fortunately the fire was extinguished before the press suffered any damage. But at the end of a modest article about the fire, the *Herald* extended “thanks to the *Democrat* for its generous offer, just the same.”

One would like to think this was a glimmer of the cooperation to come many years later with their merger into the *Democrat-Herald*.

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