

A BRIEF HISTORY
OF THE
KINSTON DAILY FREE PRESS

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by
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Charles L. Arthur. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE KINSTON DAILY FREE PRESS. (Under the direction of Joseph F. Steelman) Department of History, East Carolina University, March, 1968.

The history of the Kinston Daily Free Press began in a small way in 1882 when the brothers, Josephus and Charles Daniels with a capital of \$10, founded the newspaper. After three years, during which time Charles served as the newspaper's editor, they sold one-half interest in the enterprise to Walter S. Herbert. Herbert was economically oriented and sought to increase the area's job potential through encouraging the development of industry. While he was editor, Kinston witnessed a period of rapid growth which saw the establishment of a number of basic industries. It was also during his editorship that the Free Press became first a semi-weekly and a short time thereafter a daily. He had ambitious plans for expanding the newspaper, but died in 1902 before the plans could be put into effect.

Upon Herbert's death, the newspaper became the property of Jesse W. Grainger, who had extensive holdings in Lenoir County. He asked his son-in-law, Dr. Daniel T. Edwards, to become editor of the newspaper. Edwards fought for many things, but his outstanding contribution was in the area of education. The records are not clear after 1906, but it appears that the newspaper went into a period of decline. A

factor in its decline could well have been Edward's failing health. Whatever the case, the publishing company was re-organized in 1914, and H. Galt Braxton was employed as the fourth editor of the Free Press.

Braxton did a thorough job of rebuilding the Free Press. He purchased new equipment, expanded the newspaper's area of influence, and greatly increased its circulation. In 1924, he acquired controlling interest in the Free Press Company. He gradually bought up the remaining stock so that today the company is virtually a closed family corporation. Braxton strongly believed that a newspaper should represent the interests of the people and strove to use the Free Press in a manner that would lead to the growth and development of the community.

In the area of education, he strove to decrease adult illiteracy, sought tax increases and bond issues to expand the community's educational base, fought for teacher pay increases, resisted the efforts of some to curtail education, and supported state-wide-measures that would assure more effective use of the educational dollar. He was also a proponent and an avid worker toward the improvement of rural education. Although he personally favored a county-wide system of control for the schools of Lenoir County, he did not let this fact deter him from fighting for a system of consoli-

dated schools on a smaller scale.

Economically, Braxton sought those things that would give the community a broader foundation for development-- better roads and other means of transportation, diversification of agriculture, larger and better markets, and the general development of Kinston. In helping to bring these things about, Braxton worked closely with civic groups and others interested in community development.

Over the years the Free Press became a community institution, through its support of measures and advocacy of programs that greatly aided the townspeople. It sought improvements in sanitation and public health, aided in the vice cleanup of Kinston, fought against political apathy and entrenchment, boosted entertainment, fought for public recreation, and aided other institutions toward making the community a better place in which to live.

This historical treatment of the Free Press, generally, concludes in 1939; however, the newspaper has continued to play a dominant role in its community down to the present day.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT PAGE

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PREFACE

America's strength resides in its local institutions, of which the small town newspaper is a vital and necessary part. In fact, it is the guardian and protector of all other local institutions. Unlike the large chain or metropolitan newspaper which serves geography, it is like a freshet in the desert serving people. Its persistence in behalf of its own freedom qualifies it to uphold the "four freedoms"; and, its proximity to the people gives it an insight into their problems and needs and qualifies it to champion their causes, a job that no other agency can do quite so well. This is a story of one such small town daily, which by serving its people and strengthening its local institutions, served also to strengthen the state and nation.

The Kinston Daily Free Press began in a small way and graduated through the stages of weekly, to a semi-weekly, and eventually to a daily. Its early years were attended by some success in specific areas, but it remained for H. Galt Braxton, its fourth and present editor, to build it into an effective instrument for the total betterment of the community embracing social, political, economic, moral, and cultural development. So often have its editorials led to worthwhile developments that reading them affords a preview of history.

The Free Press reading habit is like a contagion that grows on people. Many, who lived in or passed through Kinston years ago, continue to subscribe to the paper today from far away places. Migrating to the area in 1945, I became an indifferent reader. I noticed the paper's high quality and scarcity of mistakes, but like many readers took it for granted. My interest in it increased as I began to notice things happen, in and around Kinston, that had first been mentioned and followed-up closely in the Free Press. This fact, in a large measure, prompted my decision to write on the subject. Research through several thousand editions of the newspaper fully confirmed by beliefs that it had played and continues to play an important role in the development of the community.

Writing this paper has been a richly rewarding experience for which I will ever be grateful to H. Galt Braxton and the staff, past and present, of the Kinston Daily Free Press. Without their assistance and unselfish cooperation, this chronicle never could have been written. Not only has the study and association with the staff made me more appreciative of the Free Press in its role as a community institution, it also has given me a better understanding of the role of newspapers in general, and especially that of the

the small town daily, in our society.

Charles L. Arthur

CHAPTER I BACKGROUND AND SETTING

The basic ingredients for a town of any consequence in eastern North Carolina in 1882 were: one county to administer, one agricultural area of about four hundred square miles to serve, one navigable river, one railroad, and one newspaper. Kinston had all of these ingredients and was progressing normally when it was confronted suddenly with the prospects of losing its newspaper. Publication of The Kinston Weekly Journal terminated when James W. Harper, owner-editor, decided that New Bern offered better opportunities for himself and his business. This left Kinston without a newspaper and without a media through which it could be apprised of happenings outside the local area. Furthermore, the prestige of the town was in jeopardy, and no local person seemed inclined to take steps to remedy the situation.

In the late nineteenth century, almost all news outside the county was gathered by clipping exchanges, and the Weekly

Talmage C. Johnson and Charles R. Holloman, The Story of Kinston and Lenoir County (1954), 167, hereinafter cited as Johnson and Holloman, Kinston and Lenoir County. James W. Harper was a graduate of the University of North Carolina, a lawyer, a teacher, and the first Superintendent of Public Instruction for Lenoir County. He founded The Kinston Weekly Journal in 1878 and edited it until 1882, at which time he moved the paper and business to New Bern.

Journal had made a number of agreements with various state and regional newspapers. One such newspaper was The Wilson Advance,² edited by Josephus Daniels. His youngest brother, Charles, spent a good deal of time in the Advance's office reading exchanges. One day he noticed an announcement in The Kinston Weekly Journal concerning that newspaper's departure to New Bern. Discussing this matter with his brother, the two decided that this move afforded them an excellent opportunity to establish a newspaper in their own right, and that Josephus, being the more experienced of the two, should go to Kinston to lay the groundwork for the venture. Even though Josephus had been active in the newspaper field for several years, he had not attained sufficient age to negotiate contracts or accept legal responsibility. This fact did not deter the brothers, as they moved rapidly³ to take advantage of the opportunity.

Josephus, with \$10 advanced by Charles, set out for Kinston immediately. He arrived there in the afternoon by

² Josephus Daniels, Tar Heel Editor (1939), 89.

³ Charles C. Daniels, "Daniels Brothers Founded Free Press in April 1882," Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957, hereinafter cited as Charles Daniels, Founding of the Free Press. This article, written a few years prior to the publication of the above cited anniversary issue of the Free Press, was reprinted therein. It was very revealing concern-

way of the old "Mullet Line" (Atlantic and North Carolina

⁴ Railroad). His first move was to contact some friends with whom he had attended school in Wilson. From them, he learned that a Sunday School festival was to be held that night in one of the local churches. As gatherings such as this provided one of the primary means of entertainment in those days, Josephus reasoned that it offered him an excellent opportunity to meet and get acquainted with the towns-
⁵ folk. As Charles Daniels related several years later, Josephus not only attended the affair but spent \$6 of the \$10
⁶ sparking the girls. Although the money spent represented more than 50 per cent of the total capital of the business, it was apparently well invested--in more ways than one. For besides escorting the festival beauty home, Josephus made many worthwhile contacts. Among them were some of Kinston's

ing the early days of the newspaper.

⁴ Charles Daniels, Founding of the Free Press. No absolute proof can be obtained as to how this railroad got its popular name; however, it can be reasonably assumed that it came from the fact that this railroad hauled fish from Beaufort into other parts of eastern North Carolina.

⁵ Josephus Daniels, Tar Heel Editor, 89.

⁶ Josephus Daniels, Tar Heel Editor, 89. Josephus stated that he only spent two dollars; however, Charles claimed that Joe's memory was at fault in this matter and clinched his argument with: "After all it was my \$10."

most prosperous and respected citizens--pioneer builders who had the interest of the town at heart and who were willing to give of their time and effort to get another newspaper established in Kinston. With their assistance, Josephus contracted for enough advertising and local news to justify launching The Kinston Free Press.⁷

With the groundwork laid, Josephus returned to Wilson to print the paper. The first issue bore the date April 6,⁸ 1882. It must have been small indeed, for Charles revealed that he carried the entire issue in his arms when he set out for Kinston to assume management of the business. The newspaper would continue to be printed in Wilson for several weeks, until a press could be installed in Kinston. This made it necessary for Charles to shuttle between the two towns in carrying out all phases of the business. Actually at age seventeen, he was the paper's first editor. The young founders wished, however, to give the paper prestige and

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Josephus Daniels, Tar Heel Editor, 90.

8

Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957. As far as can be determined the Kinston Free Press has been published under four different headings. Weekly and semi-weekly editions were issued under the title The Kinston Free Press. Daily editions have been issued under the titles: The Daily Free Press, The Evening Free Press, and Kinston Daily Free Press. This particular issue commemorated the newspaper's seventy-fifth anniversary.

dignity which they felt their youth could not command. They appealed to the Reverend Curtis W. Howard, respected Lenoir County churchman, educator, and later Lenoir County Superintendent of Public Instruction, for the use of his name. Thus, his name appeared on the masthead of the early issues as the paper's editor.⁹

Getting through the first weeks posed a number of problems for the new businessmen. But townsmen, who had sufficient foresight to visualize the necessity and benefits of a newspaper for Kinston, came to their aid. Two of these in particular, Lemuel Harvey and Jesse Grainger, are remembered in Josephus's book Tar Heel Editor as among those who gave advice and rendered valuable assistance to the young business.¹⁰ As success seemed assured, a printing press was purchased on credit. The brothers still were not of legal age to negotiate contracts, but their mother Mary Cleaves Daniels, with a typical mother's faith in her sons, came to their rescue. She mortgaged their home in Wilson in order to guarantee their obligations. Charles related that it was many years¹¹ before they celebrated the burning of that mortgage.

⁹ Charles Daniels, Founding of the Free Press.

¹⁰ Josephus Daniels, Tar Heel Editor, 90.

¹¹ Charles Daniels, Founding of the Free Press.

Little is known of the paper's content as related to news coverage, advertising, and other items of specific interest, since copies of the early issues cannot be located. That the paper was very much in the thick of political action, editorially, may be concluded from the Tar Heel Editor. Josephus pointed out that Kinston had never elected a full slate of Democratic officials until the Free Press became a fighting newspaper and boldly set out to challenge the status quo. In fact, Charles was so headstrong in his advocacy of a Democratic slate that some of the more cautious Democrats became apprehensive lest he jeopardize the party's chances of even a partial victory. However, Charles ignored their pleas and continued the editorial campaign. His persistence in the matter paid dividends. In the following election, all Republicans were swept out of office. This was a creditable¹² victory for the Free Press and its young editor. Both of the Daniels brothers gained considerable stature and the Free Press's reputation was enhanced as a result of the campaign.

Josephus and Charles Daniels continued to operate the Free Press until 1885. During that year Josephus, who had long cherished the thought of editing a newspaper in the

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Josephus Daniels, Tar Heel Editor, 91.

state's capital city, moved to Raleigh to become owner-editor of the State Chronicle. Charles had to return to Wilson to edit The Advance. Later he left the newspaper field entirely to become a highly successful lawyer. Both Josephus and Charles recalled the Free Press and Kinston with fond memories. Charles, in an article written in 1951 and reprinted in the Free Press on the occasion of its seventy-fifth anniversary, recalled those early days and gave some indication of the high esteem in which he regarded the locality and newspaper:

But through a lifetime that has now extended to 86 years I have always had a warm place in my heart for Kinston, Lenoir County, and the Free Press that continues to march forward.¹³

Upon departure of the Daniels brothers from Kinston in 1885, Walter C. Herbert purchased one-half interest in the Free Press and became its next editor.¹⁴ Herbert, a native of Halifax County, was only twenty-three years of age when he assumed the editorship,¹⁵ but he exhibited maturity and vision far beyond his years. He was practical, forthright,

¹³

Charles Daniels, Founding of the Free Press.

¹⁴

Charles Daniels, Founding of the Free Press.

¹⁵

The Daily Free Press, September 2, 1899. Special industrial edition with a brief history of the Free Press.

and persistent in his approach to problems of that day. He recognized that his success, in a large measure, depended upon that of Kinston and the surrounding area, and he promoted those things that he considered essential in making the area a better place in which to live. He adopted the town as his home and became a highly significant figure within the community. In 1889 he purchased the remaining one-half of the newspaper from the Daniels brothers.¹⁶

Beyond the realm of the community, Herbert was highly regarded by his contemporaries, as was evidenced by extracts from their editorials reprinted in the Free Press shortly after its tenth anniversary.

The Free Press recently entered upon its eleventh year. Brother Herbert is publishing one of the best all-around papers in the state. He has a strong backing in Kinston and he deserves it. He has opinions and expresses them fearlessly, and withal he is just and conservative. He is running a model newspaper and we wish him continued success....The Wilson Advance.

The Free Press is the prettiest exchange that comes to this office and one of the best....Scotland Neck Democrat.

Brother Herbert like good wine improves with age....Raleigh News and Observer.¹⁷

¹⁶

Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957.

¹⁷

The Kinston Free Press, October 22, 1892.

Politically, the Free Press under Herbert supported the Democratic party; however, it was in no sense of the word a party instrument. On a number of occasions, the paper attacked the apathy exhibited by incumbent Bourbon Democrats in solving problems that confronted the state--particularly in the areas of transportation and education. One of Herbert's first editorial battles concerned the lack of efficiency in the operation of the state-owned Atlantic and North Carolina Railroad which ran from Goldsboro to Beaufort. This road was Kinston's lifeline. It was not only losing money, but equipment had deteriorated to such an extent that operation was difficult and accidents were commonplace. In a series of editorials that involved the crux of the matter, Herbert demanded changes in the management of the line. In the end, the state administration saw fit to remove certain officials¹⁸ and initiate much needed repairs. The road had recovered sufficiently by 1893, a depression year, to pay a dividend of¹⁹ 2 per cent, its second in thirty-eight years. In the area of education, Herbert was not as adamant in his attacks; nevertheless, he maintained that expenditures were not suffi-

¹⁸

The Kinston Free Press, January 3, 10, 1889, February 7, 28, 1889, May 2, 1889.

¹⁹

The Kinston Free Press, July 27, 1893.

cient to provide for state educational needs. Other states,²⁰ he pointed out, were doing much more than North Carolina.

Just before the turn of the century, the Free Press was to assume a leading role in the establishment of graded schools for Kinston. On the eve of the municipal election of 1899, in which voters decided overwhelmingly in favor of graded schools, this editorial appeared in the Free Press:

On the first Monday in May will be decided the most important question that has ever been before the people of Kinston, viz: whether or not Kinston shall have graded schools....It would be a great calamity if graded schools should fail at the election. Every true friend of the community should go to work--and hard at work--at once to see that the proposition is carried by an overwhelmingly majority.²¹

These and other intra-party political battles were carried on intermittently throughout the nineties; however, the paper's main political struggle was directed against the Republican party. The Free Press attacked with whatever weapons that were available, but perhaps its most effective weapon was that of equating Republican rule with "Negro rule."²² This approach obviously appealed to emotions and was attended with a

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The Kinston Free Press, April 26, 1888.

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The Kinston Free Press, April 24, 1899.

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The Kinston Free Press, July 19, 1888, September 6, 1888, November 28, 1889.

considerable degree of success. Locally, the Democrats held²³ the line throughout the eighties, and the Free Press, though certainly not fully responsible for that success, deserved a considerable amount of credit for it. Failure or perhaps the belatedness of Democrats to uphold campaign pledges and enact programs for state reform nurtured the rise of a new movement that would eventually disrupt the political status quo on the state level, and seriously disturb it on the local level.

The Farmer's Alliance, organized in Texas during the middle seventies, had first sought solution to the farmer's problems through traditional political parties. By 1892 it was evident that this approach would not bring about desired changes, and the Alliance, by then a nationwide movement, became the foundation for the People's (Populist) Party. Leonidas L. Polk, a native North Carolinian was president of the National Alliance and the logical choice to lead the new party in its bid for national political leadership, but he died before²⁴ the Populist Convention of 1892.

As long as the Alliance worked through existing parties, the Free Press treated it with respect and deference. The

23

The Kinston Free Press, November 10, 1888.

24

Stuart Noblin, Leonidas Lafayette Polk, Agrarian Crusader (1949), 275-320.

paper published a column, written by L. E. Duffy, under the
²⁵
 title of "Alliance Department." It also supported broad

demands, advocated by the Alliance, in the areas of tariff
²⁶
 and finance reform. On the state level, the paper upheld

the organization's proposal for a railroad commission and
 further supported its attacks against the jute bagging

²⁷
 trusts. However, as the state Alliance veered toward the
 third party, the Free Press's attitude toward it changed con-
 siderably. Such a movement threatened to rupture the party
 from within and perhaps assure victory for the Republicans.

Herbert tried vainly to stem the tide. His approach was to
 condemn the third party and its leadership while appealing

²⁸
 to its membership to return to the Democratic fold. In the
 election of 1894, the Democrats won most of the county of-
 fices, but did not fare as well in their bid for state offices.

Actually the Peoples Party did not have sufficient strength to

²⁵

The Kinston Free Press, March 15, 31, 1891. Duffy's
 column appeared to be a regular feature of the newspaper dur-
 ing the year 1891. It ceased to be printed the following
 year as the third party movement gained momentum.

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The Kinston Free Press, June 27, 1892.

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The Kinston Free Press, February 27, 1888, August 23,
 1888.

²⁸

The Kinston Free Press, April 21, 1892, June 9, 1892,
 June 23, 1892.

win political control within the state, but through an illogical fusion with the Republican party, they helped defeat the Democrats, and thus gain a share in the state's administration.²⁹

Although politics occupied the center of the stage, perhaps the greatest concern of the Free Press was in the area of local economic development. It was a field in which Herbert was at his best and one in which he held more than a superficial interest. He sought to induce balance into the economy through the introduction of industry; however, he did not overlook the community's primary means of livelihood--that of agriculture. Herbert encouraged wider diversification of crops. Prior to 1895, Lenoir County's biggest money crop was cotton, and he implored farmers to forsake total dependency upon that staple and plant a wider range of food-stuffs and grains.³⁰ The paper also carried a farm column in which appeared information regarding the most modern

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The Kinston Free Press, November 8, 1894. This issue of the Free Press reported local election returns. Results for state offices indicated that Republicans either won or had a majority vote in the county in all offices being offered for election. On the county and township level, however, results were as follows: County offices--Democrats, six; Republicans, Populists, and Fusionists, none; Township offices (Constables)--Democrats, seven; Republicans, two; Populists and Fusionists, two.

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The Kinston Free Press, May 17, 1888, July 5, 1888.

techniques and methods of farming.³¹ Also of direct benefit to the farmer was the impetus given road repair and construction through the Free Press.³²

Kinston, however, posed the big challenge. The town was witnessing a period of rapid expansion in terms of population. From 1890 to 1900, it increased in population from 1,726 to 4,106.³³ The Free Press on a number of occasions voiced concern that the town's job opportunities were not keeping pace with its rapidly expanding population. As early as 1888 Herbert encouraged the development of a textile industry.³⁴ He sought to interest his readers in the development of factories that would provide jobs for those whom the county's farm economy could not accommodate. Some industries established during the nineties were: C. T. Randolph Carriage and Buggy Factory, Hines Brothers Lumber Company, Orion Knitting Mills, and Kinston Cotton Mills.³⁵

³¹ The Kinston Free Press, May 3, 24, 1888, June 20, 1889.

³² The Kinston Free Press, January 6, 1893.

³³ Lenoir County News, June 27, 1953. This is a weekly published by Wilbur J. Rider of Kinston, N. C. This particular issue was a special edition and contained an undocumented history of Lenoir County--dealing primarily with its economic development.

³⁴ The Kinston Free Press, August 9, 1888.

³⁵ Johnson and Holloman, Kinston and Lenoir County, 135.

