

CHAPTER I

Frontier town gets a newspaper

“Print the truth. Fight for the right. People like a fighting newspaper.”

Charles Samuel Jackson

The publishing company that is the focus of this history had its origins in a feisty, nineteenth century frontier newspaper located in Pendleton, Oregon. Following its 1875 founding and gestation under several owners and editors, providence intervened in the form of a 20-year-old Virginian who would become a legend of Oregon journalism. Charles Samuel Jackson, took control of the *East Oregonian*. Under Jackson’s leadership, the *EO* became a respected and influential daily newspaper.

Before leaving for a larger enterprise in Portland, Jackson became a mentor to a 1900 graduate of Oregon Agricultural College, today’s Oregon State University. This conjunction – between Jackson in his forties and Edwin Burton Aldrich in his twenties – began a family publishing history that would endure for more than 100 years.

When Jackson left the *EO* in 1902 to rescue the struggling *Oregon Journal* in Portland, he placed the Pendleton paper in the hands of several veteran newsmen on his staff, while keeping a controlling interest in it. Aldrich joined the paper in 1904 and quickly demonstrated his journalistic chops as a reporter. In 1908, when Jackson again reorganized the ownership of the paper, he made Aldrich the editor and a part-owner. For the next 110 years, Aldrich and his direct descendants continued Jackson’s tradition of community-focused journalism. This happened in Pendleton, Astoria and nine other locations in Oregon and Washington – at papers acquired under the banner of the East Oregonian Publishing Company, subsequently renamed the EO Media Group.

Success with the *EO* led Aldrich and his partners to acquire the *Astoria Evening Budget* in 1919 and the *Morning Astorian* in 1930. Beginning in the 1970s, with the purchase of the *Blue Mountain Eagle* in John Day, Oregon—the state’s oldest continuously published weekly—the EOPC bought more weekly newspapers. The weekly publications are clustered around Pendleton and Astoria, home of the company’s flagship dailies. The family-run EOMG has weathered adverse economic times and the challenges of changing technology. Through it all, the company’s lodestar has been a commitment to community journalism and a fierce desire to remain independent.

The *East Oregonian* gained life in a newly settled country as white pioneers flocked to northeastern Oregon – the traditional homeland of the Umatilla, Walla Walla and Cayuse tribes. Pendleton was a raw frontier town of about 275 when Mathew P. Bull launched the *EO* on October 16, 1875. The town rose from the crossroads of the Oregon Trail and the Umatilla River at the base of the Blue Mountains.

Though small and isolated in the northeastern corner of the relatively new state of Oregon, Pendleton was perceived to have excellent prospects. It was surrounded by thousands of acres of luxuriant bunchgrass. During the 1860s, the region attracted cattle and sheep men. The cattle supplied mining booms in eastern Oregon and Idaho. The surplus was driven to eastern markets and to stock other ranges. Wool was shipped to east coast markets. A component of the larger Columbia Basin rangelands, Umatilla County – according to a state census taken in 1865 – counted 5,687 cattle and 7,446 sheep. By 1875, the number of cattle had grown to 28,024, and the count of sheep stood at 80,241.

Initial settlers in Umatilla County (which included a portion that became Morrow County in 1885) also grew limited amounts of grain along well-watered, bottom lands of the region. Some farmers successfully experimented with dry land farming on elevated bench lands in the late 1860s and early 1870s, and this brought a new wave of settlers. Soon, farmers began sending large quantities of wheat down the Columbia River by steamboats to Portland, where it was then shipped to markets in the eastern United States and Europe. The production of wheat in Umatilla County rose dramatically from 16,789 bushels in 1865 to 137,575 bushels in 1875. The county’s population showed similar growth over those same years, going from 1,805 to 4,426—a 145 percent increase.

The rising numbers of Umatilla valley settlers and the steady traffic of freighters and miners through the area over the Oregon Trail led to the creation of Umatilla County in 1862 and the selection of Marshall's Station on the north side of the Umatilla River opposite the mouth of McKay Creek as the temporary location of the county seat. In 1865, the county seat was moved to Umatilla City on the Columbia River. This town served as the freight forwarding point on the Columbia River for shipments of supplies headed overland for the mines in eastern Oregon and Idaho. Freight arriving upstream by steamboats was transferred at Umatilla City for shipment inland by wagon and pack trains. By 1868, new supply routes to the mines caused Umatilla City to begin a slow decline. This economic decay coupled with increased settlement in northeastern Umatilla County led to a movement to return the county seat to a location on the Umatilla River between Wild Horse and Birch creeks.

