City of Destiny: Print Culture, Modernity, and the Struggle for a City’s Future

By

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Abstract

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This dissertation reconstructs the social and cultural world of a small Midwestern city via its communication channels, and consider the role print culture played in addressing the tensions of the 1920s. During a decade frequently reduced to a series of ongoing conflicts emblematic of modernity, the expanding world of print publications allowed different entities to grapple with the questions brought on by the move toward an urban future, marked by rapid industrialization and the rise of new cultural institutions. Historical research of the decade often focuses on the impact of these trends on the small town or the large urban metropolis—neglected by the historical narrative are the places in between, the small cities with agrarian pasts but distinctly urban aspirations where the tensions of the 1920s carried seemingly greater importance.

Using a case study of the port city of Superior, Wis., whose boosters promoted it as a “second Chicago,” this dissertation argues that print culture operated as the primary platform to negotiate questions of identity, community, and modernity during this decade of change. Print culture was essential to the city’s survival from its inception, and played a prominent role in its development beginning the mid-19th century. Superior’s future destiny was, to some extent, tied to the print publications that advertised its advantages to a wide audience. By 1920, the city had only one English-language daily newspaper, the Telegram, a publication that constructed and promoted a central narrative about Superior’s past, present, and future.

However, other print products were in circulation, and this project pays special attention
to the growing world of high school print culture and the at-times competing narratives it
promoted. Conversations about the city’s high schools often viewed the institution as site of
struggle over a place’s future, and one where educators, civic organizations, parent associations,
and the students themselves were actively invested. Using yearbook descriptions and marginalia,
student newspapers, school reports, newspaper archives and manuscript collections, this project
draws on a variety of underexamined materials to demonstrate the importance print culture
carried in constructing modern identities and defining community.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation could not have been completed without the help and intellectual guidance from fellow historians, communication scholars, professors, and friends that I’ve received since starting this project as a master’s student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Sue Robinson, my adviser in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, has changed how I think about communication history and its relevance to the present, and how I conceive of my research projects. Since my first seminar with Sue on qualitative research methods, she has read over my writing with a critical eye, pushing me to make my arguments stronger, my analysis more intellectually rigorous, and my research questions more impactful. Her willingness to help at all hours of the day, her attentiveness, and her own impressive research agenda has made her a wonderful mentor. William Reese, my adviser in the Department of History, has encouraged my interest in the Progressive Era and its implications since the first seminar I took with him. Had it not been for his seminar on the history of education in the United States, I would not have thought to dedicate an entire chapter (or two) of my dissertation to the topic of high school student print culture. His passion for examining yearbooks as historical artifacts proved infectious. I’ve enjoyed my many conversations in his office, and leaving each time with a list of books to consult, new questions to consider, and a number of humorous anecdotes and advice that eased the dissertation writing process. Professors Robinson and Reese both acted as a calm force to quiet my nerves and move this project from proposal to completion. They provided an endless source of encouragement, and strongly believed in the strength of this project from the beginning. I cannot express the depth of my gratitude for their willingness to step in and help after the untimely passing of my original adviser, Professor James L. Baughman.

Other professors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison helped shape this project,
whether through conversations, reading recommendations, or chapter reviews. Kathryn McGarr provided encouragement throughout the process, and valuable feedback on my dissertation structure and archival work. Stephen Vaughn’s history seminar helped me think about communication history from a broader standpoint. Lucas Graves offered insight into connecting media history into the present. I am lucky to have Professor Richard Popp from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee on my committee, and have benefited from his almost unbelievable knowledge of communication and media history scholarship.

I am grateful for funding from a variety of sources. The Helen Firstbook Franklin Wisconsin Distinguished Graduate Fellowship and Louise Roberts Scholarship allowed me focus entirely on researching and writing the dissertation and move it through its final stages. The Mellon-Wisconsin Summer Fellowship also provided funding essential to completing this project. Research awards from the School of Journalism & Mass Communication and the Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin-Madison helped offset the costs for several research trips to the Superior Area Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, Douglas County Historical Society, and Superior Central Library.

Conferences have helped me make connections with a number of scholars who have offered wonderful insight into this project, including Carolyn Kitch, Roderick Hart, and Amber Roessner. They’ve also introduced me to others interested in studying communication history from a variety of angles, and helped me better appreciate the truly interdisciplinary nature of the field. I am forever grateful for the guidance and mentorship of Carolyn Bronstein and Karen Russell, who have acted as strong role models as both media historians and teachers, and given me countless words of encouragement throughout the dissertation process.

Archivists are essential to the success of any research project, and I cannot say enough
kind words about the staff at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Cat Hannula, a Superior native and a Library and Information Studies graduate student, encouraged me to look more closely at Superior, and referenced an under-utilized archival collection that would prove to be a treasure trove and essential to this dissertation. Teddie Meronek at Superior Central Library helped me navigate a wonderful collection of local print materials, and the staff at the Douglas County Historical Society provided a wonderful space to work and addressed my many questions on local history. The archivists at the Superior Area Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Superior pointed my way toward several valuable manuscript collections. Much of the primary research in this dissertation came from a collection of Superior history compiled by the Works Progress Administration—the effort of these workers to record the stories of life Superior from its founding through the early 20th century created an invaluable local history resource.

Completing a project as complex as a dissertation would not have been possible without the support of friends and fellow graduate students. The intellectual community of graduate students in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, and the departments of history and education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has been indispensable. Conversations with Marcus Cederstrom, Meredith Metzler, Sandy Knisely Barnidge, Mallory Perryman, Elizabeth Hauck, Molly Blake, Megan Duncan, and Jordan Stalker have not only helped me conceptualize this project and tackle obstacles along the way, but they have also provided encouragement and helped me approach my research and writing with a sense of humor and humility. I’m especially grateful to Meredith and Marcus for their willingness to coordinate research trips to Superior and provide podcast recommendations and Bruce Springsteen playlists to help pass the six-hour car ride from Madison.
My family has been a strong source of support throughout my entire graduate school career. I am grateful for their willingness to make the trek from Milwaukee to Madison at the drop of a hat. Their pride in my research has given me motivation when I couldn’t find it on my own, and for that I am thankful. To Robert, your support has been invaluable, whether it was listening to conference presentations, doing the laundry, or making dinner. Our late-night, dog-walking conversations about this project have helped me overcome a number of hurdles along the way.

Finally, I would not have completed a dissertation if not for the guidance and encouragement of James L. Baughman. As an undergraduate, Professor Baughman’s media history course first piqued my interest about old newspapers. I was somewhat surprised when he agreed to oversee my senior thesis on celebrity gossip columns in the early 20th century, and was made a better researcher during that process. When I decided to pursue a PhD in media history, he was my loudest champion. His kindness in the classroom, curiosity in the archives, and attention to detail as a reviewer set a wonderful example to his graduate students, and made me a more diligent and more empathetic scholar. He pushed me to think more critically about media history, especially through a cultural and social history lens. We only discussed this project when it was still in its beginning stages (when it had, as he said, a lot of potential). While he did not get to see it come to its conclusion, and was likely mad as a wet hen as a result, I count myself extraordinarily lucky to have written a senior thesis and master’s thesis under his guidance. For that I dedicate this dissertation to James L. Baughman.
Introduction

The citizens of the port city of Superior, Wisconsin, awaited the results of the 1920 U.S. Census with high expectations. Throughout January, census takers had been busy in the city on the southern shore of Lake Superior. They weathered wind, snow, and frigid conditions in order to take an accurate count of the city’s population. Superior’s only English-language daily newspaper, the Superior Telegram, emphasized the importance of the census results via editorials, banner headlines, advertisements, and articles charting its progress. “It is needless to enumerate the reasons why an aspiring city, hoping for large development, cannot afford to be underrated in the census,” the Telegram wrote in a January 1920 editorial. “A good showing will be a substantial aid in securing future growth.”1 “Are You Helping With the Census? Are All Your Neighbors Counted?” asked the Telegram’s front page a few weeks later, and added: “One Superior Man Telegraphed from Los Angeles to Get His Name in the Census. Are You as Patriotic as That?”2

Since 1890, Superior had grown rapidly. Home to one of the most active shipping harbors in North America and the eastern terminus of the Great Northern Railway, it emerged as an important commercial center and transportation hub. For nearly three decades, it attracted new settlers looking to capitalize on the opportunities the “City of Destiny” promised.3 Superior’s population grew from 655 in 1880 to 40,384 in 1910, a growth rate that echoed the explosive increases seen in Chicago, Buffalo, and Cleveland in the second half of the 19th century. City

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1 Superior Evening Telegram, January 3, 1920.
2 Superior Telegram, January 19, 1920.
3 “The City of Destiny” tagline appeared throughout promotional materials produced in Superior in the late 19th century, as well as on letterhead for the firm of Moulton, Moran & Co., a real estate, loan, and investment company. Superior was not the only “City of Destiny,” in the United States, however. Promoters from Tacoma, Washington—the western terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad—also dubbed it the City of Destiny.
officials expected the census would reveal Superior had more than 65,000 residents in 1920, a testament to its continued progress.