But Herbert was not satisfied with these modest gains. In 1897 he offered his services to help "public spirited citizens" organize a hosiery mill to put Kinston on a "solid foundation."³⁶ Not the least among Herbert's services was the publication of industrial issues of the Free Press in 1897 and 1899. In these he described fully Kinston and Lenoir County in terms of contemporary growth, and he presented a good picture of their potential for future development. Concerning the 1899 issue, Herbert wrote "This issue was gotten out to show the people of the surrounding section and even Kinstonians what a fine town we have."³⁷ Three thousand copies were printed and distributed throughout the state. In making this distribution, the Free Press assumed the responsibility of selling Kinston and Lenoir County to the remainder of the state.

Progress and growth in Kinston were not without complications or interruptions. Perhaps the most disturbing occurrence during the nineties was a series of devastating fires that destroyed every building within two blocks in the very center of town. Included among the buildings destroyed was the Free

³⁶

The Kinston Free Press, June 20, 1897.

³⁷

The (Kinston, N. C.) Daily Free Press, September 2, 1899, industrial issue, hereinafter cited as The Daily Free Press.

Press plant which was located on the corner of Queen and Caswell streets, a site presently occupied by Baker's Furniture Store. This setback necessitated removal of printing operations to Goldsboro for a short time,³⁸ but it did not dampen the spirit of the paper. The next day it issued an "extra",³⁹ reporting in detail the extent of damages. After several fires, the Free Press and citizens alike were convinced that they were deliberately set. Although vigilance was intensified, no one was actually caught in the act of committing arson. However, pressures of publicity and added attention served its purpose, as Alex Rouse, a Negro, voluntarily confessed to have been involved in the burnings. He further implicated three other Negroes and two prominent white men, Bryan N. Fields, owner of the stables where the first fire started, and J. B. Colie. All parties were indicted, but a jury after deliberating only seventy-five minutes, found all defendants "not guilty." Based on the evidence, they apparently should have been convicted. The presiding judge severely reprimanded the jury, and a week later the Free Press commented:

38

Johnson and Holloman, Kinston and Lenoir County, 140.

39

The Kinston Free Press, March 1, 1895.

Kinston was shocked last week by the verdict acquitting all defendants in the case for burning Fields stables. The action of the jury was severely criticized by perhaps 19 out of 20 of our citizens, who could not understand how twelve men could agree to acquit when the evidence presented them was so strong.⁴⁰

This setback only temporarily delayed the progress of Kinston and the Free Press. Business was surging; the depression of 1893 was practically over; tobacco was beginning its ascendancy; the cotton and knitting mills were in full operation; and prospects for additional railroad facilities seemed bright. The Free Press, to keep pace with this progress and development which it had helped nurture, became a semi-weekly in February, 1896, only a year after its plant had been destroyed.⁴¹

To get capital for this expansion, a stock company was formed; however, Herbert retained all common stock and sold only enough preferred stock to raise money necessary to purchase materials to print the paper twice a week. Semi-weekly issues of the Free Press would continue to be published until the early twenties, but upon approach of the Spanish-American War, the newspaper, on April 5, 1898, also became a daily.⁴²

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The Kinston Free Press, March 1, 1896.

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The Kinston Free Press, February 14, 1896.

⁴²

The Daily Free Press, April 5, 1898.

As the Free Press increased its business, its labor force expanded accordingly. In 1886, a short time after Herbert assumed control, its staff consisted of an editor, a printer, and a part time "devil." By 1899, this force had grown to include an editor, six printers, a reporter, a soliciting representative, and several carriers.⁴³ One might assume that business acceleration coupled with population growth would stimulate circulation; however, such was not the case.⁴⁴ It remained near 1,000 throughout the nineties. The basic underlying causes for this situation were lack of education and poor roads. The increase in population failed to reflect an upward swing in circulation, because it was apparently comprised mostly of laborers who could not read. Cost of newspapers should not have been a deterrent to prospective subscribers for the published prices appeared rea-

43

The Daily Free Press, September 2, 1899.

44

The Kinston Free Press, December 29, 1892 and The Daily Free Press, June 30, 1898. These issues made references to circulation. The 1892 edition reported a weekly circulation of 1,063, and the 1898 edition reported that the paper had 900 subscribers. It is unknown whether this figure included both daily and semi-weekly issues or not. The figure was given in connection with an announcement that the daily issue of the paper was being discontinued because of lack of interest. Under these circumstances, the figure probably had the "water squeezed out of it." The Free Press incidently did not discontinue the daily issue.

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sonable for this period.

Herbert's last official act to enlarge the business was to organize the Kinston Publishing Company in 1902 at a capitalization of \$22,000. In order to raise the capital, seventy-two shares of preferred stock were sold to sixty-one people at one hundred dollars per share. The remaining common stock was held in equal shares by the editor, his brother James H. Herbert, and a business associate, Frank M. Harrington.⁴⁶ A stockholder's meeting elected twenty-three directors with Jesse Grainger as chairman.⁴⁷ The stock company was formed to expand commercial printing facilities and to give the newspaper forward looking capabilities commensurate with the expected development of the town. Herbert, however would never realize the full fruition of his hopes and plans for the future. Within a few months after formation of the company, he was taken suddenly ill and died a week afterwards, without

⁴⁵
The Daily Free Press and The (Kinston) Evening Free Press, 1898-1902. Published rates were: Weekly (by carrier)--ten cents, one month--thirty-five cents, three months--one dollar, one year--four dollars. Semi-weekly rates were about one-third of the daily rates.

⁴⁶
 Lenoir County Record of Corporation, Book A, 65-70, located in the Lenoir County Courthouse, Kinston, North Carolina, hereinafter cited as Lenoir County Record of Corporation.

⁴⁷
The Daily Free Press, April 25, 1902.

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regaining consciousness.

Kinston deeply mourned the passing of Herbert. During the sixteen years of his editorship, the Free Press had become a definite factor in the growth and development of the community. Many tributes were paid to Herbert as both a man and public servant, but perhaps the most fitting and appropriate was given by Plato Collins, when he wrote:

Standing in the shadow and gloom of his death, I cannot correctly estimate his true worth nor accurately analyze his character and his life work. But, I do know that progressive Kinston owes a debt of gratitude to him....⁴⁹

Upon Herbert's death, Jesse Grainger, chairman of the board of directors for the Kinston Publishing Company, acquired control of the Free Press.⁵⁰ Grainger was one of Kinston's pioneer builders. He was born in Greene County, educated at Hookerton Academy and Trinity College, and served

48

The Daily Free Press, November 18, 1902. Herbert was buried at Moorehead City, the home of his wife. Many voiced the opinion that Kinston would have been a more appropriate place to have laid his remains at rest.

49

The Daily Free Press, November 19, 1902. Plato Collins was a local attorney. He had been, in 1892-93, an associate editor of the Free Press. In 1899, he wrote a very important history of the community for the industrial issue published by the newspaper.

50

The Daily Free Press, Industrial Issue, 1906. This issue contained a brief history of the Free Press.

in the Civil War as a captain of Junior Reserves. He moved to Kinston in 1879 and rose rapidly to a position of leadership in the political, economic, and social life of the community. Among the political offices held by Grainger were the following: county commissioner, delegate to two national Democratic conventions, chairman of the county Democratic Executive Committee, and Lenoir County representative in the General Assembly.⁵¹

Already a highly successful produce farmer and merchant by 1890, he perhaps deserves more credit than any other single individual for the initiation of modern tobacco culture in Lenoir County. In 1889 only six acres of tobacco had been planted in the county.⁵² But in 1891, Grainger purchased five hundred dollars worth of seed and distributed them "free" to farmers throughout Lenoir County and guaranteed that a sales warehouse would be available at the end of the year. In fulfillment of that promise, Grainger built the Kinston-Carolina Warehouse, Kinston's first modern warehouse.⁵³ His name is perpetuated today through Kinston's Grainger High

51

Johnson and Holloman, Kinston and Lenoir County, 124.

52

R. C. Journey and W. A. Davis, Soil Survey of Lenoir County, N. C. (1927), 4.

53

Lenoir County News, June 27, 1953.

School and Grainger's Station, located about six miles north by northeast of Kinston, on the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad.

Grainger's public life caused frequent absences from his vast holdings, but he seemed to be endowed with the faculty for selecting men of great ability to operate them for him. To edit the Free Press, he chose his son-in-law, Dr. Daniel T. Edwards. The new editor, sometimes referred to as Kinston's first Ph.D., was born in Greene County. He received his elementary and high school education at High Point, graduated from Trinity College, and attended the University of North Carolina, from which he received a certificate of proficiency for the study of law. He obtained a license to practice, but instead went to New York City and secured a scholarship at New York University, from which he earned the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Afterwards, he taught in the Manhattan and Brooklyn schools. While there, he married Capitola Grainger. Because of failing health, Edwards returned to Kinston in 1902, and in the early months of 1903⁵⁴ accepted the job as editor of the Free Press.

Edwards could perhaps be characterized as an "educational editor." Although North Carolina had entered into a

program of emphasis on education, the initiative to proceed with it resided largely with citizens of a given locality. If left alone, their pace was usually slow and the goals they set were minimal. The Free Press made certain that such was not the case in Kinston and Lenoir County. Hardly a week passed that the subject of education was not brought before the people in terms of better pay for teachers, expansion of facilities, necessity for educating Negroes, and encouragement to all citizens to take advantage of educational opportunities.⁵⁵ Edwards realized that many parents, having little or no education themselves, failed to see the importance of sending their children to school; therefore, he advocated state constitutional changes which would provide for definite school terms with provisions for compulsory attendance.⁵⁶ His energetic efforts on behalf of education produced encouraging results for Kinston and materially improved school conditions throughout the county. By 1905, Kinston had an elementary school and a high school through the ninth grade for white children and a school through the sixth grade for Negroes. At the end of that school year, the high school

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The Daily Free Press, January 12, 23, 1903, February 12, 1903, August 27, 1903, January 6, 1904.

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The Daily Free Press, January 23, 1903.

graduated twenty-five, and it is interesting to note that five or six of the graduates became teachers the next year. In its industrial issue of 1906, the Free Press could boast:

The educational facilities have not been neglected in Kinston. The school enrolls more white children than any other graded school between Raleigh and Wilmington--save the Goldsboro school alone, which has about a hundred and twenty-five or thirty more pupils than this school.⁵⁷

Edwards also expressed himself with his usual breadth and clarity on a number of subjects of immediate interest to the local citizens. The Free Press sponsored campaigns and events to raise funds to equip the fire department; it attempted to move the city administration to establish recreational facilities; and it strove to interest the people in beautifying the town.⁵⁸ Outside the immediate locality, Edwards supported development of the inland waterway and improvement of water communications in general.⁵⁹ His was a broad approach to road construction--even to the extent of suggesting that the federal government share the financial burden with state and local administrations in order to pro-

⁵⁷ The Daily Free Press, Industrial Issue, 1906.

⁵⁸ The Daily Free Press, March 9, 1903, August 2, 1903, October 13, 1903, January 29, 1914.

⁵⁹ The Daily Free Press, December 12, 1904.

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vide a more adequate system of roads. In 1906, the Free Press published another industrial issue that surpassed preceding issues in both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Only a few copies of that prized edition are extant, and they are in the hands of private citizens and the present Free Press Company.

Prospects for advancement of the Free Press appeared exceptionally bright during the first years of Edwards' editorship. He wrote with great ability; the publishing company, of which the newspaper was a part, was one of the largest commercial printers east of Raleigh; the paper had the support of one of the most prosperous families of Lenoir County; expansion of education and the establishment of "rural free delivery" combined to give it a larger reading public; and the town itself was opening new opportunities for the

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The Daily Free Press, February 23, 24, 1904.

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Joseph Ballard, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, October 16, 1963, hereinafter cited as Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963. Mr. Ballard was an employee of the Free Press from 1902 until 1960.

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M. D. Davis, Chief of the Reference Service Branch, Federal Record Center, St. Louis, Missouri, letter to the author, April 23, 1964. According to this letter "rural free delivery" was established in the Kinston postal area on July 1, 1902. By 1910, the post office had seven rural routes, which averaged approximately thirty miles in length.

newspaper. The equipment, though not new, had capabilities which exceeded requirements for both the newspaper and commercial printing. Linotype was introduced in 1905 and replaced the tedious process of composing by hand. By 1906 the newspaper was being printed on a Cottrell cylindrical press, and a short time thereafter electricity replaced steam as the motive power.⁶³ Despite these improvements and expanded capabilities, the Free Press went into a period of decline after 1906, from which it would not recover until it changed hands in 1914.

That the newspaper declined between 1906 and 1914 may be concluded from a number of factors. Regular issues, from December 1904 to January 1, 1914, are missing from the newspaper files.⁶⁴ This would tend to indicate decline.⁶⁵ Of significance also is the fact that those extant newspapers from January 1 to May 1, 1914 contained very few news items from out-

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Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

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The Daily Free Press, 1888-1914. Accumulation of the present files, which are on microfilm, has been largely the work of H. Galt Braxton, present publisher-editor of the Free Press. That he went to considerable pains to complete the set is quite obvious. Many of the earlier editions were filmed from copies held by the state library. Braxton could not locate regular editions from 1904-1914.

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Although this factor alone does not conclusively support the idea that the Free Press declined during the period

lying villages and communities. After Grainger's death in 1910, the Free Press also ran into financial difficulties. According to Joseph Ballard, retired equipment supervisor of the Free Press and an employee under Edwards, the paper had difficulty supporting itself, and on a number of occasions had to raise money through special issues of stock to keep going.⁶⁶ Decline was also reflected in the downward swing of subscriptions and the paper's lack of growth. Its circulation had been more than one thousand in 1900 but by 1914⁶⁷ circulation had fallen to about five hundred.

Causes for the decline can only be surmised. As previously stated Captain Grainger died in 1910, and Dr. Edwards, excellent writer that he was, did not have Grainger's business acumen or knack of leadership.⁶⁸ Indicative of this fact was the lack of care and diligence in the maintenance

1906-1914, it helps to support the opinion that there was a general deterioration in the newspaper, structurally and materially, during this period. A newspaper is its own history, and like a civilization, if it is not interested in maintaining a record of its past, there is doubt that it is interested in its future.

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Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

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H. Galt Braxton, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, October 11, 1963, hereinafter cited as Braxton, interview, October 11, 1963.

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Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

of business records as was reflected by out-of-date subscrip-
tion lists when the new management assumed control.⁶⁹ Fur-
thermore, declining circulation and the absence of news items
from areas outside Kinston indicated that the paper, in some
measure had lost rapport with its readers. Edwards's health
could well have been a basic factor in the overall decline of
the newspaper. At the time of its disposal, he was on doctor's
orders to give up its editorship. Whatever the case, the Free
Press was anything but a healthy business when H. Galt Braxton
made his first visit to Kinston in 1914 to assume control of
the newspaper.⁷⁰

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Braxton, interview, October 11, 1963.

⁷⁰The Daily Free Press, April 29, 1914.

CHAPTER II

THE FREE PRESS UNDER NEW LEADERSHIP

It has been said that H. Galt Braxton and Kinston were
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looking for each other in 1914. It was true that certain people in Kinston sensed the need for a newspaper with a more progressive outlook, and Braxton, then employed by the Raleigh Times, wanted an opportunity to broaden his horizons in the newspaper field. Each saw in the other the possibility of meeting these needs. Although the Free Press at that time did not appear to offer much in terms of security for his family, Braxton had faith that he could overcome this factor by building a newspaper that would be worthy of his own dreams and measure up to the standards of those who saw a need for a change. Neither was to be disappointed.

The modern era of the Free Press began with reorganization of the Kinston Publishing Company. Actually a new company, the Kinston Free Press Company, was created. It was incorporated and capitalized at \$25,000. In the record of incorporation, nine men were listed as stockholders: Noah J. Rouse, J. F. Taylor, Felix Harvey, Sr., J. Herman Canady, Dal.

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John P. Strother, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, December 28, 1964, hereinafter cited as Strother, interview, December 28, 1964.

F. Wooten,² Herbert E. Mosley, Thomas V. Mosley, and Daniel T. Edwards, then editor of the Free Press but under doctor's orders to give up the job. It was these men, all highly respected in the community, who approached Braxton and invited him to assume management and editorship of the Kinston Free Press. He accepted conditionally--that owners modernize equipment, that he be given a free hand in operating the paper and shaping its editorial policy, and that he be permitted to purchase stock in the company. Thus, Braxton kept a date with destiny and became the paper's fourth editor.³

H. Galt Braxton was born in Hanover County, Virginia on February 22, 1881 into a family with a deep and indelible American heritage. One of his forebears, Carter Braxton, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Early in Braxton's life, his family moved to Birmingham, Alabama, where he literally grew up in the newspaper world. In 1895, he became a carrier for the Birmingham News, and two years later was made route inspector. At about the time of his graduation

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Lenoir County Record of Corporation, Book B, 15-17, located in the Lenoir County Courthouse, Kinston, North Carolina, hereinafter cited as Lenoir County Record of Corporation.

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For the sake of clarity, the author considers Josephus Daniels as founder and the Reverend Curtis W. Howard as editor in name only. Past and present editors include: Charles C. Daniels, Walter C. Herbert, Daniel T. Edwards, and H. Galt Braxton.

from high school in 1898, he was promoted to circulation manager, the youngest in the history of the newspaper.⁴ After ten years in this position, he was elevated to general business manager. It was also during this same year, 1908, that he married Miss Theo Pennington of Birmingham. Through the years, she became a source of encouragement and a worthy helpmate in all of the editor's endeavors. They have two daughters, Mrs. John Worth McAlister and Miss Ethel Braxton. Their only son, Carter, died in January, 1930 while a freshman at Virginia Military Institute.⁵

In 1911, Braxton decided to leave Alabama and pursue his profession in North Carolina. He purchased an interest in a Greensboro newspaper, The Telegram, and moved there. His sojourn in Greensboro, however, was brief and somewhat disappointing. After about a year, he sold his interest in the newspaper to the Greensboro Daily News⁶ and accepted a position

⁴
Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, January 20, 1930.

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Ethel S. Arnett, Greensboro North Carolina, (1955), 255. Quoting from this reference: "In keeping with the nationwide trend toward 24-hour newspapers under one management around 1911 the Daily News absorbed the Evening Telegram." This is presumed to be the newspaper that Braxton owned an interest in, although according to Johnson and Holloman, History of Kinston and Lenoir County, the newspaper with which Braxton was affiliated in Greensboro was a morning newspaper.

as business manager of the Raleigh Times. Two years later he accepted the offer from Kinston. The new owners of the Free Press were optimistic when they announced the hiring of the new editor:

The owners of the paper only entered upon negotiations with Mr. Braxton after they had satisfied themselves that he was not only the type of man they desired, but that as editor and manager of the paper, he would be able to extend the influence and usefulness of the Free Press, and in so doing advance the material, social and moral welfare of Kinston and this section of the state.

In addition to the experience of Mr. Braxton, which well equips and qualifies him for the work, it will be interesting to know that he has the reputation of being an active civic worker and [is] always interested in those things that make for the advancement of the religious and moral life of the community....⁷

The Free Press was at a low ebb of its history when Braxton became editor in 1914. At that time, it contained four six column pages and was issued as a semi-weekly, under the title The Kinston Free Press, and as a daily, under the title The Daily Free Press. Daily circulation, however, hardly extended beyond the city limits. The newspaper was housed in a rented building on West Gordon Street, and its basic equipment consisted of one Cottrell cylinder printing press and one Linotype typesetting machine. Both had been purchased several

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The Kinston Free Press, May 2, 1914.

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Joseph F. Ballard, interview with the author, Kinston,

years previously and were hardly adequate to print a truly modern newspaper.

Braxton began rebuilding almost as soon as he arrived. He concerned himself with the laying of a foundation that would give the newspaper stability and enable it to grow and prosper. One of his first moves was to acquire newer and better equipment--equipment which would give the company the capacity to "print a newspaper in keeping with the progress of the community."⁹ A model eight multiple Mergenthaler Linotype Machine was purchased at a cost of more than \$10,000. Shortly thereafter, a Cox duplex printing press, which had a capacity of eight pages at four thousand copies per hour,¹⁰ was purchased and installed. These machines were the first of their type to be brought into eastern North Carolina and soon proved their value. A column was added to each page and more than an inch was added to the length of each column.¹¹ In 1915, Braxton further demonstrated the paper's increased capacity by publishing a multi-section special "Opportunity

North Carolina, October 16, 1963, hereinafter cited as Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

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The Daily Free Press, September 26, 1914.

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Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

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The Daily Free Press, October 26, November 17, 1914.

Edition," which drew praise from a number of newspapers and news agencies throughout the southeast.¹² To the newspaper world, the Free Press had returned to the fold--some indication that it was on its way toward recovery.

Full recovery, however, would take several years. The period immediately preceding and during World War I was especially difficult. Much of the original capital, invested by the new stockholders, had been used to purchase new machinery. Operating costs: payrolls, newsprint, news services, and other expenses had to be met on a week-to-week basis and this was not always a certainty.¹³ But through the confidence of creditors and loyal employees, the Free Press continued to circulate. During those days, Mrs. Braxton exhibited the same confidence, determination, and strength as her husband. Besides serving as mother and homemaker, she also doubled as proofreader and copyreader at the newspaper office.¹⁴

To compound difficulties, a competing newspaper, The Kinston Morning News, was established and circulated its first

¹² The Daily Free Press, March 29, April 10, 1915.

