

Halves of a Whole: When the *Journal* met the *Pioneer*

July 4, 1876. While Americans celebrate the centennial of Independence Day, citizens of Alberton also have cause for jubilation. Why? Hot off the press is a new paper: the *Alberton Pioneer*.

It must have been a proud occasion for former schoolteacher-turned-newspaperman John L. McKinnon. He'd sunk a lot of resources into the venture, equipping himself with a new plant and materials. Optimism shone through in his first editorial as he sent the *Pioneer* forth "into the sunshine of summer"; however, storm clouds were gathering on the horizon.

Things began to unravel for McKinnon in November of 1878 with an outbreak of smallpox in Alberton. Despite efforts to contain the spread, the disease slowly seeped into the village as the new year dawned, claiming two lives. Although the *Pioneer* did what it could to reassure its readers that the situation, though deathly, was under control, that didn't stop the fear-mongering rumours published by the *Examiner* in Charlottetown, and the *Journal* in Summerside, which waxed apocalyptic. The affair became a vicious "he said, she said", and unfortunately for McKinnon, he found himself outgunned. The "exaggerated rumours" spread by his contemporaries, notably the *Journal*, fostered public distrust in the *Pioneer*. Subscribers outside Alberton began to boycott the paper under the assumption that it was physically contaminated, and untrustworthy. As the *Pioneer* lamented: "Several Postmasters have returned the package of papers unopened, some flung them aside, while one more zealous than the rest, committed the packages to the flames..."

While the *Journal* later admitted that it might have overreacted, it felt it had every reason to believe the information behind its assumptions, and that in such instances it was better to overestimate the danger. Too little, too late for McKinnon and the *Pioneer*. On February 26, 1879, he suspended publication, and never resumed printing in Alberton; however, we're far from the end of the *Pioneer's* story.

Karma oft has a name, which I shan't repeat; suffice it to say, however, that the *Journal* bore the full consequential brunt of its actions when, in September of 1880, the offices of the *Pioneer* re-opened...in Summerside. The past few months had been an odyssey for McKinnon. In May he gave the newspaper business another go in Montague, but it quickly became apparent that he could not garner the advertising patronage and subscriptions needed to fund publication, forcing him to fold his enterprise once again. Undaunted, he next set his sights on Prince County's capital.

The third time was the charm for McKinnon and the *Pioneer*. The *Journal* had extended its sympathy after the Smallpox Affair, and well-wishes upon his foray into Montague. But when the *Pioneer* dared encroach on its stomping grounds? Barely a word in acknowledgement. It was game on.

Whereas the *Journal* had slowly been able to triumph over its first rival, the *Progress*, it was unable to force the liberal-leaning *Pioneer* into submission. Even after McKinnon sold his shares and quit the business in 1886, the *Pioneer* only continued to thrive. Eventually, the *Journal* gave up and accepted the fact that its rival was there to stay. Begrudgingly, no doubt.

For many years, the *Journal* and the *Pioneer* locked horns in Prince County. Hardly any quarter was given. As time passed, however, this rivalry subsided. In 1951, it ended entirely in amalgamation.

It's said everything happens for a reason. Had the *Journal* not acted as it did during the smallpox scare, the *Pioneer* may never have left Alberton and, ultimately, come to Summerside. Lacking this proximity, these two papers may never have become such intense rivals and, after many years, partners in print.