Historians tend to view the 1920 U.S. Census as a critical turning point in the American historical narrative due to its revelation that the United States had become a primarily urban country, with the majority of its citizens living in communities with a population of 2,500 or more. The census’ findings signaled the eclipse of America’s agrarian past and the rise of an industrialized, modern age. And while some intellectuals and politicians bemoaned the transition, and equated it with the collapse of community (and, potentially, democracy), Superior embraced the idea of modernity. Buoyed by a booster mentality, Superior took on characteristics that increasingly separated it from small towns in order to better align itself with urban centers. For Superior, the census provided an opportunity to highlight its transformation from a small, provincial settlement into a thriving urban port with all the hallmarks of a major city—new streetcar lines, upscale hotels, a robust electric grid, motion picture theaters, and a local normal school. But the census disclosed a dark reality that challenged Superior’s narrative: It revealed the city’s population fell short of expectations, and had, in fact, declined during the previous decade. Less than 40,000 people officially lived in Superior. The census provided a strong counterpoint to the rhetoric of the city’s boosters, and demonstrated what had been sold as the city’s assured path toward becoming a new urban metropolis was anything but.

The announcement that the city’s population declined was met with disbelief, and the *Superior Telegram* became the primary platform for citizens to articulate their frustrations. The newspaper reported that residents blamed the “slipshod manner” in which the census was conducted, as well as other factors, ranging from the winter cold and snow, and inaccurate counts at the city’s rooming houses, for the unanticipated results. “Why should we take it seriously?”
citizen asked. “It is absolutely wrong and in fact ridiculous,” Superior’s mayor said, and noted the city would consider pursuing a recount. People took to the Telegram to express their disappointment via letters to the editor. “So I say the report of the Federal Census Bureau is a mighty good thing for Superior if it shakes the drone bees out of our townsite and vicinity, and results in the property getting the hands of enterprising progressive citizens of Superior, who will do something for the development and prosperity of our city and surrounding country,” read one letter to the Telegram’s Public Forum. “A community that does not stand up for its rights is not entitled to any.” While much of the outcry over the census figures was ostensibly over the city’s population, it was rooted in frustration over Superior’s seeming inability to capitalize on its advantages and become the urban metropolis its early settlers predicted. The fact that the city’s citizens took to its newspaper, and used it as a platform to debate the myriad paths forward the city could take, served as a testament to the Telegram’s civic role within the community and its prominent position.

Since its beginning, Superior’s print culture promoted a narrative the portrayed it as a “City of Destiny,” one with seemingly God-given natural advantages that distinguished it from its peers. Superior’s success depended on the newspapers, pamphlets, and brochures produced to promote the city and attract settlers and investment. These materials created and maintained a narrative portrayed as central to the city’s identity: Born out of the wilderness, built by entrepreneurial, hard-working settlers, and tied to the modern age, Superior was constructed on a series of promises related to the increasingly industrialized and nationalized U.S. economy. Superior’s founders—a group of well-connected politicians and financiers called “The

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4 “Superior Has 39,624 Says Census Bureau,” Superior Telegram, July 14, 1920. Superior did eventually pursue a recount, but it reaffirmed the census’ initial findings.

5 Ernest A. Arnold, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, July 30, 1920.
Proprietors”—recognized the importance print publications would play in the settlement’s success, and supporting the founding of Superior’s first newspaper almost immediately after the city itself was platted. The Proprietors believed it would be the most effective way to advertise their investment. This link between Superior’s growth and print publications made the continued production of newspapers and promotional materials a key part of the city’s identity for nearly seven decades.

Networks were critical to Superior’s success. Its future depended on the expansion of railroad lines and the building of a robust transportation network, meant to bring the bounty of the Western United States to the shore of Lake Superior, where it would then be distributed worldwide. Capital from eastern financial centers such as Philadelphia, Boston, and New York, would bring the funds necessary to fund the city’s growth and expansion. And regional and national communication networks would circulate print materials beyond northwestern Wisconsin, publicizing the opportunities that existed in the City of Destiny, and attracting interest from potential settlers and investors. While Superior benefited from the increasing interconnectedness of the U.S. economy and the modern communications environment, it also made the city’s growth more susceptible to market and political trends. This dependency on outside forces, rather than grassroots development, created a series of contradictions. Superior’s print publications preached that its citizens controlled the city’s destiny, and it was due to their strong, unified, community-centric spirit that Superior’s success could be assured. In reality, Superior was at the mercy of national and international trends its residents could not control, and

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6 The promise of investment often led to political fights and competition for resources. Eastern capitalists had a long history of investing in sites throughout the Midwest, including Superior and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. While many directed their funds into the railroads, others sought to diversify their holdings and invested in copper mines, stockyards, real estate, and other ventures. See: Noam Maggor, *Brahmin Capitalism: Frontiers of Wealth and Populism in America’s First Gilded Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017).
in the 1920s the city began to realize the limitations it faced in achieving the vision of prosperity
the Proprietors first articulated. Further, the image of a cohesive community failed to
acknowledge the fractures and tensions brewing within Superior over what it meant to be a
progressive, modern city.

The culture of the 1920s was born of a series of disruptions. World War I revealed
fissures and cracks within American society and signaled the limitations of the Progressive
rhetoric that had previously dominated politics. The rise of the city raised new questions about
urbanization and industrialization. And the proliferation of communication outlets and
technologies facilitated the creation of a national mass culture and exchange of an unprecedented
level of information. Amid these social changes and tensions, a new youth culture emerged. This
group rejected the authority of traditional institutions like the family and the church, and formed
a national peer group through the embrace of mass media and mass culture. They extended their
education, and high schools became a new civic institution that challenged the authority of the
family and the church. Additionally, print culture became an important component of the new
type of community high schools created, and worked to elevate the voices of the rising
generation. The 1920s introduced a new way of thinking about the public education system,
amplifying new voices, and presenting a different world view, with the justification that it was
training the next generation of citizens.

In Superior, the city’s robust print culture operated as a platform for debate about the
future destiny of the city. Through coverage decisions, the narratives it advanced in print, and the
civic role it occupied within Superior, the Telegram drew on its standing as an important
community institution to discuss the elements needed for progress. In addition to using rhetoric
meant to cultivate a booster spirit among the community, the Telegram promoted a strong public
school system as an embodiment of the progress and modern elements the city exhibited. It established Superior’s two high schools as points of community pride. They trained the city’s next generation of citizens, and instilled in them an understanding of democratic principles. They taught students the skills they needed to succeed in a modern age. They produced a network of alumni that embodied the potential secondary education offered, and whose actions reflected well on Superior. And they also introduced new forms of print culture, yearbooks and newspapers, that allowed students to develop and elevate their own voices, and contribute in community discussions about Superior’s future—the future the students represented. Conflicting visions over what constituted progress, what made a city (and its high schools) modern, and what influence its next generation should have on articulating the city’s future led to points of conflict. New forms of media—specifically student-led publications—challenged the *Telegram*’s privileged position in creating and maintaining Superior’s sense of identity. They revealed fractures in the cohesive narrative the *Telegram* promoted, and further demonstrate the complexities of modernity.

This dissertation reconstructs the social and cultural world of a small city in the Upper Midwest via its communication channels, and examines the role print culture played in addressing the tensions of the 1920s. It addresses how print publications constructed community narratives, how they negotiated questions of identity and community, and how, in print, conflicts over the future revealed points of conflict and tension that threatened previously cohesive narratives. By focusing analysis on Superior, Wisconsin, this study provides a rich analysis of the tensions small cities grappled with at a moment when they faced a crossroads.⁷ One path led

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⁷ That Americans were fundamentally aware that they lived in a different era, one whose most marked characteristic a dramatic rupture between the past and the present, is a major theme of historical studies of the 1920s. See: Burl Noggle, *Into the Twenties: From Armistice to Normalcy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974); Lynn
these places away from their rural or agrarian pasts toward a progressive, modern future. The other revealed the limitations of their promotional rhetoric, and sealed their fate as regional commercial centers at best or forgotten boom towns at worst.

From its inception, Superior cultivated a robust print culture, built around different groups and associations, and the city as a whole. Print materials were essential to the city’s future success. In addition to operating as a promotional platform to attract settlers and investment, they cultivated a sense of community and fostered a shared identity about Superior’s past, present, and future that emphasized its urban destiny. From 1890 to 1920, there were more than 20 daily and weekly English-language publications produced and distributed in the city, representing a diverse set of political viewpoints as well as business and labor interests. Several weekly foreign-language newspapers catered to different immigrant populations. At one time the city had Danish, Finnish, German, Norwegian, and Swedish newspapers in circulation. Real estate firms, various civic and commerce associations, and other business concerns produced pamphlets and brochures meant to advertise Superior to a wider audience. They described the city’s natural advantages, and touted the spirit of its residents as a testament to its commercial potential. By 1920, only one English-language daily newspaper remained in the city, the *Superior Telegram*. Its success was predicated on its commitment to the community of Superior and its surrounding

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towns, as well as its self-promotional tendencies. It aspired to claim a regional media presence as the “home daily” for all of Northwest Wisconsin, extending its geographic influence.