¹³ Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

¹⁴ Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957.

edition on October 20, 1914. Charles W. Forlow, former associate editor of the Free Press under Daniels, was editor and one of its publishers.¹⁵ Copies of the Morning News cannot be located, but it has been said by many "old timers" that it was oriented toward private interests instead of community interests; that it picked issues with the Free Press; and that it publicly opposed many of Braxton's ideas and programs, on the basis that such would exert an untenable strain on the taxpayers. On the other hand, hardly any mention of the Morning News ever appeared in the Free Press, and no occasion can be found upon which Braxton criticized his competition editorially. Upon asking John P. Strother, a member of the Free Press staff since 1936 and present associate editor, why Braxton chose not to reply in kind, he stated: "The attacks could be likened to a gnat biting on the heel of an elephant."¹⁶

The Morning News, however, fought a good battle for existence. It survived for twenty-two years, despite its supposedly limited scope. In 1936, it issued its last edition--perhaps a victim of the Great Depression.¹⁷

¹⁵ Lenoir County Record of Corporation, Book B, 22-24, and The Daily Free Press, October 20, 1914. "Old timers" indicate that this newspaper was born especially to offer opposition.

¹⁶ Strother, interview, December 28, 1964.

¹⁷ Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957.

Besides advocating a program of steady progress, the Free Press also did its fighting by increasing services. The pony news service of the United Press Association, which the paper had joined about a week prior to Braxton's arrival, was expanded upon to give readers more up-to-date and broader national and international news coverage.¹⁸ Weather and market reports were added shortly after Braxton's arrival.¹⁹ In 1915, he gave readers their first comics--a single strip called "Mike the Messenger" by Walt Desmond.²⁰ Local news, a point of pride with the Free Press, was also increased, and news from surrounding communities again became a prominent part of the newspaper's coverage. By 1919, the paper had grown to six pages.²¹ Occasionally, larger special editions were issued. All the while, readers realized the benefits of this

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The Free Press is the oldest client of the United Press International, as it is known today, in the South. Braxton preferred this news service, because it offered a degree of independence that other news services did not offer. The term "pony news service" is a newspaper expression used to describe the telephone news service supplied by the United Press during its early years. News was disseminated daily through two twenty minute telephone conversations which had to be recorded in shorthand.

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The Daily Free Press, May 18, 1914.

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The Daily Free Press, December 27, 1915.

21

The Daily Free Press, November 27, 1919.

expanded service at the same price as before--two cents per copy.

Despite the presence of the Morning News, the Free Press steadily increased its circulation. Braxton was a practical business man. He needed subscribers to exist and was not opposed to using contests and promotional devices to introduce the paper to new readers.²² He relied, however, on good newspapermanship, dependability, and superior services to hold them. Drives boosted local circulation. Representatives were sent into outlying communities to build good will and to learn how the Free Press could best serve their interests.²³ New subscribers apparently liked the bargain they found in the newspaper. Not only did they keep returning year after year, they also passed the Free Press reading habit on to their children. Thus a base for an ever expanding circulation was established. By 1920, it had grown to twenty-five hundred, five times what it had been in 1914. With this circulation, the paper had a greater potential for advertising, and was ultimately able to pull itself out of the financial mire.

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The Daily Free Press, May 15, 1916, and H. Galt Braxton, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, March 24, 1965, hereinafter cited as Braxton, interview, March 24, 1965.

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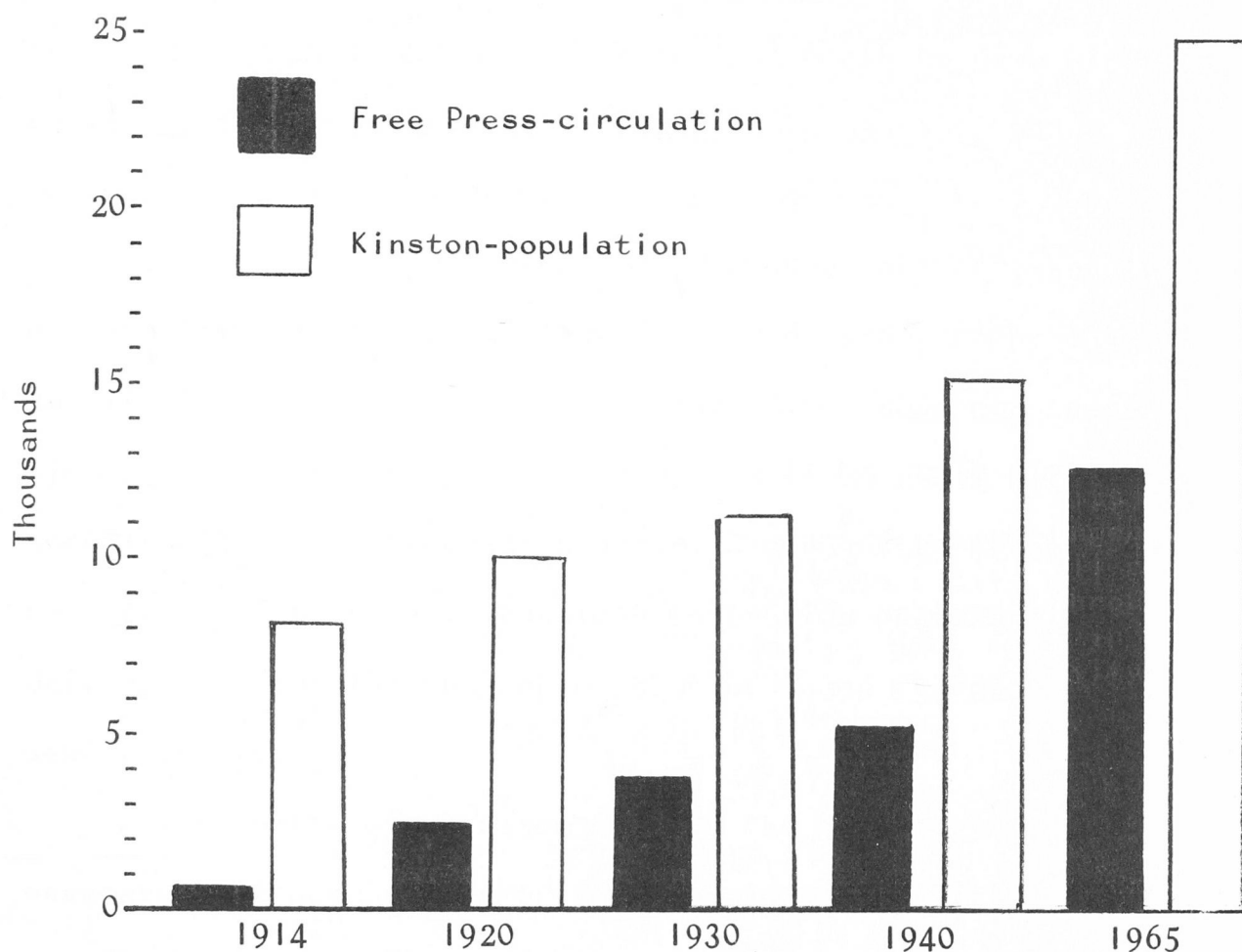
The Daily Free Press, November 25, 1914, April 24, 1915.

Although its progress was somewhat retarded by the agricultural depression of the early twenties, the newspaper continued its upward trend. In 1923, it could proudly acclaim: "The Kinston Daily Free Press guarantees its advertisers more bonafide subscribers than any other medium circulating in its territory, or no charge for advertising."²⁴ A few years later it would be able to double this claim. Not only was this a manner of saying to prospective customers that advertising with the newspaper offered certain advantages, it was also a manner of saying to readers that the Free Press was the leading newspaper of Kinston and its environs. The year 1923 also marked a turning point in the newspaper's history. It had virtually freed itself from financial difficulties and stood ready to step boldly into the future. In the making were developments and innovations that would vitally affect the newspaper's material growth and history during the next several years.

Heading the list of developments--in 1923, the semi-weekly was absorbed by the daily, and the name of the combined

24

The Daily Free Press, November 12, 1923. Although the official name of the newspaper had not been changed at this point, Braxton had sort of adopted the title Kinston Daily Free Press when referring to the daily. In any case, this would be the name the newspaper would have after the semi-weekly and daily were combined about two weeks later.



Closing the Gap Between Circulation and City Population

The Free Press steadily closed the gap between its circulation and that of the population of Kinston. The underlying causes were closely related to the newspaper's overall program for progress--better education, wider distribution through improved transportation, close rapport with the people in terms of community needs, and a general improvement in quality and quantity of news and service.

newspaper became Kinston Daily Free Press.²⁵ This move represented expansion rather than contraction and stands out as an example of Braxton's never ending search to give his readers better service. It ultimately necessitated the printing of an early morning edition in order to meet the mail schedule. This was necessary, because most semi-weekly readers lived in the rural sections and depended on postal service for delivery of their newspapers.²⁶ Road construction in Lenoir County, a subject that will be dealt with at some length in a subsequent chapter, had resulted in better mail service and made it possible to provide readers with dailies at about the same price that had been charged for semi-weeklies.²⁷

A few months after discontinuing the semi-weekly, the newspaper's trademark, "America's Premier Small City Daily,"²⁸ was first used. The trademark was Braxton's creation. However, he got the idea from a traveling man, who one day remarked that the Free Press was the best newspaper that he

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The Kinston Free Press, November 28, 1923, and Kinston Daily Free Press, November 30, 1923.

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Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, November 30, 1923.

²⁸

Kinston Daily Free Press, February 9, 1924.

had seen in any town of Kinston's size.²⁹ A few years after its first use, Braxton had it registered, and since that time, it has remained a distinctive mark of the newspaper. Kinstonians and other Free Press readers are prone to take the idea expressed in the trademark literally, even though outsiders may argue the point.

Braxton may have entertained doubts, especially during the lean years, as to the ultimate success of the Free Press Company, but it is obvious that he never lost faith in the venture. Throughout his early years as manager and editor, he demonstrated this faith by purchasing stock from the original stockholders. By 1924, he had acquired controlling stock in the company. Noah J. Rouse had the honor of being its last president outside the Braxton family.³⁰ Over the years, Braxton bought up the remaining stock until the company became a closed family corporation, the only exception being junior partners--Braxton's policy of permitting faithful key employees to purchase a limited amount of stock and hold it for as long as they remain with the company.³¹

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Braxton, interview, March 24, 1965. Braxton could not recall the person's name who gave him the idea.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, May 15, 1925.

³¹

Strother, interview, December 28, 1964.

As the newspaper continued to expand, it became more and more apparent that it was outgrowing its rented quarters. To correct this situation, Braxton purchased the Sitterson Building, a two storied structure on East North Street.³² It was to become the third and present home of the Free Press. The building was renovated, and the newspaper's equipment was moved on February 15, 1926. Despite the move, the paper was gotten out on time. About a week later, the editor publicly commended the staff, "a word of appreciation to those who worked around the clock so that the job of publishing a newspaper could go on."³³

In its more spacious quarters, the Free Press was able to expand its equipment and coverage considerably. By 1928, it had acquired additional linotype machines, new casting machines, and a Hoe rotary printing press with a capacity of sixteen pages.³⁴ The company continued to add to and modernize its equipment throughout the thirties despite the Great

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Lenoir County Record of Deeds, Book 86, located in Lenoir County Courthouse, Kinston, North Carolina.

33

Kinston Daily Free Press, February 22, 1926. The Free Press, although it has been late on a few occasions because of mechanical failures and disasters such as Hurricane Hazel, has never missed an issue.

34

Kinston Daily Free Press, February 28, 1928.

Depression. It gradually phased out its secondary function
of commercial printing,³⁵ but in the meanwhile, installed a
photo engraving plant, arranged to receive Acme News tele-
photographs, and increased its United Press news and features
reception over privately leased wires.³⁶ In 1937, the paper
issued its first weekly comics in color. The section was an
eight page tabloid which included "Tarzan" and "Captain and
the Kidds,"³⁷ both of which are still running in the current
weekly comic section.

Braxton closed out a quarter of a century as publisher,
manager, and editor in 1939. Under his management, the Free
Press had developed from a small insignificant local to a
sectional journal of considerable influence. Its circulation
was near the five-thousand mark, and its distribution covered
the entire eastern Neuse Basin, with twenty-five carriers de-
livering the newspaper in towns and cities outside Kin-
ston.³⁸ Braxton had succeeded through dedication and hard

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Strother, interview, December 28, 1964.

36

Kinston Daily Free Press, November 31, 1931, May 1,
1935, October 1, 1938.

37

Kinston Daily Free Press, October 9, 1937.

38

Albert M. Stroud, interview with the author, Kinston,
North Carolina, December 28, 1964.

work in rebuilding the Free Press. He was fifty-eight years old, and some thought that he should slow down. His friend and managing editor, Charles W. McDevett, cautioned: "Twenty five years is a long time. Nineteen sixty-four would find H. Galt Braxton fairly--well quite--old, but we hope he gets another twenty-five years and all of them in harness--but not straining so hard."³⁹

A big factor in the success and progress of the Free Press was its staff. Without the dedication and loyalty of faithful employees, the company, no doubt, would have had a more difficult time surviving during the first few years of Braxton's editorship. That the staff was loyal may be concluded from the reminiscing of Joseph Ballard, senior retired employee. He stated that, on occasions, the Free Press Company could not meet its payroll. At such times, Braxton would call all workers together, explain the situation, pay them what he could scrape together, and assure them that, as conditions improved, the back wages would be made up--promises⁴⁰ that were always kept.

Although Braxton was cool toward organized labor, he

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Kinston Daily Free Press, May 1, 1939.

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Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.



Major Area of Distribution
Scale 1" = 15 miles

never denied the right of workers to organize in their own
 41

common interest. As far as his own employees were concerned, it is believed that the editor was sensitive to their needs, treated them fairly, and was ever present to listen to their grievances, which may have obviated the necessity for a labor union. Whatever the case, his employees never affiliated with a major labor union, although they did join with members of the Goldsboro Argus in a short lived association that appeared to be more social than functional.
 42

Many employees of the Free Press contributed to its success; however, a few tend to stand out because of their special contributions or long devoted services which give them a special identity with the paper. Perhaps the most notable was Charles W. McDevett. He migrated to Kinston in 1911 and obtained employment with the paper as a linotypist. His habit of contributing news items via the linotype soon earned him a place in the news department. Braxton singled him out as the man around whom to build his first staff, and as years passed came to depend on him more and more. At the time of McDevett's death in 1941, he had risen to the position of

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Kinston Daily Free Press, June 10, 1931.

42

Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

managing editor and was vice-president of the publishing company.
43

McDevett never met a stranger, was a keen observer, and had a deep interest in nature--both human and otherwise. His first hand experience with animals and in dealing with people provided him with background for many "tall-tales" and human interest stories that were to gain for him and the Free Press

44 wide recognition. "He had a genius for words, a terse and witty style and used the 'O. Henry climax' to good advantage."
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A story that was made a part of a collection by Lowell Thomas concerned a fish that learned to live out of its watery element. One day while following its master across
46 a bridge, it slipped--fell into the water and drowned. Other animal and human interest stories made the northern and east-

43

H. Galt Braxton, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, October 11, 1963, hereinafter cited as Braxton, interview, October 11, 1963.

44

Kinston Daily Free Press, September 30, 1931. This particular issue of the Free Press made reference to one of McDevett's tall stories that had been reprinted in a Paris, France newspaper under a Kinston dateline. To set the records straight, the Free Press, jokingly, took issue with the Paris newspaper for having confused the story.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957.

46

Lowell J. Thomas; Tall Stories: The Rise and Triumph of the Great American Whopper, (1945), 58.

ern newspapers regularly. Upon the passing of McDevett, a state newspaper is reputed to have remarked, "a dateline is gone." Kinston, the Free Press, and its editor felt the deep grief that comes with the passing of a personal friend--a man that Braxton has since referred to as "my good right arm for
47
twenty-five years."

All newspaper workers, however, do not receive wide acclaim or recognition. Among the unsung are the many who toil in the backroom among the grinding machines and the peculiar odor common to newspaper printing shops--their true value known only to other members of the "fourth estate." Among the standout toilers in the backroom of the Free Press were: Joseph F. Ballard, pressman and equipment supervisor; Frank Kilpatrick, linotype operator; and Clyde Morton, ad-composi-
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tor. All had long careers with the newspaper, totaling almost one-hundred-fifty years. Ballard, the dean of them all, had the distinction of serving with editors Herbert, Edwards,
49
and Braxton.

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In a conversation with Warren McDevett, son of the late Charles, he made the remark that Mr. Braxton always introduced him at Free Press annual dinners as, "the son of Charlie, my good right arm for twenty-five years."

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Braxton, interview, October 11, 1963.

49

Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

During the middle thirties, three young men, Albert M. Stroud, John P. Strother, and Thomas F. Horton joined the Free Press staff and were to become key figures in its continuing development after World War II. They were also to carry on the tradition of long tenures for key personnel. At present, the trio have completed more than ninety years of service. Stroud joined the staff from North Carolina State College in 1935 and currently serves as the newspaper's general manager. Strother, a journalism student in the class of 1936 at the University of North Carolina, joined the staff in August of that year, and on January 1, 1942, succeeded the late Charles W. McDevett as managing editor. Horton, a native Kinstonian, began his career as a carrier and rose through the ranks to become composing room supervisor. The three have been junior partners in the Free Press Company since 1947, and today are largely responsible for the details involved in operating the newspaper.

Hardly any treatment of the staff would be complete without some mention of the hardy little fellows who fight the elements to deliver the Free Press. In a strict sense, they are agents rather than employees; since, they buy news-

papers from the company and retail them to customers. Nonetheless, they are important members of the Free Press team. Perhaps, reminiscent of his own days as a newsboy in Alabama, Braxton always has had a warm spot in his heart for the carriers of his newspaper. He calls them "little merchants," and during Newspaper Boys Week, sends two of the most outstanding to Raleigh to meet the governor and tour the capitol.⁵¹ The benefits of the program have been two-fold. Not only have the boys helped to earn their own livelihood, but they have also learned the rudiments of accepting responsibility. Some of Kinston's leading citizens fondly recall receiving their first lessons in business as Free Press carriers, and it is not unusual to find families in the city that can boast three generations of past and present "little merchants."⁵²

Braxton had his moments in dealing with the staff. In reminiscing, he related an amusing incident that was also revealing as to the nature of the employer-employee relationship. The story he told concerned James Leslie Johnson.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957

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James Marvin Rochelle, Sr., interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, May 23, 1964. Mr. Rochelle, a Free Press carrier in 1914, is a history bug with considerable knowledge of Kinston.

Johnson was a deaf-mute. He was also all-around handy man in the shop and a news tipster of considerable merit--often "scooping" regular reporters. A short time after Braxton took over as editor of the paper, some mishap occurred in the shop, and it appeared that "Dummy," as Johnson was affectionately called, was at fault. Braxton summarily fired him. Johnson retaliated, writing on his note pad: "You can't fire me--I was here before you came." The editor mulled the statement over and Johnson stayed on--actually for thirty more years.

Other incidents tend to indicate that Braxton was generally magnanimous in dealing with individual members of the staff. Although some employees readily agreed that the editor was a stern disciplinarian, they did not hesitate to state that he was no more demanding of others than of himself, and none could recall an incident wherein he was not just and

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Braxton, interview, March 24, 1965.

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During the twenties, an employee of the Free Press was apprehended in a situation in which his conduct was considerably beneath the standard expected by the editor of his employees. Braxton considered dismissing the man but decided to allow the staff to register its feelings in the matter. Upon recommendation of the staff, the editor permitted the man to remain with the company but in a lower position than formerly held. Happily to say, the employee was able to live down the stigma of his misdeeds, regain his former position, and became a junior partner in the company.

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 fair. As for the general treatment of the staff, it is doubtful that the Free Press Company set any records in compensating its employees. In 1933, however, the company could claim that it had only one employee, the janitor, who was receiving a salary as low as the minimum standard established by the newspaper code under the National Recovery Administration.
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 tion.

