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Tales of the Frontier Newsman

by K. Daniel Glover
April 30, 1998

A review of *Red Blood and Black Ink: Journalism in the Old West*
by David Dary
Alfred A. Knopf, 345 pp., $30.

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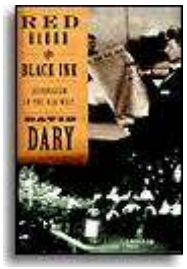
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David Dary clearly had a mission when he penned *Red Blood and Black Ink: Journalism in the Old West*, his eighth book about America's frontier heyday. The dean of the University of Oklahoma's journalism school and descendant of two pioneer newsmen wanted to convince readers of the tremendous influence of newspapers during the United States' westward expansion. He also wanted to condemn the politically correct, revisionist historians who have virtually ignored the role of Western newspapers as "catalysts for social change."

Dary accomplished his mission -- and then some. The former broadcast journalist managed to give unknown heroes of newspaperdom their rightful due and at the same time craft an entertaining tome for readers who could care less about "tramp printers" and the origins of the modern-day opinion column. *Red Blood and Black Ink* provides a glimpse of life in the Old West through the eyes of the men and women who recorded history as it happened, and it encourages nostalgia for a more adventurous time.

Dary's delightful journalistic gems

The book is replete with newspaper clippings and reproductions of decades-old photographs. It also includes nearly 30 pages of appendices for readers who want the scoop on the printing business from the early 1800s into the first part of this century.

But the greatest asset, and most reader-friendly feature, of Dary's effort is his amazing collection of clippings. From the initial printing of the *Missouri Gazette* on July 12, 1808 -- the first newspaper published west of the Mississippi River -- to the birth of still-existing newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Oregonian* and *Dallas Morning News*, Dary

takes his readers on a memorable and humorous journey. Here are just a few of the journalistic gems tucked inside the book:

> "We learn that on Friday, Jose Garcia ... caught his wife in flagarante delicto -- we leave the reader to guess the crime -- Jose, then and there, gave her the quietus with an axe. She's dead -- deadest sort of dead, and it is said that Jose did not run away and intends to face the music." (From the *Grant County Herald* in Silver City, N.M., on March 21, 1875)
>
> "William Jennison, fined $20 for hitting John Griffiths a slap in the face, was satisfied with the verdict and inquired what it would cost to whip him all he wanted to." (From the Oct. 15, 1864, edition of the *Boise News* in Idaho)
>
> "Sheriff Shehi has no use for handcuffs. When he gets a prisoner, he just cuts off the fellow's pants buttons and keeps him busy holding up his breeches while the sheriff quietly marches him to jail without any trouble." (From the *Kansas Reporter* published on May 3, 1877)

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And finally, this witty, and perhaps still relevant, insight about journalists by journalist/author Ambrose Bierce in the Aug. 3, 1878, edition of the *San Francisco Argonaut*: "There is no recorded instance of punishment for shooting a newspaper man. The restrictions of the game law do not apply to this class of game. ... I am quite serious in the statement that nobody in the United States has ever been hanged for killing a journalist; public opinion will not permit it."

Weak writing, strong research

The book does have its weaknesses, however, and Dary's writing is foremost among them. He risks losing his audience in an opening chapter plagued with two types of weak composition common among young journalists: clichés ("rumors began to fly") and the use of passive voice ("following the settlers ... were printers like Joseph Charless").

Ironically, in the eighth chapter of his book, Dary critically notes the frequent use of clichés by his editorial forebears. Apparently, he learned from neither their mistakes nor those of the students he taught during his climb to the top ranks of journalism educators.

The book also suffers from the inclusion of seemingly unnecessary details -- such as the subscription prices and subscriber numbers for various newspapers. Those facts might be worthwhile in a work aimed primarily at an audience of newspaper executives, but Dary purports to reach a broader readership. If he wanted to make a point about the finances of publishing, he should have compiled a few telling examples into an appealing chart or graph rather than composing unbearably dry text.

Fortunately for Dary, the colorful anecdotes about deadly editorial squabbles among competing newspapermen and historical tales of the fall of the Alamo and "Custer's last stand," among others, rescue this well-researched account. So, too, do the amusing stories of "hyperbolizing" by the likes of Don Hamilton Biggers,

who created satirical papers such as the *Josher* under the motto, "A Very Weakly Paper -- Issued Monthly-- Devoted to Trouble."

Dary's book will make many readers long for the early days of journalism when creative editors adopted monikers like *Boomerang or Tombstone Epitaph* for their newspapers. And it should make today's journalists daydream of reportorial heroes like Samuel Clemens (a.k.a. Mark Twain), Dan De Quille and Wells Drury as they roamed the West with the likes of Jesse James and Wild Bill Hickok.

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To learn more about Mark Twain, a familiar character in Dary's book, visit the Mark Twain Association of New York or a site dubbed Mark Twain in Cyberspace, which provides links. You also can read more about legendary outlaw Jesse James, Wild Bill Hickock and Gen. George Custer on the Web.

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