   Superior’s city leaders identified a series of potential investments in an effort to achieve its urban aspirations—improving its infrastructure (including upgrades to its harbor), external advertising campaigns, and building a robust public school system with modern, progressive high schools. These institutions, Superior’s education advocates believed, would equip the city’s next generation with the tools and training needed to navigate the complexities of a post-war society. But, as the historian David Martin observed, the modern high school was never simply a place to acquire knowledge and skills—it also created and reproduced the values of the broader community and socialized youth. During the 1920s, the high school became the “central arena” in which places like Superior sought define themselves, address their needs, and ensure their future.8 The Telegram chronicled the activities of the city’s high school students inside and outside of the classroom, validating the central role secondary education played in the city and positioning the accomplishments of the city’s students as a testament to its progressive, forward-thinking mentality. By drawing on its central position with the community, the Telegram presented a vision of the high school, and Superior’s future, endorsed by the city’s politicians, business class, and educational leaders. Absent were the voices of the younger generation, the very group destined to lead the city into the future.

   The youth culture that emerged in the 1920s represented a strong break with previous generations, and found its voice in print. Superior’s high school students used variety of their own print materials to forge a distinct sense of community, articulate a different worldview, and

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create an alternative record of life in the city. Through newspapers and yearbooks, the vibrant
world of high school print culture created a set of materials that specifically catered to a younger
generation. It also revealed a series of tensions with the sense of community that the *Telegram*
and other print materials promoted, and revealed that the cohesive portrait Superior painted of
itself was anything but. The high school emerged as a contested site of community construction,
for there was no one, uniform vision of what a place was and what it should be. Superior’s
identity, its understanding of its past and present, and the prescriptions for its future, represented
points of tension. Often, those tensions manifested themselves in print.

This dissertation contextualizes the consumption of print culture within a community. By
extending analysis beyond the examination of just the city’s newspapers, it considers how a
network of print materials attempted to shape and advance a common narrative about life in
Superior, and how other print outlets challenged it. This study uses all issues of the *Superior
Telegram* produced between 1920 and 1929, as well as manuscript collections, to establish the
community role institutional media play within a specific place at a specific point in time.
Additionally, the *Telegram* produced several commemorative anniversary issues and special
editions that fell within this study’s time frame, as well as advertisements and articles intended to
promote its position and placed in outlets such as *Editor & Publisher*. It also draws on print
ephemera produced by the city’s civic and commerce associations, government agencies, and
business class that was designed to circulate beyond Northwest Wisconsin.

This study also considers the print products of the city’s two high schools, including
student newspapers, yearbooks, pamphlets and other publications. Severely underutilized in
historical study and communications scholarship, these items provide a glimpse into the social
world of high school students. If newspapers offer a more official record of life in Superior, these
other printed spaces demonstrate the complexities of the 1920s, and offer additional sites for articulating the tensions of the decade. In discussions of the high school, its growth, and its place within the community, student voices are often absent due to a lack of records. But within the city’s high schools, print culture became an important space for the city’s young people to articulate their own ideas of what it meant to live in a city struggling to chart its future course, (relatively) free from the interference of adults. Student newspapers and yearbooks help construct the historical record of the generation tasked with navigating the complexities of the post-war era.

This introductory chapter provides the historical and analytical context for this dissertation. It discusses the role print culture played in the formation of community throughout the United States, and the privileged place newspapers have long occupied within the American historical narrative. It will outline the unique challenges small cities faced in the 1920s, as many sought to leave behind their provincial pasts and pursue an urban future, and sought to project an image of progress based on population growth and business investment. But often these places never achieved their metropolitan aspirations. For many, the 1920s marked a critical decade in their development. By embracing the modern elements associated with industrialization and urbanization, they attempted to achieve the promises their boosters had earlier touted. But often small cities found themselves at the mercy of increasingly nationalized (and internationalized) networks and market forces, and in the process, lost control of their destiny. For some places, robust public school systems emerged as one way to ensure future progress and build community spirit. A new vision of the high school materialized—one that would cater to all students, not just

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9 Several education historians have begun to use yearbooks and student materials more prominently in their research. See: Martin, Community Needs and School Life: Bloomington High School, Indiana in the Progressive Era;
the college bound, and ready them for the demands of a modern age. But often conflicts over the shape of the curriculum and the role of the extracurriculum, and questions about the new values and norms associated with a distinct youth culture, emerged in conversations about the future of the high school and what role it should occupy within the community. This dissertation examines how all of these historic trends converged in one small city attempted to ensure its destiny: Superior, Wisconsin.

Print Culture and the Formation of Community

The United States was built on newspapers. Newspapers have long been a privileged form of communication in the country, granted subsidies and protections denied other media, in part because of their perceived ability to build and maintain a community, as well as to create a distinctly American sense of identity. From the beginning, “Americans have been driven by desire for more unified, more true community experience, though the outcome of their desire has been to fragment the community as well as to solidify it,” wrote the historian David Nord. The media scholar James Carey observed that the United States was created at a point where there was a void, a space between oral and written traditions, which allowed a country to be built on a print community that differed from other nation-states. Across the country, cultures of print

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10 The impressive distribution of newspapers was another signal of their importance to the United States in the late 18th and throughout the 19th century. The historian Richard John calculated that by 1840, the postal service was transmitting 39 million newspapers per year. In 1832, newspapers account for only 15 percent of postal system revenue, but accounted for 95 percent of the total weight of items processed. Richard John, Spreading the News: The American Postal Service from Franklin to Morse (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 38.


12 This study follows in a long tradition in communication scholarship that evaluates the cultural role of print publications that is largely indebted to Benedict Anderson, James Carey, and Warren Susman. These scholars advanced an idea of communication that prioritizes the context in which publications are produced, as well as their relationship to the audience, over just an analysis of content. Benedict Anderson used the concept of print capitalism to describe the circulation of materials, produced for a profit, which made it possible for consumers to think like a nation. See: Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso Editions, 1983).
developed based on specific sets of reading practices and patterns and institutions of publication that ultimately shaped American dimensions of identity. Print culture consisted of a variety of print ephemera, and included books, magazines, posters, pamphlets, and political papers. However, newspapers were the most prominent item in circulation in the United States, and a key component of the distinctly American form of print culture due to their close association with the political process and community life.

Newspapers in the United States have undergone a series of substantial transformations since their introduction in the late 17th century, often reflecting larger cultural, economic, and political changes affecting the United States. The first colonial-era newspapers were a mish-mash of styles, following no set formula in terms of content and carrying little news of the colonies themselves. Published weekly (at best), they were text-heavy affairs, with few illustrations, and packed with news from overseas, reprints of sermons, reports on shipping activities, and short classified advertisements. Printers were businessmen first, and produced newspapers largely as advertisements for their print shop. They avoided controversy and potential accusations of libel (and the associated loss of business) by staying away from political matters. That mindset began to change in the decade prior to the American Revolution, when printers began picking sides and increasing the amount of political news they carried, as well as reports of the other colonies. In the wake of the Revolution, the new government institutions

Through his ritual definition of communication, James Carey advocated an understanding of communication that viewed it as the construction of a symbolic reality that represents, maintains, adapts, and shares the beliefs of a society in time. See: *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Warren Susman, a contemporary of Carey’s, also advanced a cultural conception of communication. Susman implored scholars to look at the relationship between form, content, and audience for publications. *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

reflected a new understanding of the political imperatives for information and communication. Now, attention turned toward creating a national political community, with newspapers playing a central role.

American newspapers in the early 19th century were largely political publications, and operated as a central part of the political system. They created a sense of party membership and identity among votes, in addition to serving as a political party’s primary communication channel. The printer-editors behind these journals lay critical groundwork for building the mass party system, and transformed newspapers from outposts of information into active participants in the political life of the United States. In 1759, there were 17 newspapers published; by 1819, 518 newspapers were printed in the United States. And if every hamlet had its newspaper, to borrow the French political scientist Alexis de Toqueville’s phrasing, so did every political movement.14 Newspapers were founded in support of abolition, temperance, the women’s movement, and other causes, and the sense of community they cultivated—united over support of a cause over great geographic distance—reflected Tocqueville’s vision of American journalism as democratic and pluralistic. This close relationship between communication and democracy instilled a strong belief in the power of the printed word. It also extended newspapers’ role in American culture.