In late 1868, the voters of Umatilla County decided to relocate the county seat. Commissioners chosen to select the precise site accepted an offer of two-and-a-half acres for county buildings from Moses Goodwin who had a claim on the south side of the Umatilla River, west of Wild Horse Creek. To strengthen this offer, Goodwin platted part of his land as a town and, on the advice of County Judge G. W. Bailey, named it Pendleton for Democratic U. S. Senator George Hunt Pendleton of Ohio.

The choice of George Pendleton as the namesake for the new town was unsurprising, given the politics he represented and the background of the community's early settlers. Most had emigrated from the South or border states in the decade following the Civil War. Senator Pendleton, during the Civil War, was aligned with the peace faction of the Democratic Party and served as the vice-presidential candidate with General George McClellan when he ran against Lincoln for the presidency in 1864. In 1865, Pendleton voted in Congress against the 13th Amendment, which outlawed slavery. This dramatic event would later be immortalized in Steven Spielberg's movie, *Lincoln*. Senator Pendleton later earned fame as the father of the modern federal Civil Service Reform Act of 1883, which ended the "Spoils System" when selecting government employees.

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At the time it became the county seat, Pendleton consisted of a house, small hotel, trading post, and a toll bridge across the Umatilla River. Soon, county officials erected a two-story frame courthouse. Other businesses and residences quickly followed. In October 1869, federal postal authorities established a post office in Pendleton. By 1870, the federal census recorded that Pendleton had a population of 243. The original plat of the town included 20 blocks bounded by the present SE 6th Street on the east, SW 2nd Street on the west, the Umatilla River on the north, and Dorion Avenue on the south. The southern boundary of Pendleton was also the northern edge of the Umatilla Indian Reservation as established in the Treaty of 1855. That led to illegal building on reservation land as the town expanded.

In 1880, after much pressure from the citizens of Pendleton, the Umatilla Indians agreed to sell 640 acres along the town's southern edge. Congress approved this agreement in 1882, and lots were surveyed and sold at auction in 1884. As the center of a rich agricultural area based on dry land wheat farming and livestock raising, Pendleton grew rapidly in the 1880s and 1890s. As it matured, it sought the trappings of permanency.

On the western frontier after the Civil War, having a newspaper was a way of proclaiming that a town was real and here to stay. Along with schools and churches, a newspaper provided an important measure of civilization and order. A newspaper also served as a potential unifying element and a sense of identity as it attempted to speak for the community. As one observer of the western scene noted, "just as every community in the land must . . . have a railroad of its very own, so did every hamlet and crossroad in the West pant . . . for its own newspaper." (Quote in Cloud, 6)

Oregon's enterprising newsmen avidly sought to fill this desire. In 1870, Oregon had 30 newspapers; by 1880, that number more than doubled to 74. Oregon was fertile ground for newspapers. Across the eleven western states and territories in 1880, about 73 percent of the counties had at least one newspaper, while in Oregon, 87 percent of the counties possessed papers.

The frontier publisher needed to make a careful calculation of a town's ability to support a paper. One measure of market conditions for a newspaper was the population. Evidence from a U. S. Census report on newspapers indicated that a viable weekly newspaper needed a countywide population base of at least 2,500. With a population of 2,916 in 1870, Umatilla County barely reached that threshold of newspaper viability. But by 1880, the county had 9,607 inhabitants, and by then was

supporting three weekly newspapers. In addition to a sustainable population base, the anticipation of a community's future economic growth could serve as a key enticement to an enterprising newsman. A locale, for example, with a growing population and a promising agricultural economy, coupled with a lively business community seemed to offer a sufficient subscriber base and the potential advertising income necessary to sustain a newspaper. If a town, moreover, happened to be a county seat, it held the further potential for lucrative legal advertising.

An important additional source of income for newspapers in newly settled areas of the West arose from the legal requirement that all persons who had successfully proved up on their homestead or other types of claims on federal public land had to publish notice of such action in a local paper. These advertisements usually cost between \$7.00 and \$11.00 per ad—a sizeable sum—and thus a welcome source of income for a struggling frontier newspaper.

Pendleton, by 1875, as both service center of a thriving agricultural area and a county seat, seemed to meet the criteria necessary for founding a newspaper. Over the long term, however, a successful newspaper in Pendleton, or anywhere in the West, would need to promote the future growth and prosperity of its community.