Good business practices and a loyal staff both contributed to the success of the Free Press, but at the heart of its success was Braxton's own personal feelings regarding the role of newspapers in our society. He believed that the press had a mission in our society and did his utmost to use it as he thought it should be used. After seventy years of experience in newspaper work--his enthusiasm for the press undiminished and his personal philosophy concerning it unchanged--the editor reminisced:

From my earliest experience, I recognized the potential service that could be rendered in newspapering, and I have never had occasion to regret my decision to make it my life work. It has given me a lifetime opportunity to contribute to the

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 Jack W. Rider, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, December 11, 1963. Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963. Strother, interview, December 28, 1964.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, August 14, 1933.

worthwhile and upbuilding undertakings of my community, state, and nation. No profession, I believe, has greater opportunity for the betterment of mankind.⁵⁷

Shortly after Braxton's arrival in Kinston, he stated some of his viewpoints and theories regarding the manner in which newspapers should be used: "The newspaper must give the news and it must be impartial without color or bias... Unfortunately the chronicle of misdeeds must be recorded with the chronicle of virtues... The paper must have a policy and that policy must be adhered to without fear or favor....⁵⁸ The newspaper to serve its community as it should must be fearless and independent to the point of being honest and fair...."⁵⁹ In these statements is reflected the basic philosophy of the Free Press--independence, courage, fairness, integrity, and community responsibility.

Highly jealous of its independence, the Free Press counted the principles of free speech and press among the inviolable rights of our society and was quick to react to any threat to these basic freedoms. In 1925, free speech was in jeopardy of being abridged in the famous Scopes Trial. Brax-

⁵⁷ Braxton, interview, March 24, 1965.

⁵⁸ The Kinston Free Press, January 26, 1915.

⁵⁹ The Daily Free Press, December 16, 1916.

ton, a pious man himself, viewed the total case with mixed feelings. He held little brief for those who would discount the teachings of the Bible but refused to yield to those who would tamper with the principle of free speech. In giving his viewpoint regarding the matter, the editor stated: "But this paper unequivocally subscribes to the doctrine of free speech and believes that it is the most effective check to all sorts of radical doctrines and cisms."⁶⁰

Braxton further believed that newspapers should maintain themselves independent of entangling alliances with special interest groups or political parties. The Free Press billed itself as "An Independent Democratic Newspaper" and, most generally, supported the Democratic party. However, it did not hesitate to place the party as the word appears in the slogan--second--if the party ran counter to the paper's policy and beliefs.⁶¹

Also in keeping with the idea of independence, the Free Press believed that it could serve the public best if it

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Kinston Daily Free Press, June 8, 1925.

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For example, the Free Press withdrew its support of the National Democratic party in 1928 when the party refused to take a firm stand in support of prohibition. Even on the local level, the paper refused to abandon progressive programs upon the advice of some that continued support, by the paper, would be injurious to the party.

remained close to the people and adhered to a policy that developed out of the needs of the community. For this reason, it did not look favorably upon the advent of the chain newspaper into the South.⁶² In fact, it viewed them as being destructive of a truly independent press. Earlier, in 1924, upon the purchase of another newspaper, The New York Evening Mail, by Frank Munsey, the Free Press had commented:

The newspaper is one of the bulwarks of civilization. It is one of the safeguards of the nation and it functions best when individually operated by an editorial management close to the people and in touch with their wishes and desires. A newspaper is an important molder of public opinion. In fact it has more to do with crystallizing public opinion than any other agency, and it is dangerous indeed for any considerable number of newspapers to be controlled by the same mastermind--it makes no difference how lofty may be the purpose of that guiding genius.⁶³

Independence is of little value, to a newspaper, unless it has the courage to use it effectively. On this score, the Free Press apparently faced up to its responsibility. It, of a necessity, may have used some selectivity in the printing of news, but it is fairly certain that it did not suppress worthwhile news to the benefit of any person or

⁶² Kinston Daily Free Press, August 1, 1927, August 1, 1930.

⁶³ Kinston Daily Free Press, January 30, 1924.

groups. Friendship offered no escape for those caught in the act of making unfavorable news.⁶⁴ It was as Braxton once stated: "The log must be chopped regardless of whither the chips may fly."⁶⁵ The editor knew that the truth was a powerful force in eliminating crags, some reposing in the most influential people, that tend to retard progress. Subsequent chapters reveal how the Free Press used the news coupled with a very courageous, but separate, editorial policy to pry loose some fairly solid rocks of political entrenchment, apathy, and immobility, so that life in the community could go on unhindered.

Braxton knew that independence and courage had to be tempered by fairness and honesty. He pursued a policy that man could redeem himself, and that he had a right to face his accusers. Along these lines, the pages of the Free Press were always open to those whom it had occasion to oppose or to those who might oppose its viewpoint. If they availed themselves of the opportunity, Braxton rarely picked their statements apart editorially, but rather left them to the public for judgement. In business matters, this same sense of fair-play

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Ballard, interview, October 16, 1963.

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The Kinston Free Press, January 26, 1915.

and honesty prevailed. For example, the Free Press was a strong believer in reporting its circulation accurately to prospective advertising customers. In fact, it felt so strongly on this point that in 1925, it joined the Audit Bureau of Circulation, an organization maintained by publishers and advertisers, which verified circulation by physically checking subscription books.⁶⁶

In another direction, the Free Press did its best to avoid the printing of fraudulent or misleading advertising. It was the policy of the newspaper to have dubious orders investigated. If companies or claims for their products did not meet certain standards of honesty and fair-play, the orders were refused and readers apprised of the situation.⁶⁷ Moreover, the paper remained true to its editorial policy in accepting orders for advertising. For example, the paper had supported the Eighteenth Amendment and fought for enforcement of its provisions throughout its unstable existence.⁶⁸ After the Amendment was repealed, the Attorney General ruled that

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Kinston Daily Free Press, January 9, 1925.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, August 25, December 15, 1926.

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The Daily Free Press, July 7, 1915, February 10, 1917. November 13, 1918, January 20, 21, 25, 1922, and Kinston Daily Free Press, July 28, 1928, July 26, 1929.

newspapers could accept whiskey advertising from manufacturers. The ruling made no difference to the Free Press, as it left few doubts regarding its position in the matter:

To accept liquor advertising would make it necessary for this paper to turn its back on ethical standards which have always actuated it and which have been the motivating inspiration of the editor of this paper...The Free Press, this writer hopes, will never prostitute its high office as a community mouthpiece and creator of public sentiment to the furtherance of the sale of a single bottle of liquor or other article, the use of which is known to be detrimental to the user and destructive of moral and physical fiber.⁶⁹

In adhering to his philosophy and policy, Braxton, in effect, gave his newspaper a conscience and will power. He knew that, within the scope of the law, a newspaper, like its creator, could do good or bad--pursue unselfish programs for the betterment of mankind or selfish programs for personal gain. Bound by certain rules of conduct and a sense of community responsibility, he believed newspapers could render a great public service, but if left unbridled by any rules of conduct, newspapers given over to the sensational without regard to the community, could be very dangerous. Bound by this philosophy, the Free Press followed a moderate course, and within what appeared to be a group of priorities, pushed

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Kinston Daily Free Press, July 31, 1935.

for gradual change. Subsequent chapters will indicate that, over the years, it struck many blows for the moral and material benefit of its community. Throughout the process, no evidence can be found which indicates that it entertained selfish ideas or sought material gain at the expense of other people or its community.

CHAPTER III THE FREE PRESS AND EDUCATION

Although the Free Press, under editors Herbert and Edwards, had advanced the cause of education, there remained much to be done in 1914. At that time Lenoir County had three separately state chartered school systems--Kinston, LaGrange, and a loosely structured county system. All systems were beset with problems, growing out of lack of public acceptance, lack of revenue, and lack of an adequate foundation upon which to build. Braxton, then striving to re-establish the Free Press to a position of influence in the community, saw in the cause of education an excellent opportunity to identify the newspaper with the needs of the community, and at the same time regain rapport with the people, a factor that was tantamount to the paper's financial recovery. Thus education became one of the main objectives of the Free Press. In 1916, the editor commented: "The Free Press is always, in season and out of season, glad to be able to support and urge the addition and employment of every facility for better education", a policy that has continued down to the present day.

¹
The Daily Free Press, June 28, 1916.

One of the newspaper's first moves, in the field of education, was aimed at what Braxton considered a drawback to progress in the overall program--adult illiteracy. Records indicated that almost 16 percent of the voters of Lenoir County could not read or write.² The editor's theory was, "that knowledge begets the desire for more knowledge and that there [was] a certain responsibility resting upon those who [were] blessed with an education to start those who [were] not upon the right road."³ To aid in eradicating this stigma of adult illiteracy, the Free Press strongly advocated the organization of a night school, more popularly called "moonlight schools." James Yadkin Joyner, a Lenoir County educator and State Superintendent of Public Instruction at that time, was actually the motivating force behind these schools on the state level;⁴ however, local areas bore full responsibility for selling the idea to the people and launching the schools. The Free Press willingly accepted this challenge, even though some of the local educators felt that little would come from

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The Daily Free Press, April 25, 1915.

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The Daily Free Press, May 22, 1915.

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Johnson and Holloman, Kinston and Lenoir County, 180-189. Doctor Joyner, a decade earlier had been a leading figure in the promotion of free public schools in North Carolina.

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 such an experiment. The paper solicited volunteer teachers, encouraged attendance, and from time to time reported results to the people. Whether or not this school awakened parents to the need of educating their children is unknown; however, the Free Press proudly reported in 1916 that adult illiteracy had been reduced to 9 or 10 percent of the voting population.⁶

Compulsory schooling also caught the attention of the Free Press. In 1915, Kinston city schools were operated on an eight month basis, while most of the county schools were operated on a five or six months basis. Parents, however, were only required to send their children to school for four months out of each year.⁷ Besides advocating longer terms on the local level, the Free Press brought home to its readers the great need for extending the state compulsory school term.⁸ Braxton visualized a day when a high school education would be within reach of every boy and girl and fully realized that in order to eliminate apathetic parents as deterrents, toward this end, a longer compulsory school term was needed.

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The Daily Free Press, May 15, 1915.

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The Daily Free Press, February 8, 1916.

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The Daily Free Press, September 3, 1917.

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The Daily Free Press, August 20, 1917.

He further felt that this step also offered the "best solution to the child labor problem."⁹ During the summer of 1918, a vigorous campaign was conducted throughout the state to amend the constitution to provide for a six months school term. The opposition stemmed mainly from the manufacturing interests, those who had no children, and those who utilized children for farm labor. Braxton's approach and appeal to voters was two-fold--interest of the children and a more progressive county and state.¹⁰ In this campaign, the editor and those working for education were richly rewarded, as both Lenoir County and North Carolina voted by very large majorities to amend the constitution.¹¹ Many people would have viewed this victory as an end, but complacency was not in character with the fighting spirit of the editor. The ink was hardly dry on the amendment before he was advocating another constitutional amendment to extend the school term still further.¹²

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The Daily Free Press, September 11, 1918.

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The Daily Free Press, July 27, October 29, 30, November 2, 4, 1918.

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R. F. Johnson, Director of Publications, Department of State, North Carolina, letter to the author, June 16, 1966.

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The Daily Free Press, July 19, 1919.

Braxton knew that it did little good to compel students to attend school if teachers lacked training and ability and had little incentive to seek self improvement. A continuing battle was that for higher teacher's pay. The Free Press pointed out that the average tenure for teachers in Lenoir County was two years. It blamed the meager rate of pay, referring to it as "starvation wages," as the basic cause for this high rate of attrition.¹³ The paper maintained that higher pay would not only assure longer tenures, it would also attract more qualified people to apply for teaching positions from which the best could be selected.¹⁴

This viewpoint regarding pay spanned the whole scope of school personnel, including those in administrative positions. In 1916, Barron Caldwell, Superintendent of Kinston Graded Schools, resigned. The Free Press learned that the School Board was attempting to hire a replacement as cheaply as possible. The paper viewed such thinking on this matter with scorn. It maintained that the trustees were putting money matters ahead of the interests of the children, and also pointed out that a person hired on the basis of money considerations, alone, might lack the qualifications neces-

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The Daily Free Press, June 16, 1915.

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The Daily Free Press, September 21, 1916.

sary to implement an effective educational program. In summarizing his feelings on the matter, the editor stated:

"Small salary usually gets small service."¹⁵ It appears that the editorials had the desired effect, because the School Board hired a very capable man in Kadar R. Curtis who initiated medical examinations and a school lunch program during¹⁶ his first year.

During the early months of 1918, the Free Press supported a special county-wide tax to improve facilities and raise¹⁷ standards of instruction. The First World War prevented any extensive building program; however, money was needed to maintain existing facilities and to offset the rising costs brought about by the conflict. Actually the city system was in danger of having to curtail its school term. This special tax was, therefore, an emergency measure. To convince the people that the measure was necessary, the Free Press presented statistics to show that other cities of eastern North Carolina were spending locally one-third more per pupil than Kinston.¹⁸ The campaign was hotly contested by those who saw

¹⁵ The Daily Free Press, May 1, 19, 31, 1916.

¹⁶ The Daily Free Press, September 16, 1916.

¹⁷ The Daily Free Press, April 2, 1917.

¹⁸ The Daily Free Press, May 15, 1918.

education as a threat to the status quo. Their main arguments were: such a move would be injurious to the Democratic party; the measure was untimely because of the war; and, there was already considerable waste in the operation of the schools, and more money would tend to stimulate greater waste. Rural voters were also led to believe that passage of the measure would mean rural financial support of the city schools. This final bit of political chicanery was far from the truth; however, it had far reaching results. Overall, the measure failed to pass, due mostly to a large rural vote against it. Kinston, considered separately however,¹⁹ strongly endorsed it. An attempt was made to put the special tax in force in Kinston on the basis of its vote, but the opposition, not to be outdone, successfully blocked the action. The State Supreme Court eventually ruled that it²⁰ was unconstitutional to split the election results. This decision left the Kinston schools with funds for a five or six months term. Had it not been for the efforts of the Free Press in calling the people together and appealing for

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Minutes, Lenoir County Board of Commissioners, June 3, 1918, located in Lenoir County Courthouse, Kinston, North Carolina, hereinafter cited as Minutes, Lenoir Commissioners.

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The Daily Free Press, December 5, 1918.

direct loans from public spirited citizens, the school term²¹ no doubt would have been curtailed.

The two years immediately following the war were highly prosperous ones for predominantly agricultural regions; yet, the people of Lenoir County appeared reluctant to invest in furthering education. Maybe prosperity lulled them into a sense of false security and nurtured the idea that education wasn't necessary. Whatever the case, little was done to overcome the need created by the building holiday during World War I. An example of the apathy of the people was illustrated during the summer of 1919. An enabling act was obtained to hold an election to redeem the notes of citizens who, through their personal loans, had made it possible for the schools to complete the previous year.²² Only 617 registered to vote in the special election. On the day of the election, the early vote was so slight that a few public minded citizens had to go to work in the afternoon in order to secure a majority. Editor Braxton in commenting on this apparent lack of interest stated: "Such was the lack of interest, not one out of fifty men could tell how

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The Daily Free Press, December 14, 18, 1918.

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Public, Local and Private Laws of North Carolina, 1919, Chapter 104, 139.

the election went."²³

The full impact of the inadequate facilities of Kinston's Graded Schools was brought home to the people in 1919, when²⁴ their children had to attend school in shifts. The Free Press was highly concerned; however, it did not despair, or abandon the fight. Instead it recommended a program that would be "commensurate with requirements for the next 25²⁵ years," but no positive action was taken.

After the school year 1919-1920 ended, Braxton decided to carry the problem to the people. He called a meeting of citizens to discuss problems confronting schools and to form-²⁶ulate plans to alleviate them. At the meeting, it was pointed out that Kinston was three years behind in its building program. In order to overcome this backlog and to plan for the future, the citizens were asked to support a \$900,000²⁷ bond issue, the largest ever requested by the city. Before the bond issue could be submitted to a referendum, however, hard times hit the community. Prices for cotton and

²³ The Daily Free Press, June 16, 1919.

²⁴ The Daily Free Press, September 4, 1919.

²⁵ The Daily Free Press, September 29, 1919.

²⁶ The Daily Free Press, June 20, 1920.

²⁷ The Daily Free Press, June 26, 1920.

tobacco fell to less than one-half of what they had been the previous year. In view of these circumstances, this ambitious school plan was discarded before the people had a chance to act upon it.

The Free Press was a practical newspaper. Under the circumstances, it was willing to settle for less, but not 28 willing to discontinue altogether the fight for education. Braxton reluctantly agreed with city leaders when they refused to ask for a \$500,000 bond issue; however, he believed that a smaller issue was absolutely necessary to take care of immediate needs. The editor hoped that the coming market year would usher in higher prices, so that the people could take more realistic action toward education, 29 as the situation was steadily growing worse.

The bond issue that was finally presented to the people was for \$150,000, 30 small indeed compared with the \$900,000 asked for the previous year. The Free Press literally "shook the bushes" to round up support for the issue. Editor Braxton, feeling that mothers were deeply concerned about educating their children, urged the women to get out

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The Daily Free Press, April 27, December 13, 1920.

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The Daily Free Press, August 26, 1921.

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The Daily Free Press, December 3, 1921.

and exercise their recently acquired voting privileges. Registration of women, however, fell far short of expectations.

³¹ In the resulting election the bond issue was defeated, a defeat that was characterized by Braxton as, "one of the most shameful and pitiable acts in the history of the community."

³² In analyzing the results of the election, the Free Press listed several reasons why the measure failed: dissatisfaction of some voters with the school administration, lack of dedicated leadership and interest by the School Board, work of the "gum shoe gang" which opposed all progressive reforms, but most of all, the paper attributed loss of the election to the apathy and indifference of citizens.

³³ Braxton, never one to despair over defeat or for that matter gloat over victory, was always ready to be up and doing in matters about which he felt strongly. In an effort to awaken the School Board as to its responsibilities, he made a pointed attack on it for its lack of aggressiveness when it failed to initiate immediate action to rectify the situation in which the schools were left as a result of the Decem-

³¹ The Daily Free Press, November 29, 1921.

³² The Daily Free Press, December 7, 1921.

³³ The Daily Free Press, December 28, 1921.

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 ber election. At the beginning of the 1922-1923 school
 year, conditions in the Kinston schools were deplorable.
 Classrooms were only about 50 percent adequate; children, for
 the third consecutive year, were attending school in shifts;
 and instructional materials were sadly deficient, even for
³⁵
 the space available. The School Board was fully apprised
 of these conditions. Under constant pressure from the paper
 to do something about them, it finally agreed to ask for an-
 other bond issue. The attack on the School Board had been
 vehement. The paper's approach to the people, however, was
 somewhat different. In announcing plans for the bond issue,
 it pleaded: "The Free Press pleads for the boys and girls of
 Kinston, that they may have a fair and square deal--opportu-
³⁶
 nities for life's preparation second to none."

The economy had improved by 1922, although it still
 lagged behind that of 1919 by a considerable margin. Never-
 theless, the school situation demanded immediate attention.
 As is often the case, years of doing the bare minimum had re-
 sulted in accumulated deficiencies which could only be cor-

³⁴
The Daily Free Press, May 6, 1922.

³⁵
The Daily Free Press, September 26, 1922.

³⁶
The Daily Free Press, November 1, 1922.

rected by a sizeable financial outlay. In view of this, the County Commissioners honored the School Board's request and authorized a \$300,000 bond issue.³⁷ The Free Press, phase one of the battle won, turned its attention to convincing the voters. The paper urged the people to get out and work for the measure. The editor lashed out at the apathy and lack of concern that had contributed to defeat of the previous bond issue.³⁸ As usual the "gum shoe gang" made its presence known. One of the ruses used to coerce voters was the threat of certain landlords to raise rents if the measure passed-- higher rents, they claimed, being necessary to take care of the higher taxes which would result.³⁹ This and other attempts to influence voters was, however, to no avail, as the people, finally convinced of the need to take action, approved the bond issue by the overwhelming majority of 990 to 110. The Free Press announced the victory in seven column headlines.⁴⁰ It had cause to celebrate. Kinston at last, among other things, was assured a new school building. The

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The Daily Free Press, November 7, 1922.

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The Daily Free Press, November 15, 23, December 12, 13, 28, 29, 1922.

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The Daily Free Press, January 1, 1923.

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The Daily Free Press, January 10, 1923.

campaign had been long and hard fought, beginning, actually, during the closing weeks of 1917.