The sense of nation was not the only social norm that newspaper readership enforced; it also created community ties within the United States’ newly formed cities and towns. Newspapers became an important symbol as Americans moved westward. They acted as a channel to connect settlements to one another, and to also promote their opportunities to an

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14 Alexis De Toqueville, Democracy in America, 1839.
external audience. In the new territories of the American West, including Wisconsin, newspapers took on a booster role. While some were linked to political parties, many of these publications viewed their primary objective as boosting the prospects of the various settlements they represented, in hope that one day they would grow into a booming metropolis.

Elsewhere, newspapers were undergoing an additional transformation. They began to resemble a more urban product reflective of the cities in which they were produced and the increasing industrialization and standardization of the publication process. They grew larger, and offered more sections and more story types in an effort to court a mass readership. While economic motives drove this expansion, readers began to use these newspapers as guides to the complexities of modern life, which in turn further demonstrated newspapers’ fluid, constructed nature. They offered a sense of place in a community that was becoming markedly impersonal, and constructed a public space where, as the historian David Henkin noted, “relations between strangers could be imagined and represented.” As Julia Guarneri observed in her study of major metropolitan areas at the turn of the 20th century, newspapers cultivated a new model of urban community in which residents understood and interacted with their cities not simply by living in them but by reading about them. The daily newspaper, with its many sections and mass readership, became closely linked with cities, a “spectacle of a new urban life.”

Consequently, newspapers in the United States are best understood as a constantly

18 Henkin, 5.
evolving entity. This study fits into a trend within communication history to view the newspaper’s role as a product of a specific place and a specific time, the result of an interactive process between the community and the publication. “A newspaper is not merely printed,” the sociologist Robert Park wrote. “It is circulated and read. Otherwise it is not a newspaper.” The definition of news has never been fixed, argued the sociologist Michael Schudson. Time and place influence the making and manufacturing of news. Even the form of news depends on the larger context in which it is consumed, noted the communication scholar Kevin Barnhust and historian John Nerone. This focus on interpretation serves as a reminder that newspapers were not created nor consumed in a vacuum. To better understand their relationship with a specific community, newspapers need to be considered alongside other print products in circulation. By examining Superior’s newspapers in conversation with additional forms of print culture, this study further enhances the understanding of the cultural role that newspapers play in an increasingly complex media environment.

Newspapers in the hinterland took their cues from the metropolis, and in doing so created a unique print product. Superior’s newspapers had their roots in the booster press. They never shed their promotional tendencies, even as the city grew in size and the Telegram’s more urban counterparts embraced a more objective, dispassionate approach to reporting. Best understood as a hybrid of the booster and urban press, the Telegram reflected the continued transformation of the American newspaper, its response to the needs of its readers, and the ways in which it operated as both an internal and external communication platform. Newspapers such as the Telegram offered a chance to align the small city with the metropolis, but also had to continue to

boost its prospects in order to ensure urban destiny it coveted. They cultivated community within the small city—itself growing more impersonal—but also kept an external audience in mind. And while they enjoyed a privileged position as an important civic institution, they had to navigate an increasingly complex print media environment, in which newspapers circulated alongside national magazines, political papers, labor journals, and new communication platforms that elevated voices otherwise absent from traditional media.

Small cities in American historical narrative

The grand narrative of the Midwest in the late 19th and early 20th century was one of progress. The region, formed out of the Northwest Territory after the Revolutionary War, stretched from the land west of the Appalachian Mountains and north of the Ohio River to the Mississippi River, and included the land south of the Great Lakes. The Midwest’s malleability made it unique compared to the East coast, and to potential settlers it represented a place of “liberation from tradition” and “a source of tremendous energy for change.”\(^\text{21}\) By the 1870s and 1880s, the Midwest seemed to be “truly the heart and essence of the nation,” and central to both the national existence and also the “source of the nation’s vitality.”\(^\text{22}\) Boosters across the region envisioned a “spectacular urban future for the Midwest,”\(^\text{23}\) and they seemed to be on the right track. Its cities provided the goods and services the industrializing U.S. economy depended on, and their populations grew accordingly. Pittsburgh transformed iron ore into steel. Chicago’s rail-yards processed the bounty of the western plains and handled cattle, wheat, corn, and other products. Cleveland became an important manufacturer of automobiles, and Milwaukee

\(^{23}\) Teaford, 1.
established itself as a significant port city, home to tanneries, heavy equipment manufacturers, and breweries. The story of the Midwest of the late 19th century promoted the triumph of the city over the countryside,\textsuperscript{24} the taming of the wilderness by civilization, and the success of political and social reform. Throughout the region, settlements emerged at the center of their own hinterlands, each claiming a set of natural advantages and financial backers that would make them future commercial centers.\textsuperscript{25} Yet, their promises often failed to materialize, at least on the scale initially predicted. Small cities, one of the region’s defining characteristics, litter the Midwest.

Historians have struggled with how to make sense of the small city, due in part to its placement between two well-defined and well-researched categories, the large city and the small town. While essentially subjective, what separates a small city from a town is “scale and diversity,” as reflected in the economy, ethnic composition, social class structure, and array and quality of municipal services.\textsuperscript{26} Small cities experienced slower and less dynamic change compared to larger cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and emerged as secondary economic centers whose primary commercial activity focused on the production of one or a few specialized products.\textsuperscript{27} But as communication and transportation infrastructure improved, these places were increasingly tied to larger urban cities, both economically and culturally, despite

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Eric J. Morser explored the complexities surrounding rhetoric of frontier expansion through a case study of the small city of La Crosse, Wisconsin, which grew into an important lumber city in the 19th century. Morser argued that political decisions, more so than any other factor, determined the growth of Midwestern cities in the 19th century, and also limited their further expansion. See: \textit{Hinterland Dreams: The Political Economy of a Midwestern City}. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).
\end{itemize}
seeing themselves as distinct regional centers. A key part of the small city, then, was its much greater aspirations. These places were united in their booster mentality, pitching themselves to potential settlers and investors and imaging that they would end up becoming much greater places in the American landscape.

Small cities stand at the crossroads of two historical narratives, occupying a no man’s land between the story of the urban metropolis and that of the rural town, which tend to attract more historical attention. Wisconsin’s small cities struggled with their identity. Most residents’ memories were rooted in agriculture although their aspirations were aggressively urban. The element of cultural conflict, then, is an important part of the definition of small cities—even as small cities welcomed the developments that would modernize the city and allow it to compete with larger cultural centers, they tried to do so in a way that would sustain their own sense of community and preserve elements of small-town culture. They embodied what the sociologist Louis Wirth dubbed “the urban personality,” and increasingly the residents of the Midwest’s small cities “clearly considered themselves every bit as urban as the residents of the metropolis.” As Robert Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd observed in their Middletown study, this makes small cities an ideal site to study the myriad tensions that defined the 1920—the clash between urban and rural, community and society, tradition and progress. They embodied these conflicts on a scale, and with an urgency distinct from larger cities. Often community members

28 Muncie, Indiana, remains the most-studied small city. Throughout Robert and Helen Merrell Lynds’ Middletown study, the Lynds and their research team examine how regular patterns of life in Muncie underwent rapid and extreme change in the wake of the city’s urbanization, increased connection to a nationalized economy, and the rise of mass culture.
29 This despite the fact that many people still live in mid-sized cities. According the 1920 U.S. Census, more people lived in Wisconsin cities of 15,000 to 50,000 than in the state’s largest city, Milwaukee.
31 Mahoney.
express their aspirations as well as their frustrations via print channels.

The Disruptive Decade: the 1920s

The decades-long forces of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization intensified at the end of the 19th century, and came to a head in the 1920s. New concerns emerged about the collapse of community, a notion that had preoccupied intellectuals since the turn of the century and one that was central to the historical American experience. Modernity seemed to threaten communal ideals through the creation of an impersonal, mass society. The German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies articulated the historical transition from community (“gemeinschaft”) and society (“gesellschaft”), which described a process where personal social interactions defined community life, and underwent a gradual erosion. Indirect interactions, impersonal roles, formal values, and beliefs based on such interactions characterized the new mass society. In the United States, contemporary intellectuals drew on Tonnies’ observations to explain what was at risk as the country become more urban. The rise of cities signaled a break with the United States’ agrarian past and the ideals it had come to represent: a close-knit community, with a strong moral foundation built on a Protestant work ethic. Concerns about the impact of urbanization fueled these nostalgic yearnings. Crowded, noisy and impersonal, cities both large and small provided an arena for temptation and vice to wreak havoc on the moral fiber of its residents, and urbanization disrupted the patterns of communal and social life. Within this mindset, “social unity is shattered and communal solidarities are replaced with associations based upon interest.”

