

Volume 1 Number 1 of the *Manitoba Free Press* was launched on 30 November 1872. A few copies distributed free appeared on 9 November. It was started by two young men, one with newspaper know-how, **William Fisher Luxton**, and the other with money and muscle, John A. Kenny. Luxton bought a press in New York and they rented a shack at 555 Main Street, near the present Main and James Street corner. It was hot in summer and cold in winter. The Luxton family and the widower Kenny lived upstairs. John Cameron, reporter and humourist, and Justus Griffin, printer, had a bunk downstairs in a cubbyhole next to the front office.

The type and press arrived by Red River steamboat on 25 October. It was the first cylinder press north of St. Paul, Minnesota, and was run by human muscle power supplied mainly by the huge and powerful Kenny who, among others, turned the handle.

Liberal in philosophy, the *Free Press* was a leader among newspapers in Canada. It became a leading daily and its sister weekly, the *Prairie Farmer*, became the most widely circulated farm weekly in Canada. Of 20 newspapers that started in Manitoba between 1859 and 1890, only the *Free Press* survived.

The eight-page first edition contained a variety of material including a story, a poem, men's news, telegraphic dispatches, editorials, local news, and classified ads. The first main story was the re-election of General Ulysses S. Grant as President of the United States of America. It was the only daily west of Toronto on 6 July 1874. It cost 25 cents per week on subscription and there were 900 subscribers. In those early years, putting together a newspaper was a formidable task. All copy was written by hand and type was set by hand, one letter at a time. In very cold weather, even the red-hot box stove in the press room could not keep the ink and rollers warm and a row of 32 coal oil lamps was placed around the press.

Many other problems surfaced in those early years—failure of telegraphic services via Montreal and the USA due to adverse weather—storms, frost and prairie fires, unreliable paper supply that had to come by rail, steamboat or ox cart. For example, a paper shortage coincided with the hot story of the downfall of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's government. There was just enough paper for the *Free Press* to produce a handbill-sized sheet carrying the news from Ottawa and apologies to readers.

In 1874 the enterprise moved to a new building on Main opposite St. Mary Avenue. As it grew in popularity it continued to live up to its motto of fostering "Freedom of Trade, Liberty of Religion, and Equality of Civil Rights." In 1882 it moved to a building on McDermot east of Main Street, stayed there until 1900, and then moved to a new address on McDermot and Albert Street. By then it had added a women's section, crop reports, and a book and magazine page. Because of its growth it moved in 1905 to a four-storey building at Portage and Garry. As circulation grew and new presses were added, another move became necessary, and in 1913 the paper occupied the building at **300 Carlton** and remained there for 78 years, becoming known as "the old lady of Carlton Street." In 1991 the *Free Press* moved to its present location at 1355 Mountain Avenue.

From the beginning, **Luxton's** outspoken editorials shaped the future of the new City of Winnipeg. About 1892, control of the *Free Press* passed to **Clifford Sifton**. From 1901 to 1944, **John Wesley Dafoe** served as editorial writer, editor-in-chief and president. He, too, was a man of strong opinions. He fought for Western issues such as breaking the **CPR's** monopoly in the prairies, and lower freight rates. He actively promoted Dominion status and autonomy for Canada. On 2 December 1931, the *Manitoba Free Press* became the *Winnipeg Free Press*.

James Gray related an interesting story dating to when he worked for the newspaper. A character named Davy Rait established squatter's rights in the newsroom in 1924. His consuming passion was to avoid work at all costs and he managed to spend his life in idleness. He cadged quarters from the newsroom staff, and for

ten years slept erect in a chair by the door of the newspaper library. At the time the business manager for the paper was **Edward Hamilton Macklin**, known for his sulphuric vocabulary. A new employee, **Scott Young**, asked about the old man sleeping by the library door. Clem Shields, a senior employee, thought he would play a joke on the newcomer. He said: "That's Mr. Macklin, so for God's sake don't slam the door when you go in or out. If you do and he wakes up, run and don't look back." Thereafter, Young tiptoed past the sleeping Rait, until one night disaster struck. Out of the library a few paces behind Young came the editor-in-chief **John Wesley Dafoe**. Young held the door open for Mr. Dafoe who, preoccupied with weighty matters, paid no attention to the door. It closed with a loud bang. Davy Rait awoke and screamed and shouted abuse at Dafoe's back while the awestruck Young hid behind a counter. So convinced was Young by this exhibition of what he thought was "Macklin terror," that for weeks afterwards he removed his shoes before tiptoeing past the sleeping Rait.

In January 2001, an **MHS Centennial Business Award** was presented to the *Winnipeg Free Press* by **Sam Loschiavo**.