During the long struggle to improve educational facilities in Kinston, the Free Press was strongly advocating improvement of the county system. In a special rural school edition in 1916, Braxton made public the meager educational opportunities offered by rural schools. At that time, the county was divided into approximately forty districts, of which seventeen had one room schools. The total assessed value of the county school property was \$45,000. In commenting on the one-room-one-teacher-schools, the editor gave an excellent picture of conditions that existed in the Lenoir County system:

Out yonder is the one room school of a small community. The number of people living in the community is too small to give life and enthusiasm to the school or to enable it to become a real force as a community center in the life of the people. Because of the small amount of taxable wealth and small school fund, the school term is comparatively short, while the salary paid the teacher is comparatively low. The teacher is young, untrained and inexperienced. She is teaching her first school year, for as soon as she gains a little practice in her art, she moves on to a larger community with more teachers, longer school terms and at a larger salary.⁴¹

It was several years, however, before any practical

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The Daily Free Press, July 18, 1916.

consideration could be given to consolidation of county schools. In 1921, the Free Press began a series of editorials, apprising the rural people of conditions that existed in their districts. The paper compared the quality of education offered by larger schools with that of the county system. It pointed out that districts of only nine square miles in agricultural regions were severely limited in what they could do toward the support of education. Usually, such districts had facilities which were unattractive, teachers were underpaid, and terms averaged two months less than those of the city schools. Besides the poor quality of education, the taxpayers of these districts realized less for their dollar. Cost of instruction per capita was about 50 percent more in these small districts, than it was in the larger city system. The Free Press believed strongly that solution to the many problems confronting the rural system was consolidation. Actually, the paper advocated a county-wide plan with all schools, county and city, under a single administrative head.⁴² Although the editor never gave up on this idea, he did not pursue it to the exclusion of all other plans for consolidation.

The supporters of consolidation were given a big boost in 1921, when the state enacted a law which would permit

small districts to combine to form a single larger dis-
⁴³trict. Emmett E. Sams, then Lenoir County Superintendent
of Education and the actuating force behind the county's con-
solidation movement, did not hesitate to take advantage of
this newly-enacted law. Pink Hill and four other districts
⁴⁴were combined to initiate consolidation in Lenoir County.
Near the middle of the school term, the Free Press happily
reported that the experiment was meeting with great success.
Plans were already underway to expand the curriculum to in-
⁴⁵clude agriculture, domestic science, and bookkeeping, sub-
jects, which before consolidation had been beyond reach of
rural students.

Transportation had earlier been a drawback to combining
schools, but the roads of Lenoir County were being improved
rapidly. The success of the "school truck," which had been
used in the Pink Hill experiment, was proof enough that this
⁴⁶problem could be worked out satisfactorily. The Free Press
had been among the first in the county to advocate the use of

⁴³
Public, Local and Private Laws of North Carolina, 1921,
Chapter 179, 463.

⁴⁴
The Daily Free Press, July 12, September 13, 1921.

⁴⁵
The Daily Free Press, January 13, 1922.

⁴⁶
The Daily Free Press, September 13, 1921.

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motor transportation. Without it consolidation would have been impossible. Braxton saw in the "school truck" the dawn of a new era in education for Lenoir County and North Carolina, wherein the small one room school would disappear from the landscape. In this respect, he stated:

We can welcome the progress of the reform and hope for the day when Lenoir County shall have only a few school buildings; but these adequately manned and equipped with sufficient means of transportation to meet the needs of the entire county.⁴⁸

Encouraged by the Pink Hill experiment and well aware of
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 the shortcomings of its system as it stood, the County Board of Commissioners decided on an unprecedented move in 1923--consolidation of all county schools under unified control. The Free Press viewed this move as an important step

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The Daily Free Press, July 21, 1920.

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The Daily Free Press, August 22, 1921.

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L. C. Brogden, Survey of Public Schools of Lenoir County (1924), 1-135. This report, compiled during 1922-1923, showed that the county system had eighty-five teachers whose educational backgrounds were as follows: nine college graduates; one, three years of college; eight, two years of college; nineteen, one year of college; twenty-six high school graduates; eleven, tenth grade; four, ninth grade; four, eighth grade; and three, seventh grade. The survey further revealed that students of the county systems spent about half as much time on subject matter as students of the city system. Comprehensive tests revealed that rural students, who averaged about eighty days attendance per year, were far behind their contemporaries of the city school system.

toward a county-wide system and wholeheartedly endorsed the plan. The editor believed that this decision would play an important role toward the elimination of illiteracy in Lenoir County, and commented: "The proposal...to consolidate schools of the county and unify control is, the Free Press believes, one of the most far reaching and forward steps in the history of its educational system."⁵⁰ This county-wide plan, much to the disappointment of the editor, was abandoned when the county and city systems could not reach an agreement. The decision, however, did not deter the paper from advocating consolidation on a smaller scale. Its desire was to see every one, two, and three room schoolhouse supplanted by facilities that would provide rural children with the same educational⁵¹ opportunities as city children.

The Free Press met opposition to consolidation with a common sense approach--that it would provide better facilities, assure diversification through expanded curricula, and bring about a better qualified and balanced instructional staff. As is often the case, much of the opposition grew out of matters alien to education--the location of new facili-

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The Daily Free Press, January 4, 1923.

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The Daily Free Press, January 17, 1923.

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ties. Small districts struggled to retain their schools and separate identity. A typical example was that of the Contentnea School. When it became known to patrons of that small district that the new consolidated unit was to be constructed at Grainger's Station, about four miles away, they threatened to withhold their special tax from the county system and proceed on their own.⁵³ Apparently naming the new school Contentnea, which was also the name of the township, helped to smooth matters over. The school was built as planned, at Grainger's Station, and the formerly small school of Contentnea was included as a part of it.

Throughout the twenties, consolidation, under the watchful eye of Superintendent Sams, moved ahead steadily. La-Grange gave up its independent charter in 1925 and became a part of the Lenoir County system,⁵⁴ bringing the county one step closer to Braxton's ideal of a county-wide plan. Deep

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H. Galt Braxton, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, December 28, 1964, hereinafter cited as Braxton, interview, December 28, 1964.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, February 27, 1924. Each small district of the county system imposed an ad valorem property tax to supplement county support of its particular school. Some communities could or were willing to do more than others.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, April 7, 1925.

Run opened its doors in 1926.⁵⁵ The last school to be dedicated was that of Wheat Swamp in 1932.⁵⁶ With this dedication the one, two, and three room schools, for white students, disappeared from Lenoir County. The county, over the preceding ten years had reduced its number of school districts from forty-two to seven and thus became the first county in the state to consolidate completely its schools. This was made possible because a vast majority of rural people had come to realize the importance of education. Many agencies and factors contributed to a gradual reversal of the attitude that had prevailed prior to World War I. A formidable influence among these agencies was that of the Free Press. It carried the message of the importance of education to the people, pled for harmony among patrons, applauded achievement, and successfully fought those who would antagonize the movement.

The Free Press had supported each step toward wider consolidation, as previously mentioned, but envisaged the broader county-wide plan.⁵⁷ When the city high school burned in 1924, the paper, although it proposed immediate replacement of the building under any circumstances, believed that the situation

⁵⁵ Kinston Daily Free Press, November 11, 1926.

⁵⁶ Kinston Daily Free Press, November 16, 1932.

⁵⁷ Braxton, interview, December 28, 1964.

offered an opportunity to combine the county and city systems.⁵⁸

The county and city boards, however, could not agree, and nothing came of the idea. The editor did not let his personal feelings on the matter prevent his support of a large

bond issue to rebuild the school.⁵⁹ Again in 1927, when Superintendent of Kinston Graded Schools, Kadar R. Curtis, resigned, the city school board elected Emmett E. Sams, then

Lenoir County Superintendent of Education, to replace him. Braxton felt sure that his ultimate aim had been achieved; however, the Lenoir County Board of Education disapproved the

joint superintendency by a three to two vote.⁶⁰ This was the last serious effort to combine the systems. The editor never abandoned the idea that schools could be administered more

efficiently and economically under a single unit system; however, he accepted the dual system, and proved himself a willing worker for the advancement of education in both the city and county systems.

The Free Press, between its advocacy of broad plans to

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Kinston Daily Free Press, November 24, 1924.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, June 29, July 6, 8, 11, 13, 1925.

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Minutes Lenoir County Board of Education, May 16, 1927, 270-271, located in the Lenoir County Courthouse, Kinston, North Carolina.

finance and consolidate the school systems, continued its activities to make education more attractive and give schools greater holding power over students. Braxton felt that athletics tended to add enthusiasm to the educational program. He believed, however, that: "Athletics should be a means of development but always an accessory."⁶¹ The paper supported the Parent Teachers Association, especially in connection with its sponsorship of hygiene courses for the schools.⁶² It further advocated vaccinations for children when entering school.⁶³ Of special significance was the paper's drive to provide textbooks free or at a low rental rate. The Free Press argued that compulsory school laws made it mandatory that children attend school; yet, some could not provide the necessary texts.⁶⁴ Arguments for the measure obtained results locally, as Wayne Mitchell, Mayor of Kinston, announced in 1925 that Kinston had made plans to provide texts for the school year 1925-1926, either free or at a very low rental rate.⁶⁵ Later the paper would join with other forces through-

⁶¹ The Daily Free Press, September 7, 1922.

⁶² The Daily Free Press, February 14, 1921.

⁶³ Kinston Daily Free Press, April 16, 1928.

⁶⁴ The Daily Free Press, September 28, 1923.

⁶⁵ Kinston Daily Free Press, March 27, 1925.

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out the state to make the program statewide.

The Great Depression was a very difficult time for education. About the most that could be expected was to hold the line and prevent people from using education as a "whipping boy" for their distressed condition. Pressure groups materialized to take advantage of this moment of weakness. In 1930, the Lenoir County Taxpayer's Union was formed with Miss Delia Hyatt as its president. Its purpose was to decrease taxes, at any price--even to the extent of curtailing

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the educational program. The Free Press fought back, and for a while helped to thwart the plans of the Union.

Problems in Kinston, however, were mild compared with those of some sections of the state. Many districts, confronted with empty county and municipal treasuries, faced prospects of little or no school in 1931. The General Assembly of that year virtually had a mandate from the people--to alleviate the local tax burden and assure a more equitable distribution of the education dollar. Under the circumstances, it was only natural to accept the recommendations of the Educational Commission, which had been established in 1929, and

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Kinston Daily Free Press, August 19, 1926, July 13, 15, 1929.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, April 15, 1930.

move toward unified control and centralized support of education.⁶⁸

The Great Depression probably hastened the idea of centralization into reality. It rapidly swept the whole spectrum of the state's educational system. As an economy measure, Governor O. Max Gardner proposed that the three leading state supported institutions of high learning, the University of North Carolina, North Carolina State College of Agriculture and Engineering, and North Carolina College for Women, be combined under a single board of trustees with unified control and aims.⁶⁹ The Free Press, while not opposing the move, felt that it was "apt to stir up bitter conflict,"⁷⁰ but it apparently failed to do so. Perhaps a number of factors helped to lessen the controversy surrounding the issue. In the first place, the idea gave promise of savings at a time when the state needed to economize; secondly, local problems, especially the failure of banks,

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David L. Corbitt, ed., Public Papers and Letters of Governor Oliver Max Gardner, (1937), 43, hereinafter cited as Corbitt, Papers of Gardner. The Commission found that the state's school system was most expensive in its weakest places. It recommended a state supported school term of eight months with unified planning.

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Corbitt, Papers of Gardner, 278.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, February 14, 1931.

detracted from the issue; and thirdly, the people as a whole were perhaps more acutely interested in pending legislation pertaining to public education, roads, and revenue.

The state moved from consolidation of colleges and universities to centralization of the state's public school system. The McLean bill, which the Free Press supported,⁷¹ provided for a state funded school term of six months.

The idea was accepted with only mild objections, coming mostly from those who favored an eight month term.⁷² Serious problems, however, arose in deciding the manner in which to raise funds to pay for the program. Braxton favored a luxury tax or a tax on foreign stocks, larger utility companies, and corporations.⁷³ He vigorously opposed a general sales tax and did not look with any great degree of favor upon an ad valorem property tax, feeling that either would work a hardship upon the little man. On one occasion, he stated: "The legislature has a clear mandate to relieve the average citizen who is less able to pay the increased taxes now than

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Kinston Daily Free Press, March 23, 31, 1931.

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Corbitt, Papers of Gardner, 57-71. The Educational Commission and Governor Gardner favored an eight month term.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, March 25, 1931.

heretofore...."⁷⁴ On another occasion, he charged bribery⁷⁵ on the part of larger industries. Notwithstanding, the General Assembly, after haggling throughout the longest session of its history, finally imposed an ad valorem tax--⁷⁶ an act characterized by some as a sellout to the tobacco and soft drink industries. Whatever the case, North Carolina was given a school machinery bill, and its schools were assured of at least a six months term.

Passage of the bill provided ammunition for the Lenoir County Taxpayer's Union to begin a campaign to repeal local special tax laws and reduce Kinston's nine month school term to the state supported term. It circulated a petition to⁷⁷ hold a special election. In the meanwhile, the Free Press fought back, pointing out that a vote to abolish the special⁷⁸ tax was a vote to abolish the educational system. Fortunately for Kinston, its citizens heeded the plea of the Free Press and voted to retain the special tax and the nine month

⁷⁴ Kinston Daily Free Press, March 27, 1931.

⁷⁵ Kinston Daily Free Press, May 12, 1931.

⁷⁶ Corbitt, Papers of Gardner, 304.

⁷⁷ Kinston Daily Free Press, June 26, 1931.

⁷⁸ Kinston Daily Free Press, July 9, 1931.

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school term by a nine to one margin.

The victory, however, was short lived. The depression worsened through 1932, and the state, wishing to alleviate the heavy local tax burden, adopted a uniform eight months school term which permitted localities to abolish their special taxes.⁸⁰ On the basis of this law, Kinston abolished its tax and reduced its school term to the uniform state supported eight months. The Free Press, deplored this retrogressive movement, and hopefully looked forward to the day when the nine month term could be restored.

By 1935, the economic situation had improved somewhat, and the paper, feeling that the time was right, entered upon a drive to restore the special tax and the nine month school term.⁸¹ Its campaign was conducted with the usual vigor, but the people, still not certain of the future and cautious lest something disturb recent economic gains, rejected the special tax.⁸² Although the Free Press attempted to interest county and city leaders in another election in 1936 and again

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Kinston Daily Free Press, August 29, 1931.

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Public Laws of North Carolina, 1933, Chapter 282, 143.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, July 2, 1935.

82

Kinston Daily Free Press, July 12, 24, 26, August 5, 7, 1935.

in 1937, it was not able to generate the necessary enthusiasm to get the issue before the people. The measure, however, was not allowed to perish. Each time the paper raised the subject, the idea of broadening childrens' educational opportunities and giving them a chance equal to that of children elsewhere was slowly but surely hammered home to parents.

In 1938, the editor got his wish for another election. In the previous election of 1935, he had said: "We will⁸³ fight another day," and that day had finally dawned. As in all such elections, the burden of balloting was on those who favored the special tax. This meant, that if the measure was to be passed, a majority of those registered had to approve it. The Free Press readily accepted this challenge. It⁸⁴ geared its campaign toward the needs of the children. During the campaign, the old "bugaboo" of intimidation reared⁸⁵ its ugly head, but the Free Press had had three years in which to prepare the voting public, and the influence of such intimidation was negligible. The results of the election were impressive. Of the 1,341 registered voters, 984 voted

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Kinston Daily Free Press, August 7, 1935.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, October 11, 18, 31, November 11, 12, 1938.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, November 15, 1938.

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for the special tax, while only 57 voted against it. This represented a great victory for editor Braxton. It was a fitting climax to twenty-five years of inspired devotion to the development and advancement of education in Lenoir County.

Education in Lenoir County, no doubt, would have progressed without the aid of the Free Press. But the question arises: Would it have developed as rapidly as it did had the paper chosen to be a sideline spectator and referee of fights between opposing factions instead of participating crusader in behalf of education? The author thinks not. People generally oppose change and have to be convinced of the rightness of something, even though it may eventually be in their own best interest. The Free Press did the job of convincing exceedingly well, not only through ideas expressed in its pages, but also through example and effort on the part of its editor.

CHAPTER IV THE FREE PRESS AND THE ECONOMY

Kinston and its surrounding area grew very rapidly during the quarter of a century preceding Braxton's arrival. By 1914, however, the boom had run its course. Actually, the county was in danger of being strangled because of its narrow approach to economic problems which, in some measure, had grown out of the period of rapid expansion. The era of the automobile had arrived, but the county had no paved roads. Kinston had a single paved street of four blocks, and its public utilities and facilities were, in no way, adequate for a city of its size. Furthermore, agriculture and commerce, the lifeblood of the community, had reached the point of diminishing returns. In fact, the two were at an impasse. Lack of markets, among other things, caused farmers to cling to the two-crop system, and merchants, without as-

In 1890, Kinston had a population of only 1,726, but by 1914, it had grown to a small city of 8,000 inhabitants. Many factors contributed to this rapid rate of growth. Three textile mills went into full operation; the county's lumber industry more than doubled; farmers had a period of unprecedented prosperity; tobacco became an important cash crop, which gave impetus to the establishment of a market of considerable consequence and several processing factories. Both a cause and an effect of this economic progress, the community received the services of two additional railroads--one local and one interstate.

surances of a steady flow of new products were reluctant to establish the necessary markets. Braxton, concerned but undismayed, tackled all problems that threatened to hinder economic progress. He exposed apathy and indifference among local leadership, sought to bring farm production and commerce into closer harmony, and fought for the general material growth of Kinston. He first tackled the bottleneck of poor means of transportation.

In 1914, county roads were paid for by a direct tax levy which netted about \$16,000 per year. From this amount, existing roads were maintained and the residue was set aside for construction of new roads. The Free Press, realizing the value of a good transportation system, pointed out that the county could never hope to build a road network compatible with its needs through this method of financing.² Moreover, roads were needed then, and further delay, the paper emphasized, would only aggravate conditions. In lieu of this pay-as-you-go system, it sought to interest leaders and citizens in the use of bond issues to finance road building. It believed that this was the only means by which funds could be raised immediately in sufficient quantities to per-

mit the county to formulate long range plans to develop "a³ system of highways second to none in the state."

The paper was almost alone in the struggle. Citizens were generally apathetic and the county commissioners, who should have supplied the necessary leadership in helping the county reach its full economic potential, were reluctant to act forcefully in the matter. This perhaps stemmed from the fact that a majority of their support came from rural sections which had a prior record of opposition to bond issues.⁴ After considerable pressure, however, the commissioners, perhaps to appease the paper, asked the state legislature for and received authority to issue bonds in the amount of \$250,000.⁵

When the General Assembly passed the necessary enabling act, prospects for good roads appeared excellent. Braxton was jubilant. He was confident that citizens had been won over to the idea and would favor overwhelmingly the bond issue in the expected referendum. But much to his disappointment, the county commissioners had once again become timid

³ The Daily Free Press, February 3, 1915.

⁴ The Daily Free Press, February 2, 1915.

⁵ Public Laws of North Carolina, 1915, Chapter 425, 635-640.

and refused or neglected to call the election.⁶ The Free Press sought by every means at its disposal to force the commissioner's to act, but they refused to budge,⁷ and the bond issue was doomed. A few months before the United States entered World War I, the paper still vitally concerned, commented:

The Free Press believes that it is evident to every intelligent man in the county that the present plan of road building will never materialize into a desireable system....The value of good roads in the upbuilding of any section of the country is no longer in the theoretical stage. Convincing evidence in abundance has been given, and wherever the greatest development of rural communities has taken place there will be found the best system of roads connecting the producer and consumer, farmer and market...⁸

After the war, Braxton resumed his fight to get the county out of the mud. The conflict, amid its castrophic consequences, had emphasized the pressing need to improve transportation in general. The Free Press, however, took no chance that citizens had been convinced of the necessity.⁹ It entered the campaign with renewed zest and was instrumen-

⁶ The Daily Free Press, September 17, 1915.

⁷ The Daily Free Press, October 20, 1915.

⁸ The Daily Free Press, November 27, 1916.

⁹ The Daily Free Press, January 4, 1919.

tal in getting the Chamber of Commerce actively involved.¹⁰

A committee was appointed to make estimates, formulate plans, and steer a bond issue through legal channels. In the meantime, the paper continued its indoctrination of citizens as to the necessity for good roads.¹¹

The committee did a thorough and comprehensive job in its survey. Authority was obtained to make a bond issue of \$2,000,000.¹² Final approval, the Free Press realized, resided with the people. It argued that good roads would mean: lower maintenance costs; economy in time and labor in marketing crops; reduction of wear on equipment; higher property values; and attraction of immigration and industry to the community.¹³ These arguments proved very convincing, as attested by the overwhelming vote in favor of the bond issue.¹⁴ The county had taken a bold step which drew attention from quarters outside the immediate area. The News and Observer was led to comment: "Certainly the eyes of

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The Daily Free Press, January 8, 1919.

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The Daily Free Press, January 30, 1919.

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Public, Local and Private Laws of North Carolina, 1919, Chapter 391, 531-540.

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The Daily Free Press, April 11, 1919.