The aftermath of World War I further impacted the national consciousness, and is central

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33 Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 16.
to historians’ efforts to define the 1920s as a distinct age. The cultural of the decade was the
direct result of the war and its legacy. During the conflict, anticipation built for a new society, a
“better postwar world,” and the future presented an opportunity to capitalize on the social
enthusiasms the war generated. These promises, however, were not realized. The years
immediately following the war, according to the historian Burl Noggle, “would embitter many
men, destroy many illusions, and prepare the way for much of the reaction prevalent in the
20s.” An ideological conflict took root after the armistice; labor unrest, racial upheaval,
xenophobia and the red scare were the result of “frenetic behavior and psychic trembling” rooted
in the war. The economy shrank in a short economic recession, recovered, and then weathered
a more serious depression to begin the decade as the economy transitioned from wartime
production to peacetime. According to the historian Lynn Dumenil, an understanding of the
decade’s tensions is critical to understanding the decade itself. Viewing modernity as the
defining feature of the 1920s, Dumenil noted the ambivalence that marked the complex
responses of the era. Americans harbored fears about both progress and the past—as they moved
forward, nostalgia became an increasingly powerful force. The “central paradox” of American
history, according to the historian Lawrence Levine, then, has been the coupling of a belief in

34 Burl Noggle, Into the Twenties: The United States from Armistice to Normalcy (Urbana: University of Illinois
36 Ibid, 84.
37 Several historians associate the rise of fundamentalist Christianity, which hit its peak in the early 20th century,
with a response to the rapidly modernizing world of the decade. Fundamentalism developed as a result of the
cultural and intellectual revolutions of the 19th century, specifically Darwin’s evolutionary theory, and several
separate denominations united in a growing protest against modernism. Fundamentalists’ struggles went beyond the
issue of teaching evolutionary theory and their reaction to the Scopes Trial in 1926. For many, teaching evolutionary
theory symbolized a much larger attack on their faith. For more, see Adam Laats, Fundamentalism and Education in
and George Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism,
1870 – 1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). For more on the Scopes Trial, see Edward J. Larson,
Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion (New York:
progress with a dread of change: “a deeply ingrained belief in America’s unfolding destiny and a haunting conviction that the nation was in a state of decline.”

Nowhere was this paradox more evident than in the 1920s.

Yet, the historiography of this decade tends to paint an incomplete picture of the American experience. Overwhelming, historical analysis focuses on major metropolitan areas, such as Chicago and New York, and how the decade’s political, economic, and cultural trends impacted life. Others examine the decade’s cultural touchstones, themselves largely a product of urban areas. Those include the rise of a national celebrity culture; the expansion of motion pictures and new communication technologies; the rise of Detroit and the automobile industry; the impact of the Great Migration and the revitalization of the Ku Klux Klan; the successful suffrage movement; and the economic conditions behind the stock market crash of 1929. But by focusing on the national and the mass, these histories neglect localized interpretations of the decade, and assume a common trajectory for all communities throughout the United States and as well as a uniform embrace and understanding of the changes the decade harbored.

This study offers a more nuanced understanding of the changes of the 1920s and how they were felt in places that fall outside of the traditional historical orbit. It builds on arguments from historians such as Roderick Nash and Christine Stansell to challenge the myth-making of the decade and better illuminate the complexities of change. The oversimplification of the decade can partly be due to the reliance on national analysis, which can often distort or misinterpret local patterns. The historical case study, which has a long history in providing in-depth, rich

39 The historical fixation on Chicago during the 1920s is due in part to the number of studies produced by the sociology students at the University of Chicago, which have formed the backbone of several historical projects, most notably Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919 - 1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
analysis within a specific city, town, or community, provides a valuable point of analysis for complicating national narratives and revealing contesting definitions of key concepts. For the 1920s—a decade often associated with progress and modernity—the case study of a place like Superior provides an opportunity to enhance the understanding of the relationship between print culture, a community, and a new cultural form, as well as a new cultural group.

**Sites of Conflict, Sites of Community: Youth Culture and the High School**

The presence of a vibrant youth culture signaled larger changes were afoot in the 1920s. New circumstances created a new youth culture with values in conflict with previous generations. American family life underwent significant adjustments during the 1920s due to shifts in the economic structure and expansion of public schooling. These combined to challenge the influence of traditional institutions like the family and church on the moral instruction and upbringing of youth, and created the space for a national youth culture to form. Nationally, youth culture in the 1920s was more worrisome than it had been at the end of the 19th century because it represented an unhinging of the social order. That included a relaxing of sexual standards and a stripping of Victorian-era genteel manners; a change in dress and fashion (primarily for women); and an upheaval in social relationships. Free time in general was no longer devoted to family activities, as new inventions such as the telephone, motion pictures, and automobile took youths out of the home. Teenagers spent nearly half a week’s night outside the home, and the conflict over nights out with friends or suitors became a point of struggle between the generations.

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40 Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 20. Fass’ examination of American youth culture focuses almost exclusively on the experience of college-going native, white, middle-class youth from heavily urban areas. However, there was a complementary relationship between high schools and colleges. Fass noted the importance of changes in adolescence on this segment of the population, and the increased attention given to high school as enrollments increased. Additionally, high schools often took their cues—both in terms of instruction and extracurricular activities—from colleges.
observed Robert S. and Helen Lynd in their landmark study *Middletown*.\(^{41}\)

Particularly for adolescents, the high school and the peer group began to challenge the family’s position. Clashes over what constituted acceptable behavior and decorum revealed fissures between the generations. The behavior of teenagers flabbergasted the parents in the *Middletown* study: Mothers lamented the greater frankness between the sexes and lack of modesty on the part of girls. They expressed concerns about early sophistication of Middletown youth, and the declining dominance of the home in the life of the child.\(^{42}\) As more youth had more access to peer cultures, and national media helped to create a national youth peer culture, youth became the “transcendent definitional category.”\(^{43}\) That is, young people found divisions between young and old more important than divisions between men and women. This youthful allegiance threatened the traditional authority of adults. And as high school enrollment increased throughout the decade, the sense of a separate youth identity—one distinct from the family—grew stronger.

High schools challenged the family and the church as the most significant institutions for teenagers, as students began spending more time in the classroom and filling their spare time with extracurricular activities. With roots in the 19th century, the American high school became an increasingly important segment of public schooling as the century wore on. The high school began as a bourgeoisie institution, shaped to meet the needs of elites by “opening the doors of opportunity to the few and elevating the symbolic and cash value of their formal education.”\(^{44}\) Gradually, the idea of the high school changed—high school advocates emphasized that high

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\(^{42}\) Lynd and Lynd, 140.
Schools would promote republican values, reward talent, and secure social order and democratic progress throughout the 19th century. Non-elites were attracted to the institution because of its promise to provide an education to all students, and in this spirit of democracy, it spread from the East Coast throughout the United States. Enrollments increased as high schools became an articulation of Americans’ belief in the power of education. High school advocates emphasized the institution’s unique ability to teach the norms and values of an industrialized society, and provide the civic and practical training necessary to help the next generation navigate a more complex age.

As communities across the United States invested more heavily in education, the new high school became a “central arena” for communities to define themselves and articulate their future desires. In the 1920s, the level of interaction between the perceived interests of the community and those of the school intensified, and was revealed in the expansion of the extra-curriculum and social activities. Cities and towns began to identify more and more with the high school, by attending its plays and carnivals, supporting its athletic and debate teams, and funding its growth. As the historian David G. Martin observed, high schools and the community became “manifestations of each other.” For places that exhibited increasing concerns about their future, such as Superior, that tendency meant that high schools not only educated a community’s children, but also provided a way to realize its destiny. Having a robust, modern, progressive school system reflected well on a city or town, and newspapers treated the high school and its students as a point of community pride.

Much historical research on the shape of the high school has focused on its top-down,

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45 Martin, 1.
46 Ibid, 176.
in institutional structure. The voices of students—the next generation these schools were said to train, and that important point of civic pride—have largely been neglected. But increasingly, student artifacts, ranging from newspapers to yearbooks to personal letters and diaries, offer a better insight into the student experience. They demonstrate how students navigated and interpreted high schools, as well as the surrounding community. In Superior, a city preoccupied with its destiny, examining student print products not only adds complexity to the city’s print culture, but it also unearths the voices of those who promised to secure the city’s future success.

**The Case of Superior, Wisconsin**

Superior offers a compelling case study due to the promotional rhetoric of its founders, the attention it received from prominent investors, and the centrality of print culture to its existence. For communication historians, case studies provide an opportunity to better understand the how institutions of journalism and processes of communications operated within a specific place at a specific point in time. They “illuminate” the importance of the unique and the particular, and offer a more comprehensive historical examination of people, places, and events than broad generalizations. For historians looking to advance journalism and communication history beyond the study of institutions and great men, the community case study provides a rich repository for the analysis of journalism as a “complex institution and a pervasive social process.” This dissertation treats journalism and communication as two intertwined

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49 Nord, 304.
processes within one community, and explores the relationship between the two, the products they produce, and their interaction with the audience.