Two newspapers had preceded Bull's *East Oregonian*. The *Pendletonian* had lasted only a short time in 1871 before fire consumed it. In 1873, Milton H. Abbott of Baker City moved to Pendleton and started the *Eastern Oregon Tribune*, but within two years he moved his newspaper to The Dalles. In the short time he published in Pendleton, Abbott strongly supported the Democratic Party, even if he thought its nominee unfit for an office. He declared, on one occasion, that should the Democratic "Convention nominate . . . any . . . man against whom we have raised objections, we shall acquiesce in such decision, and support the nominees to the best of our ability." (*Eastern Oregon Tribune*, May 29, 1875) Abbott, in common with most white settlers in Umatilla County at that time, also held racist views about Native Americans. He wrote in the *Tribune* his fervent wish "that the red pagans now on the Reservation will have been removed, and the fertile lands they occupy be owned by and cultivated by hundreds of white Americans." (ibid.)

The *East Oregonian* occasionally ran a free column for subscribers containing cattle brands.



Mathew P. Bull

Mathew Bull was a bit of a mystery. Apparently born in Virginia, he came West in the 1860s; and practiced law and edited newspapers in Portland for a time. By 1870, he had relocated to eastern Oregon, and in 1872, he took over the *Mountain Sentinel* in La Grande and edited it for two years. When voters transferred the county seat from La Grande to Union, he decided to sell the *Sentinel* back to its former owner. The following year he established the *East Oregonian* in Pendleton.

Starting a newspaper in a frontier setting required great optimism. Success depended on the growth of the new country. Such a gamble was questionable during the national economic hard times that dominated much of the 1870s. With farm prices stubbornly low and transportation costs high, most Oregon farmers could ill afford a newspaper, even if it typically—like the *EO*—only cost \$4.00 or less a year. Moreover, all too often newspapers folded without warning, leaving subscribers and advertisers no refund.

To provide some sense of Bull's determination to succeed in the newspaper business in Pendleton, he secured the backing of four highly regarded local residents to guarantee subscribers against loss. J. H. Turner, a lawyer; A. Jacobson, a saloon-keeper; Lot Livermore and I. C. Disoway, merchants, provided the necessary assurance against financial harm.

The design of Bull's *EO* was typical of most western small town weekly newspapers. It consisted of four pages, with those on the outside called patent pages. This term referred to the fact that those pages were supplied by a company that aggregated national news and advertising in a standardized newsprint format. The front page typically consisted of brief telegraphic reports of national and international news, though dated, were new to the isolated rural readers. The back page usually contained short stories, social commentary, and advertising from national brands of sewing machines, farm implements, canned foodstuffs, patent medicines, and other items aimed at a rural or small-town readership. The inside pages held the local and state news written and organized by the newspaper owner/editor, local advertising, and correspondence from readers or others from communities within the subscription territory of the paper.

The inside pages conveyed the paper's editorial stance and personality, while the outside patent pages made weekly production with sufficient content financially feasible. Every ambitious weekly editor, however, wanted to produce enough local news and advertising to drop the patent outsides and print a totally fresh and homegrown newspaper. While at the beginning of publication the *EO* cost subscribers \$4.00 a year in advance, Bull dropped the price in April 1877 to \$3.00. Subscriptions, advertising, and occasional job printing kept the paper going.

In its early years, as a service to readers and a lure to potential patrons, the *EO* occasionally ran a free column for subscribers containing cattle brands.

Small town newspaper proprietors of that era spoke to their readers more directly, even bluntly, than a twenty-first Century publisher would. As was typical of that era, Bull operated on a financial shoestring. Bull frequently printed appeals for payment

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of past due amounts. From time to time, Bull would remind his readers why they should support their local newspaper:

The liberal sustaining of a newspaper by the people in whose locality it is published and in whose interests it must necessarily operate, is a much greater source of wealth, not only to patrons but to the community in general, than is ordinarily supposed. There is nothing which more correctly tells the character and grade of community, village or town than the local paper.