¹⁴

The Daily Free Press, April 16, 1919.

the state and beyond the confines of the state will be drawn to a county which is classed in the foremost ranks of all the counties in the United States."¹⁵

Approval of the issue should have cleared the last obstacle. Actual roadbuilding, however, was delayed by legal action. LaGrange apparently had been promised membership on the newly created county highway commission but failed to get the appointment. Thus slighted, some of its citizens obtained a restraining order against expenditure of funds.¹⁶ The Free Press was sympathetic with the citizens of LaGrange, but thought that personal feelings should not stand in the way of the all important task of giving the county a good road system.¹⁷ The State Supreme Court finally disallowed the injunction, which cleared the final obstacle.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that Mosely Hall Township, in which LaGrange is located, threatened to secede from Lenoir County and annex itself to adjoining Wayne, but providently, a vacancy occurred on the highway commission in 1921, which permitted

¹⁵ The News and Observer, April 17, 1919.

¹⁶ The Daily Free Press, April 19, 1919.

¹⁷ The Daily Free Press, April 22, 24, 30, 1919.

¹⁸ Minutes, Lenoir County Commissioners, June 11, 1919, located in the Lenoir County Courthouse, Kinston, North Carolina.

the long overdue appointment of a citizen from LaGrange, and
 19
 the secession movement died.

Construction of roads progressed very well until the winter of 1920, when operations bogged down. Many of the county's roads were torn up and impassable, which caused a number of citizens to register complaints. The Free Press investigated the matter and voiced the opinion that much of the fault lay with the highway commission. The paper pointed out that there had been a lot of wasted motion through lack of proper planning. Furthermore, too much had been under-
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 taken considering that winter was approaching. This editorial drew fire from the chairman of the highway commission. He asked for a retraction, but Braxton refused to back down or retract his criticism of the commission. The editor maintained that the press was the proper agency through which people should register criticism of the management of public undertakings. Thus they could maintain a semblance of con-
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 trol over the administration of public funds. The chairman, perhaps sensing the correctness of the paper's position,

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The Daily Free Press, June 4, 1921.

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The Daily Free Press, December 29, 1920.

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The Daily Free Press, January 3, 1921.

let the matter drop. Apparently the building program proceeded without further difficulty.

By 1922, the county had built a superior type network²² of paved roads which reached to all adjoining county lines. Subsequent building programs by the state and other counties would eventually connect the system with all adjoining county seats, greatly enhancing its utility. But Lenoir County had a head start which was to have far reaching results. One of the system's first fruits was consolidation of schools. Such never could have taken place without good roads. The system further made Kinston the focal point of commercial activity. In the first place, many of the smaller tobacco markets, throughout the surrounding area, were absorbed into the Kinston market; and, in the second place, the city became a leading merchandise wholesale center of eastern North Carolina.²³

A short time after Lenoir County began its road building program, the state commenced an ambitious highway construction program of its own that would ultimately connect all county seats with paved roads. The Free Press along with many of

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The Daily Free Press, March 20, 1922.

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Strother, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, December 28, 1964.

the area's leading citizens began a movement to have part of
the county's road debt taken over by the state.²⁴ It argued
that the county had expected to use its gasoline tax in re-
tiring the debt. The state, however, had requisitioned the
tax to pay for its own highway program, leaving the county
to fend for itself.²⁵ Without the gasoline tax, the local
road debt absorbed more than half of the total taxes col-
lected. Braxton believed that the county was justified in
seeking relief in the matter and aided in the sponsorship of
a number of bills to this effect, but they failed to pass.²⁶
In one sense, the county lost. On the other hand, the ad-
vantages of being among the first in the state to have an
all-weather road system perhaps outweighed the disadvantages
of having to pay for them.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, August 26, 1924.

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Thad Eure, Secretary of State, North Carolina, letter to the author, October 24, 1967. According to Mr. Eure, North Carolina authorized the collection of the gasoline tax in 1921. The act that provided for it stated in part: "An act to provide for the construction and maintenance of hard-surfaced and other dependable roads connecting by the most practical routes the various county seats and other principal towns of every county in the state..."

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Kinston Daily Free Press, February 14, 1933, February 25, March 1, 1935, July 28, 1936. During this period of time, the tax rate was \$1.25 per \$100.00 of assessed valuation of which \$0.67 was used to pay the highway indebtedness.

Along with the fight to improve roads, the Free Press also sought to extend other transportation facilities connecting the county with outside areas. It was especially interested in deepening the Neuse River, so that it could accommodate heavier boats capable of carrying bulk cargo. Realizing that such a project required help from higher levels of government, the newspaper strove to stimulate interest on the "grass-roots" level sufficient to move state and federal authorities to act. It encouraged producers to prepare lists of proposed water shipments and agreed to compile these lists so that they could be used to justify a request for action.²⁷ Perhaps this approach would have worked, but again World War I cut short the campaign and before it could be resumed, other means of transportation had obviated the necessity of wider utilization of the river.

Rail transportation was well developed prior to the editor's arrival; however, this fact did not prevent his pushing to extend facilities. In 1914, Kinston had rail access to all adjoining county seats except those of Duplin and Jones counties. Braxton realized that if Kinston could be connected with these county seats, the city would become a center of

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The Daily Free Press, June 26, 1915.

commerce for the entire area embracing all adjoining counties. Toward this end, he took a very active part in getting the Kinston Carolina Railroad to extend its line to Kenansville in Duplin County.²⁸ The line remained open and in use until the Great Depression and the advent of good roads sounded its death knell. But by that time, the line had served its purpose. For many years, it was the only means of rapid transit between the two communities; and, because of this fact, it was instrumental in establishing commercial ties that were carried over into the motor transport era and down to the present day.

There is little doubt that Lenoir County lacked vision and imagination in overcoming its transportation needs in 1914. The highway era was rapidly approaching, but county leaders clung to old ideas and failed to grasp its portent. It was not until the Free Press became actively involved that the county departed from old methods of financing and worked out its problems, a fact that was to mark the beginning of an epoch in North Carolina highway development. The newspaper did not stop there but continued to exert considerable influence in the development of all transportation facilities.

Whenever the need for new facilities and additions or improvements to existing means of transportation offered wider potential for commerce, agriculture, industry, or community development, the paper was always among the first to support them and frequently was the motivating force in bringing such into reality.

Improved transportation was to aid greatly agricultural interests; however, it was no panacea for all of the problems confronting the farmer. These problems stemmed largely from the two-crop system and farm tenancy, which seemed mutually to support each other. Of the 3,000 farms in Lenoir County in 1919, 71 percent were operated by tenants, and about one-half of the land under cultivation was devoted to the planting of cotton and tobacco.²⁹ Such periodicals as The Progressive Farmer had long advocated diversification of crops, but farmers as a rule had not heeded the advice, either because of individual choice or because of the owner-tenant relationship. The editor, in surveying conditions shortly after his arrival in Kinston, commented:

Diversify your crops is the advice that has become so common that it hardly attracts passing

attention any longer. But judging from the results, that have been obtained in some sections in the past, the "oversupply of advice" hasn't hurt anything, for there is little evidence that much attention has been paid to it.³⁰

In a general sense, the editor championed broad utilization of the county's land resources and envisioned the gradual development of a model farm community capable of producing most of its own needs with a surplus for export. He knew, however, that such was impossible as long as farmers were slaves to the two-crop system. The standing advice of the Free Press was--reduce cotton and tobacco acreage to a point where production would command a fair price. Overproduction, it argued, only enabled buying combines to purchase on a glutted market at prices most suitable to them. Furthermore, it argued, the extra land could be used to grow farm produce, which was needed locally in considerable quantity. In fact, Kinston was having to import vegetables and meat at that time.³¹ But it appears that, even at the low prevailing prices, farmers liked the certainty of established cotton and tobacco markets better than the uncertainty of markets connected with other products and refused to curtail

letter, December 23, 1964.

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The Daily Free Press, December 3, 1914.

³¹

The Daily Free Press, October 19, 1916.

production of the two staples.

The Free Press offered alternatives to the two-crop system. Among other things, it believed that livestock offered a good counterbalance for cotton and tobacco. It realized, however, that a great need existed to improve stock. Besides publishing facts on the advantages of purebred animals, the editor advanced the idea and helped promote the first county fair in 1915, hoping that it would encourage farmers to improve their stock.³² Success of the fair, in accomplishing the desired results to some degree, was attested by an editorial in 1922, which told of the many purebred animals on exhibition.³³

Farmers, generally, fared very well during World War I, but an abrupt drop in prices in 1920 and the arrival of the boll-weevil the following year left farmers somewhat shaken but all the more determined to recoup losses by increasing acreage of the two staple crops. Despite repeated warnings from the Free Press and other agencies, many farmers succeeded in wrecking themselves by chasing the profits of 1919 throughout the following decade. The woeful story is re-

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The Daily Free Press, November 15, 1915.

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The Daily Free Press, October 14, 1922.

vealed by the gradual rise in farm tendency. By 1929, it had³⁴ reached a high in the county of 75 percent.

As this economic mayhem continued, farmers cried for reduction of acreage, but most were talking about their neighbor's patch. The paper beseeched farmers to keep books so that marginal crops, namely cotton, could be eliminated. They, however, ignored this advice and continued to plant heavily in the spring, visualizing profits that invariably failed to materialize in the fall. In 1921, the paper joined with the Kinston Tobacco Board of Trade in support of a state-wide movement for a 50 percent reduction of tobacco³⁵ acreage, but again with little success. In fact, tobacco acreage continued to increase throughout the twenties. In 1929, the county broke all previous records when it planted³⁶ 29,220 acres. The Free Press was led to comment:

There is little hope that the tobacco farmers of Eastern North Carolina or any other section of the country will become independent or be able to emancipate themselves from the serfdom of the buying octopus until they have sense enough to sharply reduce the production and put more of their time to other crops, the proceeds

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Rasor, letter, December 23, 1964.

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The Kinston Free Press, January 29, 1921.

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Rasor, letter, December 23, 1964.

from which will enable them to have backbone enough to tell the buyers where to get off.³⁷

As the Great Depression gripped the nation, the editor's words took on the significance of a prophecy. Farmers were unable to dispose of their tobacco at any price. Much of it was destroyed or left to rot in the fields. The inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt was heralded as "a day of hope for American and the world."³⁸ The paper urged support of his administration's farm program, especially that of crop controls. This program not only led to reduction of cotton and tobacco acreage, but also led farmers to devote some of the resulting extra acres to other crops and products. This perhaps had something to do with the decline of absentee ownership. By 1939, farm tenancy had decreased to 68 per-³⁹cent.

Hard times, as usual, led to movements to cut expenses by curtailing services and shrinking the number of local payrolls. In the interest of progress, the Free Press gen-⁴⁰erally fought such movements, and in some measure was

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Kinston Daily Free Press, July 1, 1929.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, March 4, 1933.

³⁹
Rasor, letter, December 23, 1964.

⁴⁰
Kinston Daily Free Press, July 24, 1930.

successful in preventing them. On one occasion, the county commissioners took steps to eliminate the farm agent. The paper, realizing the importance of the agency in assisting farmers to adapt to the new Federal farm program, defended it and was responsible for getting the commissioners to re-
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 consider.

In the foregoing case, results were easily recognizable, but in most cases relating to agriculture, results were not always as obvious. Problems were often so broad in scope that the best the paper could expect was local reception of certain ideas with hopes that other newspapers or agencies would join in support of the same ideas elsewhere. Even locally, the Free Press was frequently only moderately successful, and on some occasions was momentarily unsuccessful, as evidenced by farmers' refusal to abandon the two-crop system and by local farmers' support of the measure to lift tobacco
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 acreage controls in 1939. But in both success and failure, the Free Press served the all important purpose of conditioning farmers to better programs and methods. Although the county did not blossom into a model farm community, it stead-

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Kinston Daily Free Press, August 5, 1932.

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Strother, John P., interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, June 19, 1966.

ily improved; and, as 1940 dawned, it was much nearer that goal than it had been twenty-five years before.

Of great significance to the farmer was the development of farm markets, to which the Free Press gave encouragement and assistance. Kinston's primary function was that of collecting and distributing farm products, materials, and equipment. Braxton viewed the city's function broadly--as it related to the overall economic development of the area. He believed that wider commercial development would offer an inducement to farmers to produce a greater variety of products. Its campaign to bring this about may be characterized by the following editorial which appeared in 1916:

The Free Press has sounded this note repeatedly during the past few months, urging the Chamber of Commerce to give attention to the matter of the establishment of local markets, not only for livestock, but for all the products which are raised in any considerable quantities in the trade territory of Kinston, as one of the best and surest means of developing the possibilities for the production of agricultural and stock products.⁴³

Besides interesting the Chamber of Commerce in the problem, the paper also sought to interest farmers in setting up their own co-operatives capable of handling all types of farm products--not only for local distribution but also for

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The Daily Free Press, July 4, 1916.

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export to outside areas. Locally, some success was noticeable. A curb market was established in Kinston, and according to reports was very successful. The Free Press refused to accept the argument of some that the market was detrimental to local merchants. In defending it, the paper pointed out that sales on the market gave farmers additional money with which to buy elsewhere in Kinston and thereby enhance its general economic well being. Moreover, consumers benefitted from a constant supply of fresh vegetables, not heretofore obtainable.

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Efforts to establish an export market commensurate with the county's productive capabilities, however, were not so successful. In 1930, the paper chided:

"Lenoir County is within 18 hours of 30,000,000 people and 36 hours of 45,000,000 people who have to eat--And it lets those people send to California for eggs."

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Kinston's home owned tobacco market has always been a source of pride to the city. It is North Carolina's second

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The Daily Free Press, April 23, 1918, May 26, 1922, September 23, 1923 and Kinston Daily Free Press, October 13, 1927, August 29, 1933.

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The Daily Free Press, June 24, 1922.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, November 24, 1930.

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largest in terms of sales and income, a position that has resulted from many factors, one of which was and still is a very favorable press. Of great benefit to the market has been the willingness and eagerness of the Free Press to use its resources to inform producers throughout the Neuse Basin of the market's many advantages. A special annual edition, announcing the opening of the market, is so rich in terms of market opportunities and community development that both tobaccommen and other citizens eagerly await its arrival. Besides publicizing and promoting the market throughout its circulation area, the paper has also supported measures which have materially strengthened it.⁴⁸ The paper's greatest contribution, however, has been rendered through its efforts to stimulate an atmosphere in which the market could thrive and progress without impediments.

Whether it was markets for farm produce, tobacco, or general merchandise, the Free Press seized every opportunity to aid them and publicize their advantage. In 1928, it stated: "The Free Press has pledged itself to work with merchants to

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Henry L. Rasor, North Carolina Agricultural Statistics (1960), 22-23.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, July 20, 1925, August 31, 1926, August 24, 1929, August 25, 1933, November 25, 1937.

make Kinston a bigger and better trading center,"⁴⁹ a statement of policy actually put into effect many years before and continuing today. In keeping with this policy, the Free Press has done a remarkable job of informing citizens of needs and helping to formulate attitudes to bring about improvements which have enhanced the city's capabilities to attract new business.

At the time of H. Galt Braxton's arrival in Kinston, a bond issue was pending which would provide funds for improvement to the city's overworked public utilities. The editor welcomed this opportunity to demonstrate that the Free Press, under his management, was to be "dedicated to the upbuilding of Kinston." Encouraging people to register for the special election, the paper stated: "This matter is too vitally important to Kinston's welfare to be treated with indifference. A defeat of the bond issue would be a calamity...Let the friends of progress get behind the movement."⁵⁰ This and other editorials helped to generate the necessary enthusiasm, which before the editor's arrival had seemed to be lacking, to carry the special election and permit Kinston to take this step

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Kinston Daily Free Press, October 4, 1928.

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The Daily Free Press, May 25, 1914.

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toward progress.

As the years passed the Free Press continued to lend its support to the material development of Kinston. A new gas plant added to the comfort and convenience of citizens; the water supply was greatly improved; the sewage system was expanded; and street paving moved steadily along.⁵² In one vital area, however, that of electrical power production, the city seemed to be dragging its feet. Power was inadequate and rates were high overall, but perhaps most detrimental was the city's narrow policy of charging suburban users higher rates than city users. The paper considered this a big deterrent to highly needed industry and strove to persuade the city to change its policy but met with little success. On one occasion, it commented: "Kinston simply cannot grow with this millstone of discriminatory power rates around its neck."⁵³

Actually the city was faced with a dilemma--either to retain high power rates and discourage industry or lower the

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The Daily Free Press, June 15, 22, 24, 1914. Nothing could be found in the Free Press files to indicate that the newspaper supported the movement before Braxton's arrival.

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The Daily Free Press, August 6, 11, 1919, August 17, 21, 1920.

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The Daily Free Press, June 8, 1923.

rates and lose highly needed revenue. In 1926, a possible solution presented itself. Several companies made overtures to purchase the plant.⁵⁴ At first, the Free Press supported such a plan, provided that the purchasing company would guarantee adequate power at rates which would encourage industry, and provided that city leaders would bare all facts incident to the sale, and allow citizens to make the final decision by ballot.⁵⁵ The issue became heated over the following months, but little definite action was taken before 1928. At that time, the city council by a three to two vote accepted R. L. Blackwood's bid which, with all factors considered, was \$86,000 lower than the highest bid.⁵⁶

The Free Press, although an original advocate of the sale under certain conditions, did not like the looks of this particular situation. In the first place, the matter had not been referred to the voters; secondly, Blackwood's Carolina Gas and Light Company was relatively unknown and unproven in the field of commercial electric power production; and thirdly, acceptance of the lower bid raised the question of possi-

⁵⁴ Kinston Daily Free Press, December 3, 1926.

⁵⁵ Kinston Daily Free Press, December 4, 1926.

⁵⁶ Minutes, Kinston City Council, February 10, 1928, located in the Municipal Building, Kinston, North Carolina.

ble irregularities at city hall. Referring to the acceptance of the lower bid as "star chamber proceedings," the Free Press⁵⁷ demanded an investigation. Such, however, was not necessary, as the city council, perhaps realizing the futility of pursuing the matter further, withdrew its offer to sell the plant. In fact it was never sold but was enlarged, and over the years, rates were adjusted to suit both consumer and city needs.

Braxton realized that a city's public image is of great importance to its economy, and worked vigorously and patiently in supporting the development of facilities that would aid in attracting visitors, shoppers, new business, and industry. Particularly noteworthy were his contributions toward the development of railroad depot facilities and hotel accommodations.

In 1914, each railroad provided its own passenger stations. These, which the Free Press described as "hovels," left much to be desired. In fact, people traveling on the Norfolk Southern often had to stand in the rain while waiting for trains,⁵⁸ a wretched condition, considering that most

⁵⁷ Kinston Daily Free Press, April 6, 1928.

⁵⁸ The Daily Free Press, August 8, 1914, August 14, 1918.

people used rail transportation at this time. The newspaper attacked railroad companies and slowly but surely gathered support for a new union depot. Civic groups joined the campaign,⁵⁹ but again World War I intervened. Braxton was more than willing to delay action until the conflict was over, but he had no intention of giving up the ghost completely.

As soon as the conflict was over, he rallied previous support and prepared for a showdown. When railroad companies failed to act, the Free Press helped to organize a delegation to go to Raleigh and wrangle with the Corporations Commission. The delegation asked that railroad companies be required to show cause as to why they were not giving the matter more attention. Promises were exacted that action⁶⁰ would soon be forthcoming. It was 1924, however, before a union depot was completed and opened for use. At the opening ceremony, H. Galt Braxton was chairman of arrangements,⁶¹ which in some small measure was a tribute to the man who first advanced the idea of a union depot for Kinston and had fought almost a decade for its fulfillment.

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The Daily Free Press, January 13, 1917.

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The Daily Free Press, January 3, 7, 1922.

⁶¹

Kinston Daily Free Press, March 4, 1924.

At the time the campaign for a union depot was at its zenith, the Free Press raised the question of broadening hotel facilities. As early as 1920, Braxton wrote an editorial extolling the advantages of "an eight or nine story building with all modern accommodations."⁶² He believed that such a structure was essential to the commercial and industrial development of the city, and necessary if Kinston were to keep pace with its sister cities of eastern North Carolina. His ideas were picked up by the Chamber of Commerce, which appointed a steering committee to develop plans and devise methods of raising funds for the venture.⁶³ The project became a community undertaking with most of the stock being subscribed locally. Throughout the campaign, the Free Press continued to play a significant role as it encouraged citizens to invest in this truly "home enterprise."⁶⁴ The campaign was highly successful, and the structure that finally materialized was remarkably similar to the one the editor had visualized in 1920.⁶⁵ It was truly an edifice worthy

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The Daily Free Press, November 26, 1920.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, March 13, 1924.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, May 12, June 9, 10, July 13, 15, 17, August 28, 1926.

⁶⁵

Kinston Daily Free Press, February 28, 1928.

of its proponent. It not only gave Kinston a broader commercial base, but also gave the city the added distinction of having the tallest building in the state east of Raleigh.