Superior’s unique development prioritized the development of print products from its beginning. In the first few decades of the 20th century, Superior’s civic boosters imagined the city would become Wisconsin’s second city, behind Milwaukee. As Wisconsin’s fourth largest city, Superior had its own campaign to attract outside investment, reflecting the booster mentality typical of cities intent on improving their position. Urban promoters, city officials and journalists promoted the city. Its civic boosters pitched the city as the “New Chicago,” and the Superior Telegram’s slogan proclaimed the paper “Upper Wisconsin’s Big Daily; Largest in State Outside of Milwaukee.” Superior’s phenomenal growth also granted it with what the historian David Thelen called an “especially virulent form of the urban promotion spirit,” which demanded the demonstration of continued progress in order to satisfy its investors. Often, this narrative of progress and desire to showcase growth manifested itself in print.

These grandiose claims were not that divorced from reality. Superior was booming. A “feverish air of speculation” and promotion surrounding Superior’s revival brought comparisons to Seattle and Tacoma. Throughout the late 19th century, East Coast capitalists underwrote Superior’s extensive industrialization. Timber and iron mining industries flourished throughout Douglas County, and Superior was home to the railhead for agricultural products of the Great Plains. James Roosevelt, father of President Franklin Roosevelt, made “substantial investments” in the city, and raised $3.5 million from his business associates, including John D. Rockefeller,

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51 Thelen, 176.
52 Nesbit, 190.
to start the West Superior Iron and Steel Company. The largest ore dock in the world was constructed in Superior in 1899, and by 1910, the city also housed the world’s largest coal dock (a total of nine rose above the flats of its waterfront) and the world’s largest grain elevator. James J. Hill, president of Northern Pacific Railroad, viewed Superior as a gateway to Pacific ports, and therefore to Asia. But by 1920, Superior’s promise seemed to be slowly slipping away.

Superior’s unrealized expectations, so similar to that of other small cities throughout the United States, make it an ideal site to study how print culture created community identity, and how different print channels contest that construction. Chapter One chronicles the role print culture played in Superior’s early development. Print materials—newspapers, pamphlets, and brochures—were responsible for attracting the businesses, settlers, transportation networks, and favorable government policies that would enhance the possibility of establishing the city as a commercial center. From the beginning, Superior’s print products advanced a narrative that emphasized concepts of progress and modernity as essential to realizing the city’s destiny.

Chapter Two discusses the rise of the Superior Telegram as the city’s most successful English-language newspaper under the direction of John T. Murphy. It examines how the Telegram established itself as an important civic institution through its commitment to community news coverage, its sponsorship and involvement in local events, and through its dedication to boosting Superior’s prospects. Through, the Telegram promoted a cohesive, unified vision of Superior, which centered on its future as a commercial center.

Chapter Three explores the rise of high school student print culture, which included yearbooks, newspapers, and literary magazines. It chronicles the rapid expansion of journalism programs within high schools and increase in the number of student newspapers nationwide, told

through Superior’s largest student newspaper, the Devil’s Pi. While the Telegram enjoyed a privileged position within Superior’s print culture, the presence of student publications signaled the elevation of a new set of voices in discussions about the city’s future.

Chapter Four examines the 1927 Superior Central strike through the lens of the city’s print publications. By the mid-1920s, Superior’s print culture had not only grown more complex, but it had also provided a more substantial platform to elevate student voices. Student strike leaders drew on their experience with high school publications to articulate their own, alternative narrative about Superior’s future. Ultimately, the strike exposed conflicting notions over who had the ability to dictate what it meant to be a progressive, modern community at a moment when its future appeared to be in question—all of it articulated in print.

By examining the links between different forms of print culture within the geographic boundaries of one city, this dissertation seeks to better understand the relationship between print outlets and the communities in which they were produced, distributed, and consumed. By situating this study within the context of the 1920s—a decade seen largely as a turning point not only for Superior, but for communities throughout the United States—it illuminates how the national trends associated with the era were interpreted at a local level. It examines how the idea of modernity was both embraced and contested, as conflicts over what defined modernity, and how to achieve it, emerged in a variety of print products. And at its conclusion, this dissertation will provide greater understanding about the relationship between three major, interweaving phenomena characteristic of the 1920s: the crossroads facing small cities, the presence of a distinct youth culture (as embodied by high school students), and the expansion of print culture. This dissertation examines how communities, when faced with the on-set of modernity, adjusted
to change and made sense of living in a discordant era. The tensions associated with the 1920s
challenged the optimistic booster rhetoric prevalent in the earlier print culture of these places.
The growth in print publications and media outlets further threatened these often-cohesive
narratives, and presented alternative ways of defining and interpreting the opportunities of the
new era. Consequently, this dissertation issues a further challenge to the myth of consensus, and
the notion of a uniform sense of community; it reveals how different print platforms create and
perpetuate different understandings of what it means to live in a certain place at a certain point in
time, how they elevate new voices, and how they offer different—and, at times, competing—
prescriptions regarding a place’s future.
Chapter One

Superior, the City of Destiny

The allure of greatness, laying just beyond the horizon, defined the city of Superior from its beginning. Located on the southern shore of the extreme western point of Lake Superior, it was situated on three bays, eventually named St. Louis, Allouez, and Superior. The last two were formed by two long, thin peninsulas that jutted out from the shoreline and formed a natural breakwater. Early investors and settlers touted the city’s unparalleled natural advantages—its spacious, protected harbor; the long, flat plain of the city site that stretched for miles along Lake Superior’s southern shore, ideally suited for rail-yards and large-scale development; and the ease of access to the resources of the West as the southernmost and westernmost city at terminus of the world’s great inland waterway. Here, lake navigation could meet land transportation, and connect the resources of the Midwest with the new territories of the western United States and the Pacific Ocean. With its commanding position and great harbor, Superior seemed “designed by the Great Architect as the site of a vast city,” according to one mid-19th century promotional pamphlet.1 It was the “logical place on which a great commercial city would rise.”2 In the 1850s, “enterprising and foreseeing” town builders arrived with visions of a new Chicago on their minds.3 They hoped to capitalize on the area’s abundant resources and couple them with the advances of industrialization and modernization, especially the railroads and shipping routes that moved goods in an increasingly nationalized and globalizing economy.

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With its progress and prosperity tied to the modern age, Superior would be a city of the future. This urban vision, which appeared in pamphlets, newspapers, and brochures promoting the city, drove investors and settlers to the region nicknamed the “head of the lakes.” Print culture aggressively promoted Superior’s prospects beyond Northwest Wisconsin in an attempt to attract settlers, farmers, businesses, and outside capital. These materials described Superior’s future destiny as a foregone conclusion, and made it seem inevitable that the small settlement would grow into a major shipping port and a sprawling metropolis. One pamphlet declared that “the history of the world and of great American cities amply demonstrates that a great city must always rise at the head of a great lake, and the outlet of its greatest river. Therefore, there will be the four great cities on the Atlantic seaboard, [and] Superior the greatest of the inland cities ….”

Another described the settlement as in possession of the “best natural harbor on the whole chain of lakes,” with the room to accommodate future growth. As one settler wrote upon his arrival in 1857: “[Superior was based on] the premature vision of a great commercial city; based on the unique advantages of its location, and the great empire north and west of it. … The undeveloped condition of the Northwest -- that was to be its justification.” Superior’s future success was assured, boosters claimed, as they positioned the city as representative of the possibility of life in the United States and the promise that defined life in the Midwest.

The search for the next great western city drove nearly all 19th century town-site speculation, according to the historian William Cronon. Boosters, such as those behind Superior,

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5 Information for Emigrants, 21.
routinely promoted a site’s natural advantages, and often invoked the concept of destiny in their descriptions. In prospective settlements across the western United States, early investors and speculators believed “nature would combine with the progress of human population to call forth a metropolis to lead the Great West.” In the Midwest in particular, they saw the region as capable of delivering, if not improving, upon the promise of the United States to offer economic opportunity and freedoms not provided elsewhere. Here, where there was a preponderance of natural wealth, the “future center of American energy and wealth” would rise observed the historian Jon Gjerde. Superior’s boosters sought to tap into this rhetoric of possibility and capitalize on its natural advantages. Via promotional pamphlets and early newspapers, they described in exacting detail information about the region’s soil, natural and mineral resources, weather patterns, and shipping routes. Consequently, they articulated the settlement’s aspirations and its future visions, borrowing from booster rhetoric to dub it the City of Destiny.