After listing in detail all of the things a local paper does for its community, Bull went on to make his main point:

A newspaper, like a child, wants support and nurturing care in the beginning of its existence, so that when it can stand alone it may be able to bring credit upon the community in which it is located. Everyone should take the local, home newspaper; it gives more real information than one possibly be given by any other paper; when other papers misrepresent you, in any way, your home paper speaks in your defense. . . . Hence you should support your home paper, not grudgingly as a disagreeable duty, but willingly, in such a spirit as will satisfy the editor that you understand the investment will pay the expense intended to bring a benefit to both you and it. (*EO*, August 4, 1877)

At other times, Bull directed his ire at delinquent advertisers:

There are several men in this town who know that they owe us. If they would come forward and pay their little bills it would relieve the proprietor of the embarrassment common to the half-paid, half-appreciated county publisher. . . . If you want a paper published in your midst, patronize it! And pay for your paper and the advertising space used by you. (*EO*, August 11, 1877)

Like most small town editors in the American West, Bull fiercely boosted his community and pushed for civic improvements. The cry for street improvements and sidewalks, better schools, and enforcement of community moral standards appeared regularly in editorials and news columns. Bull promoted local industry

and businesses, sought railroad connections, and better mail service. Typical of his writing about Pendleton industry occurred in March 1877, when he took notice of the additions to a planing mill and a flour mill. After noting the arrival of several new main street businesses, Bull wrote:

the most notable improvement lately affected in our town is that made by . . . what is called a 'planing mill.' First, the power propelling the machinery of this establishment has been increased 40 percent by cutting a new tail race 300 feet long and 7 feet deep, with a flume therein 3 feet in width. Additional machinery has been placed in the building by which the firm can now manufacture anything from a magnificent house front to a potato masher. To give an idea of the capacity of the establishment we here name some of the machinery which can be set running all at the same time: planer, buzz saw, re-saw, tenon machine, mortising machine, turning lathe, scroll saw, boring machine, wabble saw, etc. etc. (*EO*, March 3, 1877)

But Bull saved his grandest praise for the accomplishments of W. S. Byers' flour mill. After reporting that

Mr. Byers is now turning out 100 barrels of flour every 24 hours . . . he needs more power, and additional burrs. The power will soon be procured by excavating a new tail race, and the additional burrs will be in position ready to assist in grinding the new and immense crop of wheat which will be harvested this season. Mr. Byers has expended \$17,000 on this mill which to-day stands unexcelled as a master piece of machinery . . . and ere another six months rolls around he will have expended at least \$1,000 more.

Bull went on to remind his readers that Byers' investment

has gone to build up your town and added to your wealth, to the value of your lots, to your business, and everything that goes to make Pendleton a business point.

He couldn't resist, at this point, to connect his own newspaper with Byers' achievement:

An enterprise of this description [Byers' mill], which stands parallel to a live newspaper, needs, demands and is entitled, other things being equal, to the united support of every man who is a friend of Pendleton, its success present and future, and of his own prosperity, which depends on the business enterprise which surrounds him. We hope this and every other enterprise (not excepting even your local paper) which advances our country will be heartily endorsed and sustained. (*EO*, March 10, 1877)

Above all, Bull and other small town editors in the West wanted growth—more settlers and investment equaled an improved quality of life on the frontier. The *EO* duly reported on the steady progress of Pendleton in his two years running the paper. In the March 24, 1877 issue he wrote “one year ago the population was 260; now it numbers 322, as a minimum number. This certainly is a flattering increase in our population.” He also noted the continued influx of settlers taking up free homesteads under the terms of the Homestead Act or filing on pre-emption claims for as little as \$1.25 an acre for unimproved lands.

Most small-town newspapers in the last half of the nineteenth century were fiercely partisan as politics served as the national pastime during that period. Bull was no exception in this regard, championing an independent Democratic Party editorial stance. This political leaning appealed to many in and around Pendleton, as most of the early settlers hailed from southern and border states, traditionally Democratic in politics. In fact, until the late 1930s when a renaming project took place, Pendleton streets bore the names of Confederate Civil War heroes as Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, P. T. Beauregard, and Jeff Davis.

After about two years of running the *EO*, Bull's health began to fail and even though his sons helped in printing the newspaper, he decided to sell. Staunch Democrat that he was, Bull refused to sell to any potential buyer that promoted Republican Party politics. Bull eventually found a buyer who met his qualifications: J. H. Turner, a sometime school teacher and fulltime lawyer. Turner agreed to purchase the newspaper but only if he could find other investors, which he soon did. For the next four years and with a succession of partners, Turner ran the business end of the *EO* and, at times, wrote editorials. The transition in ownership took place in October 1877. After selling out, Bull moved to Milton, Oregon, evidently to take up farming. In the fall of 1878, however, he went to Portland for medical attention and