The newspaper's overall program for the "upbuilding of Kinston" included the development of industry, but material success in this area seemed to elude the editor. Braxton believed that the community's industrial development should be directly linked to its agricultural economy. Through the years, he worked for the development of creameries, packing plants, textile factories, and other small industries which could utilize locally grown surplus farm products.⁶⁶ He joined with the Chamber of Commerce in encouraging preparation of industrial sites, urged tax concessions, fought for reasonable electric rates, and resisted arguments of some that industry, by boosting farm wages, would impoverish farmers.⁶⁷ Success in luring industry to the community, however, was very discouraging. In 1930, Kinston had only one cotton mill and one lumber company in operation. At that time the Free Press was led to comment:

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The Daily Free Press, January 21, 1916, September 21, 1916, June 4, 1923 and Kinston Daily Free Press, January 26, 1926, June 15, 1926, May 26, 1928, November 28, 1928.

67

The Daily Free Press, March 14, 1923 and Kinston Daily Free Press, May 22, 1926.

Kinston and this section must always look to agriculture as a primary industry and wealth producer. But even an agricultural section must have a variety of small industries with constant pay-rolls if there is to be well balanced prosperity the year round....The Free Press has great confidence in Kinston and Eastern North Carolina.... The possibilities are here; the opportunities knock at the door but unless an aroused citizenship takes advantage of such opportunities and moves forward, logically they will be lost and the community will stagnate.⁶⁸

Even though industry did not materialize, the editor's efforts in the matter were in no sense of the word in vain. His ideas helped to shape future developments. Today community leaders are making tax concessions, preparing sites, adjusting electrical rates, and doing generally what the Free Press advocated doing many years previously in order to attract industry. The results, although not overwhelming, have been gratifying.

Because of the scarcity of industry in Lenoir County, the impact of strikes and labor problems on the section's economy was minimal. As previously mentioned, the Free Press was cool toward organized labor, but its coolness did not grow out of any lack of concern for the workers themselves.⁶⁹

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Kinston Daily Free Press, March 28, 1928.

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The Daily Free Press, September 13, 1921 and Kinston Daily Free Press, June 8, 1929, September 12, 1934.

The editor deplored violence, had little regard for labor organizers and "flying squadrons," and just as little regard for hired agitators from the other side. A champion of law and order himself, he believed that labor disputes should be handled "through due course of law,"⁷⁰ a position that time has done little to altar.

When the Great Depression came, farm communities had already suffered through a decade of hard times, during which many inhabitants had barely managed to stay above water financially. On the whole, however, spirits had remained high. The Depression broke the last shred of hope, and a gloom, not before noticeable, settled over the county. Amid it all, the Free Press retained a bright outlook, confident that the nation, state, and county would emerge more prosperous than ever.⁷¹ The paper reassured the people. Its courageous outlook in this time of stress was a great source of strength and inspiration to its readers, and without a doubt was a big factor in helping them recover the all important element of confidence.

The worst aspects of the Great Depression were over by

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Kinston Daily Free Press, April 20, 1929.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, February 17, 1930, January 17, 19, December 29, 1934.

1939, the year the Free Press celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary under Braxton. During the period 1914-1939, a very significant fact stood out--the newspaper had not waited for progress, but rather had been a prime-mover in bringing together the ingredients that made for growth and development. In the process, it had established a simple but effective technique or pattern of operation--first, present the idea or problem to the people; second, interest a civic group in a program for action; and third, sell the program to the people. Of course, many of the things it fought for and saw established have long since served their purpose in the evolutionary transition from one period to the next. But as in a journey, the significance of any single step is that it leads to the next. Thus it was with the Free Press. New ideas and plans replaced the old, and the life of the newspaper and the community went on in a continuing process, each mutually supporting the other. In evaluating the success of the paper's role, in the economic development of the community, one need only observe the many material things which are taken for granted today, and which were once ideas born and nurtured in the Free Press office.

CHAPTER V THE FREE PRESS-A COMMUNITY INSTITUTION

The Free Press, in its struggle to better educational and economic opportunities, went far in recovering its reputation as a community institution, but H. Galt Braxton believed that a newspaper's influence should extend to all facets of community life. He knew a newspaper was inadequate in its total role if it did not lend itself to the creation of a place in which people could live, worship, work, and play in a clean wholesome atmosphere and pursue their political beliefs without fear of intimidation or duress. In his fight to achieve a better community, the editor met problems which lesser men would have evaded and demonstrated determination, patience, and courage. Over the years, people came to look more and more toward the Free Press as a champion of those things that made for a better life. With this confidence and support, the paper prospered, and its influence increased until it could rightfully take its place among other institutions dedicated to building a better community.

Braxton's arrival could not have been more timely. Kingston had problems. In terms of population, it had become a small city. But its people, made up of established inhabi-

tants, first and second generation mill workers, and recent arrivals, lacked the cohesion necessary to give it a city's outlook; and, elected officials appeared inadequate to think and act to meet the needs that had been generated by the city's rapid increase in population.

A need, long overlooked by the city administration, was that of providing safeguards for the health of citizens. Conditions were deplorable, even for this time. Garbage was hauled away at the expense and leisure of dwellers or owners; dust presented a problem; animal pens were left unscreened, producing a continuous crop of flies; and people spat where they pleased and recklessly littered the streets.¹ Small wonder that disease, much of which was preventable by vaccination and cleanliness, was commonplace. In 1914, a prominent manufacturer declared that payrolls were suffering losses up to four hundred workers per day because of an epidemic of smallpox.²

The editor asked for laws which would have gone far in solving immediate problems, but the city council, although energetic enough in the enactment of health laws, made little

¹
The Daily Free Press, May 23, June 26, September 22, October 18, 1914.

²
The Daily Free Press, February 7, 1914.

effort to enforce them. Thus, leaders tried to steer clear of the highly controversial issue. Such strategems, however,³ did not mislead the Free Press into relieving pressure.

Braxton soon realized that laws alone would never solve the problem. He began a movement to separate the management of sanitation from politics and was successful in getting the city council to appoint a meat and milk inspector.⁴ The administration, however, gave the inspector very little support, and the public treated him as a meddling antagonist rather than a benefactor. His efforts to have animal pens screened were rebuffed at every turn, and his inspection of producer and retail establishments was treated as invasion of privacy. Thus he was almost left to fend for himself.

The inspector, however, did find a steadfast friend in the Free Press. During the spring of 1915, the paper, with the help of local doctors, conducted a special educational anti-fly campaign designed to arouse city leaders and enlighten citizens as to the many dangers posed by the common house-fly.⁵ The city council, however, remained reluctant to take

³ The Daily Free Press, July 19, 1914.

⁴ The Daily Free Press, July 10, 21, September 3, November 28, 1914.

⁵ The Daily Free Press, March 17, 18, 19, April 14, 17, 20, 29, 1915.

positive action, and the situation improved very little.

Continuing to maintain pressure, the Free Press tried a new tack. It circulated a petition to register response from those desiring to improve sanitation conditions and called for a meeting with the view of forcing the city council to act. Seemingly, the council reacted favorably; however, subsequent events once again proved that it gave only lip service.⁶ In 1916, it appropriated the meager sum of \$500 to meet the overall needs of the sanitation department. Whether or not this was a deliberate attempt to strangle the department is unknown, but it was bound to have had that effect. Whatever the case, the Free Press was led to comment:

The Free Press feels that it cannot remain silent on the vital matter of proper and adequate health conservation, when a city council, upon whom responsibility rests for the safeguarding of the public health by affording necessary protection from those ills of humanity now recognized and pronounced by medical science to be preventable, fails so utterly to give any proper conception of the importance of the matter....the appropriation of five-hundred dollars for the preservation of the public health of Kinston is a farce.⁷

Besides lack of support, the sanitation department lacked the scope to do its job properly. Limited to the confines

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The Daily Free Press, July 31, 1915.

7

The Daily Free Press, August 19, 1916.

of the city, it did not have surveillance over rural suppliers of meat and milk. This, the Free Press recognized as a serious handicap, and was among the first to advocate a⁸ broadening of the department's scope. By 1917, the idea had gained enough momentum to interest the Chamber of Commerce. It proposed to the county commissioners that they and the ci-⁹ty cooperate in appointing a full time county health officer. Through these efforts and with aid from the State Health Department and the Rockefeller Foundation, a county health department was established with Doctor J. S. Michner as its¹⁰ head. It soon proved its value. The incidence of typhoid, malaria, and hookworm declined considerably. The paper reported in 1917 that the city had only three cases of typhoid¹¹ as compared with thirty-one in 1916. Within a few years, epidemics were rarely mentioned in the Free Press.

The county health officer, however, did not have an easy road. He faced many of the same problems that the city meat

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The Daily Free Press, February 7, August 10, 1916.

9

The Daily Free Press, May 3, 9, 1917.

10

Minutes, Lenoir County Commissioners, July 2, September 3, 1917, located in the Lenoir County Courthouse, Kinston, North Carolina.

11

The Daily Free Press, December 16, 1918.

and milk inspector had faced. Michner, confronted with apathy and indifference, resigned after little more than a year. His replacement, Doctor T. F. Wickliffe, was treated little better and was led to comment: "A lot of people are of the opinion that all health laws are good until they happen to regulate them individually." And the Free Press, paraphrasing, stated: "It is strange how much difference there is when one's own ox is being gored instead of the neighbor's goat."¹²

A special problem that continued to plague the health department and claim the attention of the Free Press, even down through the thirties, was that of adequate meat and milk inspection. Producers, it appeared, were able to disobey the laws and get away with it. Peyton A. Hooker, owner of Hooker and Company Abattoir, was one of the most outspoken opponents of sanitation laws. On one occasion, he was brought to trial for refusing to comply but was acquitted. This case left the entire county open to uninspected meat and milk. Another factor that greatly hindered the Free Press and those concerned with sanitation was the method used to pay for inspections. Individual suppliers defrayed costs,

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The Daily Free Press, September 8, 1919.

which had to be passed on to the consumer. This method of payment provided a convincing argument against inspections and aided the "gumshoes" in arraying the public against the program. The Free Press believed that what aided all should be paid for by all and urged that costs be paid from the public treasury.¹³

The matter rocked along until 1934. At that time, having exhausted all means on the local level to deal effectively with the problem, the Free Press requested that the State Health Department be brought into the controversy.¹⁴ Continuing pressure of this nature and the growing concern of a more enlightened public, toward which the Free Press had played an important role, ultimately brought the matter to a head. Suppliers throughout the county were either forced into line or out of business.

As the thirties drew to a close, Braxton could look with pride upon the results of his long fight to improve the health of the community. Although some loose ends remained to be policed, diminishing editorials on the subject indicated that the most difficult aspect of the struggle was over. Two broad principles had been established--the county and city admini-

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Kinston Daily Free Press, May 26, 1926.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, November 3, 6, 1934.

strations had come to realize the necessity of a health department, and citizens had come to accept health standards as a way of life, even though it meant giving up certain individual freedom.

Although not as critical as sanitation, safety caught the attention of the Free Press. The many awards that adorn Braxton's office walls attest to his deep personal interest in the subject. His first efforts to assure a safer community occurred during the railroad boom-period. At that time, more than twenty trains entered and left Kinston daily. Braxton became alarmed over the unusual number of accidents at unattended grade crossings. Flagmen, it seemed, frequently remained in cabs while trains were passing through town. In several well directed editorials and through personal contact with street and railroad officials, the editor made his point, and the situation was greatly improved.¹⁵

On the horizon, however, loomed a far more imposing hazard. Highways were being rapidly improved. Limited by county lines, local law enforcement officers found themselves unable to cope with mounting traffic violations. The Free Press correctly analyzed the problem as being statewide and joined with other newspapers in advocating the establishment

of a uniformed state constabulary and licensing of drivers.¹⁶ The mounting traffic toll, its treatment by the press, and consequent public concern finally led state authorities to provide for a small highway patrol in 1929.¹⁷ The licensing of drivers, however, was overlooked. Pressure from the press continued, but it was not until 1935, when the repeal of prohibition gave an assist in the fight, that state lawmakers finally decided that the time had come to license drivers.¹⁸ Braxton's next step was to advocate the teaching of driver safety in schools.¹⁹

Of the paper's many struggles to clean up Kinston, perhaps the toughest was the one it carried on for more than a quarter of a century against organized vice. Legend has it that Kinston's reputation as an eastern North Carolina center for the world's oldest profession began with the occupying Union Army after the Civil War. The story goes: Camp-followers established themselves on a hill overlooking the main

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Kinston Daily Free Press, August 18, 1925, November 12, 17, 1926, January 6, 1927, February 7, 1929.

17

Public Laws of North Carolina, 1929, Chapter 218, 270-271.

18

Public Laws of North Carolina, 1935, Chapter 52, 35-46.

19

Kinston Daily Free Press, May 5, 1936.

town, which at that time lay almost entirely upon the lower floodplain. When President Rutherford B. Hayes suddenly ended Reconstruction, the soldiers left so abruptly that their paramours were left behind. A few kindly city citizens, sensing the loneliness of these women, came to their rescue. As time passed, business boomed, and the hill came to be referred to fondly as "Sugar Hill." City growth finally forced the business to vacate its point of vantage and move to south Kinston, the lowest section of the city. The name "Sugar Hill," its geographical significance long forgotten, followed the migrant business which took on a degree of permanence that was to plague the city for many years to come.

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Thus it was when Braxton arrived. His predecessors had sought to solve the problem by ignoring it. With no public instrument to express disapproval or solidify the ideas of those who disapproved, the red-light district was free to do as it pleased. Small wonder that by 1914, the reputation of "Sugar Hill" had spread far and wide, and Kinston had earned the dubious distinction of being wide-open.

Braxton was not disposed to bury his head in the sand and let the district further sap the moral fiber of the com-

munity without a fight. The Free Press became the city's
²¹ sorely needed "public conscience." People, however, had
 become so well conditioned to circumstances that it was difficult to arouse their indignity or concern. The "bawdy-house" gang operated with apparent impunity. Efforts, on the part of some city officials, to invoke laws met with only
²² moderate and temporary success. Houses would be closed only to spring back into operation almost overnight. Many arrests with few convictions showed an indifference that was difficult to combat and which left the police force in a
²³ confused and demoralized state.

The Free Press, although openly disappointed because of its failure to arouse public concern immediately, did not abandon the fight. During the thirties, it called for grand jury investigations, supported officials who promised to take action, and attacked other officials who seemed to wink
²⁴ at the law or be in league with district operators. Through

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The Daily Free Press, March 31, 1917, December 3, 31, 1918, January 23, March 19, April 16, December 8, 9, 1919, August 5, 1920.

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The Daily Free Press, July 8, 1922.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, June 5, 1934.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, June 21, 1931, June 5, 1934.

an intensive drive spearheaded by a grand jury investigation in late 1938, Mayor Jack Skinner had houses of prostitution padlocked. More than seventy-five arrests, growing out of charges involving liquor, prostitution, and the numbers racket, were made and referred to the superior court for trial. These efforts, although demonstrating what could be done, were doomed to fail in the all important matter of ridding the city of vice. The district operators once again showed their strength and managed to have the cases transferred to recorder's court,²⁵ which had a sympathetic ear for the vice operators. Sentences amounted to mere slaps on the wrists, and the district was allowed to reopen.

The Free Press was unhappy over this state of affairs. Braxton believed, however, that the padlockings had disturbed vice operators and became more determined than ever to put an end to the menace in the city. A month after the cases had been virtually dismissed, the editor pointed out that Judge Joseph Dawson, who had sat in judgement of the cases, was legal guardian and an agent for property that was being rented as a house of prostitution. At that time, the city had a law which forbade this. The Free Press wondered how Judge Dawson, without bias, could sit in judgement of people

charged with offenses for which he himself was not above approach.²⁶

It was obvious that vice operators no longer enjoyed their previous sense of security. People had become more aware of conditions and just as it appeared that they might act, the newly established Marine Base at Camp Lejeune, concerned over the temptations the district offered young Marines, lent its support to the fight. Kinston was placed "off-limits" to military personnel until it cleaned house. Mayor John R. Sams was equal to the task, and the district²⁷ became a casualty of World War II.

After the clean-up, most madams and prostitutes left town for parts and occupations unknown. Others, however, remained behind, lived down their past, and gained respectability and acceptance.²⁸ With the menace gone, the Free Press asked for no scalps, went on no witch hunts, nor lent itself in any way to persecuting those who had been involved in the

26

Kinston Daily Free Press, February 13, 1939.

27

Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957. Many people of Kinston believe that Mayor Sams committed political suicide because of the part he played in the clean-up.

28

John P. Strother, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, December 28, 1964, hereinafter cited as Strother, interview, December 28, 1964.

district. Thus with compassion and finality, Braxton closed the books on an unpleasant memory. His approach--primarily against vice and not people--had left few scars, from which the community healed very rapidly.

Braxton was never one to become obsessed with a single objective and lose sight of all others. His program for a better community appeared well balanced and geared to the total needs of the city. A high priority objective was that of recreation. The Free Press had traditionally been a supporter of recreation. During the early days of Dr. Edwards, the paper had been very active in efforts to establish playgrounds. These efforts led interested citizens to donate the use of land and inaugurate programs; however, such rose and ebbed with the people who originated them. Whenever they moved away or became disinterested, the programs usually collapsed. Braxton continued to seek the help of willing citizens, and personally helped to organize a number of projects himself, but at the same time, he intensified efforts to establish public recreation. This, he knew, was the only means by which the city could ever hope to have a permanent system of adequately supervised playgrounds.

The idea of public recreation, however, was out of phase with the times. It was not until 1924 that the city council decided to commit itself to the movement. At that time, it selected a steering committee to study community needs. Upon the basis of the committee's report, two plots of land were purchased for the express purpose of providing public playgrounds.³⁰ The Free Press welcomed this turn of events but continued to press for improvements, expansion, and additional equipment.³¹ The early Depression years marked a decline in the movement, but the paper, realizing that the need for recreation was greater than ever, came to its rescue, and was largely responsible for restoring interest. A milestone was reached in 1934, when Charlotte Hill a trained supervisor, was placed in charge of playgrounds.³² From this point onward, the Recreation Department would continue to expand until one day it would become, perhaps, the finest in the state of North Carolina.

The Free Press was also a great booster of all forms of

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Minutes, Kinston City Council, May 5, 1924, located in the Municipal Building, Kinston, North Carolina, hereinafter cited as Minutes, City Council.

31

Kinston Daily Free Press, February 9, May 3, 1926, January 31, 1931.

32

Minutes, City Council, June 4, 1934, and Kinston Daily Free Press, July 4, 1934.

public entertainment. It supported musical festivals and viewed Chatuaguas as a form of entertainment and moral uplift. Braxton always treated sports, professional or otherwise, as definite assets to the city. He supported school athletics as long as such did not become the paramount objective of education. Perhaps no man worked as hard or did as much during this period to maintain baseball in Kinston.³³ He believed that people needed something to arouse enthusiasm for their hometown, and a good representative baseball team fulfilled this important need. His was a deep personal interest. He exhibited as much enthusiasm for a winner as anybody. Moreover, he felt that baseball was good business, in that it aided the economy and provided the city with publicity.

The city did not field a professional team every year of the Great Depression, but through the efforts of the Free Press and other interested parties, it usually had some sort of team. Perhaps no team has ever endeared itself to a community more so than Kinston's semi-professional team of 1934. Early in the season, the team was on top of the standings in the Coastal Plain League, when it suddenly received an almost

33

Kinston Daily Free Press, October 28, 1926, January 3, 15, 17, 1927, April 29, July 29, 1933.

insurmountable setback. Because of an alleged ineligible player, the team was forced to forfeit ten of its wins, which³⁴ sent it plummeting to the bottom of the league standings.

The Free Press joined with other loyal fans in lamenting the team's misfortune. Two sets of standings were published daily--to show the team's position with the ten wins and the official standings without the ten wins. Braxton even wrote the president of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, but the Coastal Plain League, being non-³⁵ professional at that time, was not under his jurisdiction.

The Kinston team, perhaps sensing this strong community support, responded with a late season drive that culminated in the league championship; however, it failed to win the play-³⁶offs. This did not seem too important, however. The really important thing appeared to be: The townspeople, amid the ordeal of the Great Depression, had found a common cause in which they could help themselves by pulling together in a community undertaking.

The Free Press seemed to have a knack for getting people

³⁴ Kinston Daily Free Press, July 27, 1934.

³⁵ Kinston Daily Free Press, August 4, 1934.

³⁶ Kinston Daily Free Press, August 27, 1934.

to pull together. Hardly any area of community life escaped its attention. It provided ideas and helped to generate enthusiasm for a community chest, a public library compatible with city needs, and a high school band.³⁷ It also lent its support to scout and youth movements, rendered invaluable service to churches of all creeds and denominations, and was a constant booster of civic groups, such as Rotary, Civitan³⁸ Kiwanis, and the Chamber of Commerce.