This chapter examines the role of print culture in Superior’s early development, as it grew from a sparsely populated settlement into a shipping boom town, and weathered a financial collapse and subsequent revitalization. Throughout, print materials—newspapers, pamphlets, and brochures—were responsible for promoting Superior’s opportunity to a national and international audience. Its early investors viewed the establishment of a newspaper as critical to attracting the businesses, settlers, transportation networks, and favorable government policies that would enhance the possibility of establishing the city as a commercial center. Consequently,

from the beginning, Superior’s newspapers operated as a booster enterprise, preoccupied on advancing a narrative that emphasized concepts of progress and modernity as essential to realizing the city’s destiny. This legacy would impact the city’s future newspapers, as discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Yet, these newspapers also began to take on an important community-building function. They not only occupied a symbolic role, signaling the formation of a settlement worth advertising, but they also revealed a strong belief and commitment to encouraging the development of a robust print culture. Despite the economic hardships Superior faced due to its reliance on outside capital and a shaky, speculative foundation, its settlers continued to publish a newspaper. They tied the realization of the city’s expectations to the vibrancy of its print materials.

**Print Culture and the Founding of Superior**

When the French voyageur Étienne Brûlé first explored the region that would be home to the City of Destiny in the early 17th century, he wrote of a region brimming with natural resources and tremendous commercial potential. In a report filed with the French government in Montreal, he described exposed copper and other indicators of mineral wealth, as well as a dense forest teeming with wildlife. Shortly after his report arrived, French missionaries and fur traders began traveling to the area, and by 1700 a number of French traders were working with local Ojibwe to trap and transport pelts out of the region. Reports and rumors of abundant natural resources at the southwestern shore of Lake Superior continued to spread as European and American settlers moved westward into the Wisconsin territory in the early 19th century. The territory’s population grew rapidly, sufficient enough to make it a state by 1848, but settlers were largely concentrated in the southeastern section of the state.
The head of the lakes remained largely unpopulated by white settlers in part because of the impenetrability of the forest that abutted the shoreline, the relative inaccessibility of the region via a water route, and the difficulty of taming the land once there. The northern part of the state was “generally considered wilderness not worthy of attention.” None of the lands in Wisconsin north of Chippewa Falls, roughly 150 miles to the south of Lake Superior, had been surveyed as of 1852, and there were no nearby military forts to attract settlers. The marshy shore, crowded with tamaracks and peppered with open swamps, gave way to an impervious clay plain with a dense forest of pine, spruce, birch, and aspen so thick the sun never dried the ground. The clay of Superior was “as hard as cement when dry, as slippery as soft soap when wet, and as sticky as Spaulding’s glue,” further complicating travel and development. Until the 1850s, the only people at the head of the lakes were the Ojibwe, who had been in the region for nearly 360 years.

As the fur trade began to collapse in the 1830s and 1840s, the Ojibwe signed treaties ceding their land rights, and white assessment of the region’s economic and settlement potential began in earnest. The Ojibwe, who had gradually migrated west from the Atlantic seaboard, settled on what is now Madeline Island in Lake Superior in the late 15th century. The settlement of La Pointe on Madeline Island, about 85 miles to the east of the future site of the city of Superior, became the spiritual and economic center of the Ojibwe. Seasonal camps, used to

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10 Robert E. Armour, Superior, Wisconsin: A Planned City (Superior, Wis.: Telegram Commercial Printing Edition, 1976), 11. Almost every town and major city on the western frontier began as a military fort (or were located adjacent to one), with the exception of Superior and Duluth.
11 Shaw, 2.
12 For more on the Ojibwe in Wisconsin, see Patty Loew, Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and Renewal, 2nd edition (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 2013). Loew notes that the decentralized nature of the Ojibwe led to the creation of several bands of Ojibwe in northern Wisconsin and northern Minnesota, with La Pointe serving as the central settlement. The Ojibwe settlements in the Superior area have been attributed to the
harvest the wild rice and fish that sustained the Ojibwe, stretched across the southern shore of Lake Superior, including one on Wisconsin Point and one at Connor’s Point, both just off the shore of the future Superior harbor. Three treaties, one signed in 1837, another in 1842, and a third in 1854 reduced the amount of Ojibwe land from millions of acres to 275,000 acres divided between four reservations in Wisconsin. The treaties effectively removed the Ojibwe from lands within the city limits of Superior, although a few remained on Wisconsin Point, which contained an important burial ground. Superior’s growth and future greatness rested heavily on the expansion of transportation and communication networks, both tied to the promise of economic opportunity, and which depended on the removal of the Ojibwe. When the government surveyor George R. Stuntz, tasked with mapping the Wisconsin side of the lake’s southern shore, arrived there in July 1852, and he found no signs of white settlement in the long stretch of shoreline from Madeline Island to the American Fur Company trading post at Fond du Lac, Minnesota. Gradually, however, whites began arriving in the area in 1853, lured north due to two major infrastructure developments.

When Stuntz returned to Superior in June 1853, just two months after his initial visit to the city’s future site and one year after arriving in the head of the lakes region, he observed a dramatically changed landscape. New arrivals from St. Paul, Minnesota, built several log cabins

Fond du Lac Band.

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13 This burial ground would later be a point of conflict between the Ojibwe and Superior’s business class, when U.S. Steel proposed to build an ore dock into the Allouez Bay off of Wisconsin Point in 1918. Those who remained (approximately 200 people) were forced to leave, and only 180 of the recognized graves were interred at the St. Francis mass grave. The dock was never constructed. See: Shelley Nelson, “Superior seeks national historic designation for Wisconsin Point, once an Ojibwe burial site,” Duluth News-Tribune, Feb. 25, 2019. [https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/community/history/4576428-superior-seeks-national-historic-designation-wisconsin-point-once-ajoibwe](https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/community/history/4576428-superior-seeks-national-historic-designation-wisconsin-point-once-ajoibwe)

14 Reginald Shaw noted that several sources mentioned a few Ojibwe lodges or villages on the Wisconsin shoreline of Lake Superior, but there is no evidence that these were centering places of the tribe or as important as the main settlement on La Pointe in the Apostle Islands. Shaw concluded that these settlements were inhabited only part time, and would likely not have been occupied at the time of Stuntz’s initial survey.
scattered in small forest clearings. Land speculators soon followed, encouraged by two major infrastructure developments that promised to connect Superior with the resources of the West and the financial centers of the East, and to make the city a commercial hub. First, the building of the Soo Canal calmed the rapids of the St. Mary River and completed steamboat navigation from Chicago and Detroit to the ports of Lake Superior. Second, a proposed northern transcontinental railroad fostered the belief that its eastern terminus would be located on the spacious harbor on Wisconsin’s Lake Superior shoreline, making Superior’s city site roughly the same distance to New York and Europe as Chicago. Two groups of speculative townsite builders joined together in one syndicate in 1854, its 27 shares owned by U.S. senators, including Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, John L. Dawson from Pennsylvania and Jesse D. Bright of Indiana; U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Robert J. Walker; eastern capitalists and “men of wealth and influence”; and politicians and prominent men from St. Paul, the newly crowned capital of the Minnesota Territory.\textsuperscript{15}

Within Superior, the group became known as “The Proprietors.” Their land amounted to 6,000 acres, and the Proprietors believed the site carried as much, if not more, commercial potential than the rapidly growing city of Chicago. Superior’s initial development demonstrated the powerful pull of the promise of the city in the hinterland. The investment syndicate platted the town and quickly sold 2,000 lots, mostly to settlers from Minnesota, Kentucky, and Indiana, for $40 to $100. They set aside additional land for parks, schools, churches, and the county buildings they assumed would be constructed, since the town site was now a front-runner for the seat of the newly established Douglas County. They immediately began the construction of a

\textsuperscript{15} Shaw, 29.
hotel, as well as a pier, in anticipation of an increase in the number of visitors to the city.

Settlers soon started to trickle in. Nearly one year after the syndicate’s initial land sales, Superior consisted of 35 houses, two stores, a partially completed hotel and wharf, and a central street often rendered impassable due to debris. The few cattle in town roamed freely, contributing to a general sense of “disorder,” and wild animals frequently walked into cabins and other town buildings.16 “This place is very new,” wrote Sarah Fairchild Dean, one of the new arrivals, in a letter to her mother. Mrs. Dean’s husband, Eliab B. Dean of Madison, was newly appointed to the receivership of the land office in Superior, which opened in 1855, and that summer Mrs. Dean left the comforts of Madison to head north to join her husband in Superior. Her letters to her mother provide an excellent glimpse into early life in Superior, and chronicle the arduous effort to survive in the early days of commercial development. “The streets are full of stumps and logs, the forest comes close, the place is newer than I ever saw before,” she wrote.17 Joseph Trotter Mills, a lawyer who journeyed to Superior in the summer of 1856 on foot from Minnesota, noted the demands of the trip in his diary: “Travelling here is like the voyage of life. Some pleasant tracts & landscapes, but these lead to deep morasses, & swamp meadows. I am better reconciled to tamarack swamps—there a traveler can step on fallen logs, roots, &c. The undergrowth thro this whole region is almost impenetrable.”18 “Civilization is in its infancy,” Mills observed in a later entry, noting the lack of women and the number of hastily constructed lean-tos and shantys to claim land throughout the area.19 Yet, the potential for

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16 Wolner, 42.
development was unmistakable. From the top of nearby Ely’s Point in Minnesota, which overlooked Superior, Mills described “the grandest prospect that ever saluted moral vision—the lake, deep blue & infinite on the East … the tout ensemble is the grandest view I have ever seen.”