Amid its schedule of community undertakings, there was also time to aid individuals who would be victimized by dishonest merchants, confidence men, or speculators in human gullibility.³⁹ Braxton was as quick to take issue with local dealers who short weighed ice as he was to grapple with carnival hucksters, but perhaps his most noteworthy efforts along these lines involved a land company which called itself the Carolina Syndicate. This company's object was to sell swampland through glib tongued promises that it might bear

37

The Daily Free Press, December 3, 16, 1920, October 27, 1923, Kinston Daily Free Press, July 8, 1926, October 15, November 4, 1936, April 8, 1938.

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The Daily Free Press, November 27, 1916, Kinston Daily Free Press, March 11, 21, 22, 1924, September 23, December 7, 9, 1925, January 9, 1926, January 30, 31, February 8, 10, 1927, November 9, 1929, February 6, March 10, 1931.

39

Kinston Daily Free Press, August 25, December 15, 1926.

oil. The Free Press published a warning, which raised a question of the company's integrity. Three days later, the syndicate closed its local office and left town. For its prompt exposure of the scheme, the state insurance commissioner who had investigative authority in such matters at that time wrote the editor: "I desire to thank you....If all newspapers in the state would uphold the efforts of the department in such matters, it would eventually be possible to prevent imposition on the public by such fantastic schemes."⁴⁰

Braxton realized that a victim of unscrupulous people was no less a victim than one victimized by a legal but unreasonable and inconsiderate government. Typical of the newspaper's viewpoint was the stand it took in the case of Noah J. Rouse. He was a member of the board of directors of the Free Press Publishing Company, but it is believed that the paper would have taken the same stand regardless of whom the party or parties may have been. In 1914, Rouse purchased a farm west of Kinston. At considerable expense, he drilled wells tapping the underground artesian flow. A few years later, the city faced with possible water shortage drilled

similar wells farther west. These caused a lowering of the water level, and many of Rouse's wells went dry. Furthermore, city water mains cut across his farm. Shortage of water caused many of his tenants to move, and the price of his land declined considerably. The Free Press believed that the city was morally obligated to pay damages without forcing Rouse to resort to civil action. It further believed that a trial would only fan the flames of dissension and make matters worse. Editorially, the paper attempted to persuade city leaders of this, as it stated:

To be brutally frank, Kinston needs to cultivate cooperation on the part of its people as bad as any community in the world. It needs to develop a community conscious [sic] actuated by higher principles than frequently seem to prevail here. Discord, friction, and factionalism can contribute no possible benefit to the community. The Rouse case ought not to come to trial.⁴¹

The editor's efforts, however, were of no avail, and Rouse was forced to seek redress in a court of law. The case was one of the most heated civil cases in the annals of the county. The Free Press played only a passive role in the trial proceedings because of its belief that the press should not use its favored position to influence the course of jus-

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The Daily Free Press, November 20, 1922.

42
 tice. Even though the editor had strong personal feelings regarding the issue, he refrained from giving opinions, editorial or otherwise, during the course of trial. As it happened, legal justice upheld moral justice. Rouse was awarded \$9,000, and Braxton appeared highly pleased when he stated: "Damage may not be adequate but the principles for which they
 43
 were fought were full sustained."

Braxton may not have pushed for some things that Negroes are demanding today, but no record was found that he denied them any right or privilege under the law. He once stated: "The Free Press yields to none in its advocacy of just treatment [for Negroes]."
 44
 On the local level, the editor supported many constructive projects--recreation centers, improvement of streets, better schools, and more economical
 45
 housing--specifically on their behalf. He also sought to assure Negroes a greater measure of justice through his advocacy of anti-lynch laws and opposition to those who would

42
Kinston Daily Free Press, August 30, 1924.

43
The Daily Free Press, November 16, 1923.

44
Kinston Daily Free Press, October 30, 1933.

45
The Daily Free Press, October 2, 1915, Kinston Daily Free Press, January 3, 1928, January 3, 1935, November 19, 1937, October 26, 1938, January 16, 1939.

deny members of the race their legal rights.⁴⁶ He has consistently opposed the Ku Klux Klan, and on one occasion referred to it as a "menace to organized society."⁴⁷ In recent years, he has espoused the quiet approach toward improving race relations and broadening economic opportunities for Negroes.⁴⁸ But typically, he has shown little enthusiasm for demonstrations, outside organizers, or the use of violence as appropriate means by which to improve the lot of the race.

In the area of politics, the Free Press appeared to steer its own course. Generally, it supported the Democratic party, but party support of persons or measures neither guaranteed nor necessarily alienated the newspaper's support. In 1928, it found itself at variance with the national ticket over a moral principle that Braxton considered a cornerstone of the Free Press. The editor tended to connect the leadership of the national Democratic party with Tammany Hall, which

⁴⁶
Kinston Daily Free Press, January 3, 1929, July 10, September 13, October 16, 1930.

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The Kinston Free Press, February 9, 1921, The Daily Free Press, November 12, 1923, Kinston Daily Free Press, May 14, 1924, February 22, 1927.

⁴⁸
John P. Strother, interview with the author, Kinston, North Carolina, October 15, 1966. The Free Press supported the establishment of a local race relations council in 1952, which was organized to deal with job opportunities, housing, etc.

in his viewpoint was the embodiment of corrupt government.

In revealing his stand, he stated: "The Free Press will give support to the local and state Democratic tickets, but it cannot support the national ticket at the head of which marches the sachem of Tammany...."⁴⁹

Also the Free Press was adamant in its support of prohibition, and the Democratic party appeared to be ready to accept the demands of some that the Eighteenth Amendment be repealed. Braxton repeatedly refuted the idea that the religion of Democratic presidential nominee, Alfred E. Smith, was a factor in his decision to oppose the national party.⁵⁰ In a typical editorial, Braxton stated:

The Free Press does not believe that the religion of Governor Smith is a serious hinderance to Southern people's support of him.... The folks cannot forget however, that Governor Smith is a wet of wets....His legislative record has consistently been on the off-side of moral issues, including gambling, prostitution, the liquor evil and all its kindred....⁵¹

Also opposing the national ticket in 1928 was Furnifold M. Simmons, senior United States senator from North Carolina. He helped to carry the state with him but perhaps contributed

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Kinston Daily Free Press, June 30, 1928.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, April 28, May 17, 25, 28, July 25, 28, August 4, 1928.

51

Kinston Daily Free Press, August 2, 1928.

to his own defeat, by Josiah W. Bailey, for renomination in the state Democratic primary of 1930. Braxton supported Simmons. Although the Free Press had nothing against Bailey personally, it tended to link him with the Smith forces, which Braxton felt, were out to retaliate against Simmons for the part he had played in the campaign of 1928. The editor also accused the State Board of Elections, along with Governor Gardner, of playing partisan politics on behalf of Bailey.⁵² The campaign, however, was mild compared with that of 1928, and on the eve of the election, Braxton was led to comment:

The editor of the Free Press is in accord with advocates of harmony and he will support the nominee of Saturday's primary with his own personal vote. The Free Press however, which does not vote will maintain its attitude of independence and refuse to "rubber stamp" candidates or campaigns and advocacies simply because they have the sanction of party leaders or even a majority, if expediency and not principle appears to be the ruling factor.⁵³

This unyielding sense of political independence was also evident on the local level. Thus unentangled, the Free

52

Kinston Daily Free Press, March 17, 24, 31, April 2, 3, 10, 25, May 23, June 3, 4, 1930. Lenoir County gave Simmons a very comfortable margin. Statewide, however, he lost his bid for renomination.

53

Kinston Daily Free Press, June 9, 1930.

Press was in a good position to audit the ongoings of government. It attacked demagoguery, influence peddling, balloting abuses, slate making, and any other irregularity that posed a threat to honest and efficient government. Under the watchful eye of the newspaper, machine politics in its literal sense, never became firmly established, although there may have been some shades of political influence in the city's vice district. Actually there were a few attempts of persons to set themselves above the law, but these were promptly exposed, and the persons concerned were forced to seek other life pursuits.

One such case concerned Sheriff Arden W. Taylor. During 1924, his tax records revealed a shortage, which later⁵⁴ was established to be in excess of \$56,000. The shortage apparently resulted from Taylor's discretionary omission of certain people from the delinquent tax lists. He attempted⁵⁵ to justify his actions on the basis of hard times, but the Free Press would not accept this explanation. As far as it was concerned, Taylor had violated a trust of the people by ignoring the law which he had sworn to uphold. It further

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Kinston Daily Free Press, January 5, 1925.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, December 9, 1924.

believed that he had forfeited any right he might have had to the office of high sheriff. The county commissioners felt likewise, and they removed him from office. Taylor, however,⁵⁶ vowed to seek vindication at the polls in the next election.

As vowed, Taylor filed for the office of sheriff in 1926. The Free Press knew that his candidacy was no empty threat. In the first place, he was a very popular man. He had served as sheriff for twelve years and had won the election of 1922,⁵⁷ over two other candidates, by a majority of 1,800 votes.

Secondly, many people had been drawn to his support because of the manner in which his case had been handled in the tax matter. Thirdly, some people had jumped to his defense, because they saw a certain justice in what he had done. The Free Press, however, believed that it had a duty to oppose Taylor's election, because he had set himself above the law. For public digestion, it asked the question: "By what right did Taylor have to waive the law in behalf of some of his⁵⁸ friends while advertising the sale of other's land?"

Taylor, on the other hand, maintained that he had oper-

⁵⁶ Kinston Daily Free Press, November 7, 1925.

⁵⁷ Kinston Daily Free Press, June 4, 1926.

⁵⁸ Kinston Daily Free Press, May 18, 1926.

ated within the law and gave as his reference an alleged act of 1919 that authorized a lapse of seven years for the sale of land for delinquent taxes. Furthermore, he threatened to sue the Free Press unless it retracted what he alluded to as an implication that he had used public money for private purposes.⁵⁹ The newspaper let the threat pass without diminishing its attacks: It did not apologize or retract anything it had said--furthermore, it was not sued.

Despite efforts of the Free Press, Taylor won the primary but did not obtain a majority. A run-off between himself and Herber Worthington became necessary. During the following month, the newspaper redoubled its efforts to defeat the man it considered unfit for office.⁶⁰ In the end, it was rewarded. Worthington was elected sheriff by a vote of 2,667 to 2,408,⁶¹ and Taylor ceased to be a political figure in Le-noir County.

Another slightly different case involved influence peddling. Isaac J. Sparrow was alderman from Kinston's fifth ward. According to the Free Press, this ward had built up a

⁵⁹ Kinston Daily Free Press, May 29, 1926.

⁶⁰ Kinston Daily Free Press, June 7, 24, 30, July 1, 1926.

⁶¹ Kinston Daily Free Press, July 5, 1926.

reputation that "it took money to carry it."⁶² Sparrow admitted that, during a campaign in which he was offering for re-election, he had accepted money from Gibbon Hobbs, candidate for district solicitor. According to Sparrow, the money was to defray election costs. Hobbs, however, made a statement that Sparrow had promised to deliver seven hundred votes⁶³ toward his election as solicitor. The Free Press believed that the passing of money and the promise of votes were too closely connected not to have some overt political relationship. It accused Sparrow of "ward heeling." He demanded an apology, but the paper felt that it had nothing for which to apologize.⁶⁴ As the campaign progressed, the situation went from bad to worse for Sparrow in his bid for re-election. The Free Press, apparently, had found the vulnerable spot that was to seal the political fate of the long entrenched ward master.⁶⁵ He was soundly defeated, and never again was he a serious threat to regain control of the ward.

The Free Press had no personal vendetta for those it op-

⁶² Kinston Daily Free Press, April 1, 1927.

⁶³ Kinston Daily Free Press, January 14, 1927.

⁶⁴ Kinston Daily Free Press, January 20, 1927.

⁶⁵ Kinston Daily Free Press, April 5, 1927.

posed for public office. Its primary aim was good government. Attacks were generally confined to a person's fitness for office, and once the newspaper had aroused voters to dispose of those it believed had demonstrated a lack of fitness, the matter was dropped. In all such campaigns, Braxton retained a high sense of fair play and justice, and the pages of the newspaper were always open to those who desired to make a reply to attacks.

Braxton believed that good citizens going to the polls and casting their ballots for those whom they felt best qualified for office was the best assurance that bad politicians would not gain public office. But he was practical enough to know that all voters were not good citizens, and that the "floating vote" could be and was frequently influenced. In 1917, he pointed out, "that balance of power ⁶⁶ [in Kinston] could be wielded through the rumkeg...." It was because of abuses such as this that he fought for several years to have the Australian ballot adopted, but those in power, apparently fearful of free elections, were able to delay acceptance until 1930.⁶⁷

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The Daily Free Press, April 4, 1917.

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Kinston Daily Free Press, November 8, 1924, February 20, 1925, May 25, June 4, November 2, 1926, January 22, 1927, January 18, February 1, 2, 1929, June 16, 1930.

Adoption of the ballot probably improved the situation, but it did not completely free elections from manipulators. During the early thirties, the editor continued to ferret out and expose abuses, and as late as 1937, he was to state:

This paper has no desire to make a horrible example of anybody. It has zeal, however, for an honest election system which will make it possible for citizens of Kinston to go to the polls when they are called to vote and cast their ballots.... without coercion, duress, bribe taking or expectancy of reward other than efficient administration of the city.⁶⁸

Honest elections alone, however, could not assure good government. Efficiency within the system and on the part of those elected was also an essential ingredient. The national movement to bring about greater efficiency in municipal governments, during the period 1880 to 1900, permeated the South very slowly. During the early 1900's, only a few citizens seemed to recognize the merits of separating legislative functions from the day-in and day-out business of running a city. Braxton was a pioneer in the advocacy of a city-manager system of government for Kinston.⁶⁹ In 1919, preceded by five years of prodding, the city took a step in this direction; however,

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Kinston Daily Free Press, June 17, 1937.

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The Daily Free Press, February 15, 1915, May 27, 30, 1916, March 9, 17, 21, 1917, May 16, 1921, Kinston Daily Free Press, August 14, 1928, June 17, 1931.

before the new system was given a fair trial, it was changed⁷⁰
 to the commissioner type system. Despite many appeals from
 the paper, this was to remain the city's basic system of gov-
 ernment for another quarter of a century. During the middle
 forties, the Free Press fought an up-hill battle in a city-
 wide referendum, and at long last saw the council manager sys-
 tem installed by a narrow margin of eighty-three votes.⁷¹

Common to the aldermanic and commissioner systems, of this
 period, were many abuses that militated against efficient gov-
 ernment, but perhaps the most common was the biennial shakeup
 of the police force. In 1921, the Free Press stated: "Let
 efficiency and good service be the requisites for office in-
 stead of friendship and political pull."⁷² As early as 1915,
 the paper had advocated a civil service for policemen, but
 politicians seemed to be more interested in using the force
 to catch votes than to catch lawbreakers.⁷³ The installment

70

Minutes, City Council, June 17, 1919, January 10, 1921.
 Under this system of government, the city council would handle
 only legislative functions with management apparently being
 distributed elsewhere. The system survived less than two years.

71

Kinston Daily Free Press, November 23, 1957.

72

The Daily Free Press, May 11, 1921.

73

The Daily Free Press, May 8, 1915, December 15, 1919,
 May 9, 1923, Kinston Daily Free Press, May 5, 6, 1926, May
 11, 1929, February 24, 1933.

year of 1933 will suffice to show the extent to which shake-ups were taking place. In that year alone, the chief was reduced in rank, and five members of the force were fired.⁷⁴

As the Free Press put it somewhat later, an officer was between "the devil and the sea." He could remain an officer only so long as it pleased those of influence--a factor that contributed to low force morale and inefficiency.⁷⁵ But better things were in the offing. The newspaper's many years of fighting had not been in vain. As the thirties drew to a close, a new and more enlightened generation of public officials took over the reins of government. Shake-ups became less frequent, and with the adoption of the council manager system of government, the problem virtually ceased to exist.

During this period, the Free Press served as a bridge between the people and their government. The newspaper's demands for high standard of performance gradually helped to bring about a better political climate in the community. Inefficient and dishonest public officials were exposed and ultimately disposed of through the will of the people. The

74

Kinston Daily Free Press, May 25, 1933.

75

Kinston Daily Free Press, November 9, 1937. No absolute proof could be found, but the shake-ups may have had some relationship to the vice-district.

newspaper also helped to congeal public opinion sufficiently to bring about freer and fairer elections and more efficient city management. In the meantime, the city grew politically, as evidenced by elected officers who appeared to be more conscious of their responsibility to the people and less concerned about their own perpetuation in office.

The year 1939 marked an end to an epoch in the history of the Free Press. In the twenty-five years that Braxton had been its editor, it had consistently been on the moral side of issues. It had earned, if not universal approval, then the respect of a great majority of the people it served, and there seemed to be little doubt that it was deserving of its reputation as a community institution. It is believed that few Kinstonians would fail to respond favorably to a statement that the Free Press made a short time before the period ended.

We would like to think that we have aided Kinston and the section out of proportion with the mistakes we have made....We shall continue to say: "Great Is Kinston and the Free Press Tells Its Story."⁷⁶

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Kinston Daily Free Press, December 1, 1937. The slogan closing this chapter probably was used for the first time on October 9, 1915. It has since been used on numerous occasions especially in anniversary and commemorative issues of the newspaper.

EPILOGUE

Before H. Galt Braxton took over as editor of the Free Press, a change had already begun, nationally, in the broad field of newspapering. It moved slowly into the South, but with the rapid improvement of communications, the "golden era" of personal journalism here also eventually passed. Newspapers generally became more departmentalized and more dependent upon syndicated writers, specialists, and news services for their content. Small newspapers found it difficult to compete and fell by the wayside or were absorbed by large metropolitan dailies. Others existed through the twenties only to be rendered the coup-de-grace by the Great Depression. Hard times brought financial havoc and ruin and also probably helped to destroy the need for a large number of small newspapers. In some areas, local governments lost their will to function effectively and abdicated their responsibilities to higher levels of government. Thus battlegrounds shifted from county seats to the Federal or state capitols. As a result, the need for local newspapers di-

1
Fredrick H. Mueller (Secretary of Commerce) Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial to 1957 (1960), 500. In 1909 there were 17,023 newspapers of all types in the United States. In 1929, the number had decreased to 10,176, and in 1933 the number had decreased further to 6,884.

minated, and perhaps, many of them dried up and withered away for lack of a purpose.

Braxton met the challenge of change in typical fashion. Throughout the critical period, he continuously made improvements to keep the Free Press among the more progressive and forward looking newspapers in the state. Even during the thirties, when others were treading more cautiously, he expanded and modernized news gathering equipment, increased the staff, and organized stricter departments within the news section. In the meantime, he maintained the personal touch, characteristic of earlier newspapers, by continuing to shape the policy of the Free Press, participating himself as a member of its staff, and personally writing its editorials.

In the process of change, the newspaper lost little, if any, of its previous vigor. During World War II, the post war years, and down to the present time, it has maintained a close identity with the community through the careful auditorship of public affairs and the advocacy, sponsorship, and support of worthwhile ideas and undertakings. Needless to say, it has not succeeded in everything it attempted, but the plus-side of its record far outweighs the minus-side. In the meantime, the newspaper continued to grow. In 1955, the Free

Press Company was re-capitalized at \$200,000,² and by 1964, the circulation of the newspaper had exceeded the 12,000 mark.

It was also in the year 1964, that H. Galt Braxton rounded out a half-century as editor of the Free Press. A partial list of his honors and activities, professional and civic, leave little doubt that he had led a full and purposeful life.³ Today, an octegenarian, he continues to shape the policy of the newspaper and meets office hours regularly. However, in recent years, the details of operating the newspaper have been left to younger associates, who continue to make it a definite factor in the development of eastern North Carolina. In reflecting on Braxton's many years of identity with the Free Press: It would be difficult to find a man and

² Lenoir County Record of Corporation, Book E, 274-275, located in the Lenoir County Courthouse, Kinston, North Carolina.

³ The News and Observer, March 14, 1954. This issue selected H. Galt Braxton as "Tarheel of the Week" and listed some of the professional and civic offices he had held and some of the honors he had received up until that time: President, North Carolina Press Association; Director, Southern Newspapers Publishers Association; President, Kinston Kiwanis; Senior Active Kinston Rotarian; Life Director, Kinston Chamber of Commerce; Honorary Kinston Jaycee; Life Member, Kinston Salvation Army Advisory Board; Member, Kinston Red Cross Advisory Board; Board Member, Children's Home Society of North Carolina; President, Carolina Motor Club; Director,

newspaper that have so faithfully served the purposes of that small lettered free press that the founding fathers must have had in mind when they framed the Constitution.

Carolina Motor Club; Committeeman, Sesqui-Centennial, University of North Carolina; Trustee, College of the Bible, Lexington, Kentucky; Trustee, Atlantic Christian College, Wilson, North Carolina; Honorary degree, Atlantic Christian College, Delegate, National Democratic Convention, 1928.

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