Within two years of the first lot sales, Superior changed dramatically. The city was bustling with activity and “crowded to the point of suffocation,” according to another letter from Mrs. Dean. The city had 400 buildings and nearly 2,500 inhabitants. There was a state bank, a daguerreotype gallery, and a literary club, which held lectures throughout the year. New businesses popped up in town. There was a brick yard, a shoemaker, drug store, and sash and blind factory, in addition to restaurants and saloons. Frame buildings appeared alongside cabins, improving living conditions as well as the general appearance of the city. These developments evoked a future vision of Superior as a city with modern amenities.

Visitors arrived from the East Coast ready to invest and turn a quick profit. Mills noted encounters with the Supreme Court justices Samuel Nelson and Robert Cooper Grier, who came to evaluate the possibility of land purchases in the city. Many of the original land plots had exchanged hands many times, and the land holdings of the Proprietors were halved, quartered, and divided further into eighths and sixteenths. Land in the city’s central business district sold for $1,200 to $1,500 each, and shipments totaling one quarter of a million dollars per year.

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21 Dean quoted in Kellogg, 14.
22 Shaw, 30.
23 Kellogg, 14.
24 Wolner, 27.
arrived in Superior’s harbor. While the central business district was “almost mean” and physically “mediocre,” the “tempo of the street was that of wealth and high hopes.” By 1856, Superior “had become a fact, accepted, treated and valued as such by capitalists to the extent of their bank accounts; and by fortune hunters, to the elasticity of their credits’ inflation.” A visitor remarked that “upon the whole, [Superior] presented the busiest scene we had witnessed since leaving Chicago.” The city’s newspaper, the Superior Chronicle, confidently predicted that Superior would soon be Wisconsin’s second largest city, behind Milwaukee. The early development of Superior reflected that of similar boom towns across the western United States. According to the historian Lewis Atherton, technological and transportation factors stimulated created a rhetorical concept of progress based on rapidly increasing population figures and rising real-estate prices. In order to continue to attract settlers and investment, Atherton argued, these new cities and towns constantly had to project an image of constant growth and progress. Superior’s origin as a planned development, rather than an existing outpost, put additional pressure on inhabitants to continue the demonstrate its expansion. Any hint or notion of decline could spell doom for the fledgling city.

Publicity was key to Superior’s success, and tasked with advertising the city (and the Proprietors’ investments), the Superior Chronicle became the city’s official communication channel. It worked in tandem with letters from settlers to promote the community to an external audience. The Proprietors oversaw the newspaper’s founding, soliciting two young printers from

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25 Shaw, 32.
26 Shaw, 57.
27 Superior Times, Feb. 28, 1874.
28 Kellogg, 15.
29 Superior Chronicle, May 13, 1856.
30 Lewis Atherton, Main Street on the Middle Border (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 7.
the East Coast and providing initial financial support, believing that a newspaper would be an important promotional tool in their efforts to attract the infrastructure improvements critical to Superior’s survival and growth.

Connecting Superior to the outside world was of great consequence to residents, businesses and investors. Lacking a railroad, practically everything and everyone arrived in Superior via boat. Ships brought provisions, furniture, horses, clothing, sawmills and wagons, as well as newspapers and letters. But the short, six-month-long navigation season for Lake Superior meant that the city was more or less isolated for half the year. Several roads tied Superior to trading posts and lumber camps further south, including one built by volunteers battling show drifts and subzero temperatures in the winter of 1854, but weather conditions often made them impassable in the winter months, when sled dog trains were the primary mode of transportation. Mail arrived every three weeks at best, and service was often infrequent. Mrs. Dean’s mother often commented on the long delay between replies. “I have written a number of times which you have not acknowledged,” she wrote in one letter sent in December 1855. Another early settler, Clara Clough Lenroot, described the sense of isolation felt by younger people in Superior: “On account of the peculiar local conditions, such as long distances, bad roads, and no means of locomotion except by the ‘Foot and Walker Line,’ the social experiences of the younger members of the family were still circumscribed by the boundaries of a limited locality, and the individuals intimately concerned with our daily life were for the most part those immediately about us.” Food scarcity and high prices were an expected part of winters. As

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31 Kellogg.
33 Clara Clough Lenroot, Long, Long Ago (Appleton, Wis.: Badger Printing Co, 1929), 64.
spring approached, flour rose to $70 a barrel and potatoes $3 per bushel, and provisions were often shared among residents. It was little wonder, then, that the arrival of the “first boat” caused such joy among residents, and the failure of lake boats to arrive for a period of a month or a sinking of a boat late in fall or early in spring caused such anxiety.

A railway was necessary for the town to flourish, and promoters in Washington, D.C., took the steps necessary to secure a land grant to build a railroad from the Mississippi to Superior. While many of those efforts involved political maneuvering, they also needed publicity. The *Superior Chronicle* circulated news about the city beyond the northwest territory, and produced several brochures and pamphlets that described the city’s future potential in breath-taking and often exaggerated detail. The founding of the newspaper was “the most important new enterprise,” according to the recollections of an early Superior resident. It raised “a voice in the wilderness to proclaim to the world the gospel of city-building and fortune-making.” Quite simply, the presence of a newspaper signaled Superior had arrived.

As Americans moved westward, they founded newspapers. Often published weekly, they became valuable for farmers and those living in the hinterland because they were cheap and widely available. Newspapers fulfilled the same function as word of mouth but were a more efficient use of time, and often read in public and shared with others. Additionally, for many small towns in western territories and states such as Wisconsin, newspapers were symbolic. They demonstrated that a community had not only been founded, but it had news to share. Wherever

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34 Kellogg, 13.
35 Shaw, 34.
36 Ibid.
37 Recollections of Frank. A. Flower written in 1889, printed in the *Superior Inter-Ocean*, April 18, 1896.
there was a town, there was a printer, observed the historian Frank Luther Mott, who noted these publishing entrepreneurs often appeared “as by magic,” driven by politics and promotional reasons.39 They signified a place’s importance and became a valuable tool for advertising that community’s advantages to outsiders, according to the historian Daniel Boorstin. The first issue of the *St. Anthony Express*, published in a small town in the Minnesota territory, declared its mission to be “be to advocate the interests of the Territory in general, and especially those of the village of St. Anthony.”40 Early issues of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* described the impressive vegetable growth found on the shores of Lake Michigan in articles designed to attract settlers and sell land plots in the newly established city. Often, these newspapers tried to recruit investment to their specific location; in the early stages of a city or town’s development, the decision to locate government offices, railroad stations, or a business or agricultural operation often had major ramifications for that place’s future growth. The *Milwaukee Sentinel*, founded by Solomon Juneau to support land holdings, frequently battled with Byron Kilbourn’s *Milwaukee Journal*, a rival developer. For Superior, a scant 14 miles (and one state line) separated it from the nearby settlement of Duluth, a cluster of small towns on the shore of Lake Superior. Both Duluth and Superior had their sights set on attracting the proposed railroads that would terminate somewhere on the shore of the lake. But Superior seemed to have the advantage. Despite its lake frontage, Duluth had no natural access point to the harbor, and no wide plain to house the railyards both cities envisioned in their future.

As the ice began to thaw on Superior Bay in the spring of 1855 and navigation of the lake

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opened, the steamer *Sam Wood* arrived in Superior and carried among its cargo a printing press destined for a small log cabin on the Nemadji River, just outside Superior’s central business district. The cabin housed the offices of the newly founded *Superior Chronicle*, a newspaper financially backed by Senator Douglas and the other Proprietors. Douglas persuaded Washington Ashton and John C. Wise, two young men from Maryland who worked for the *Congressional Globe* in Washington, D.C., to head to Wisconsin and start a newspaper. On their westward trek they purchased their printing outfit in Philadelphia, which included a Foster hand press with stationery platens, newspaper type and material, and a small outlay for additional printing jobs, which would be done upon the hand press. Wise described their arrival in the rapidly growing town: “We were landed ... and rowed across the pretty bay in small boats, and as we ascended the step bank of soft red clay, made slippery by the falling rain, with an occasional splash of mud upon our clothing, our feelings of disappointment were not a little intensified. We were heartily welcomed at the new hotel ... and a cheerful fire in the large sitting room the only one enclosed and finished, soon dispelled much of our gloom.”

The lack of vacant buildings in the growing commercial district meant that the only suitable space printing office was located in an old log cabin—the first built in Superior—which added another set of challenges to the already difficult task of producing a weekly newspaper in a settlement community. The “primitive” building consisted of two rooms, each eight by twelve feet, with a chimney made of logs and covered with mud. “We encountered many troubles and

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41 Box 4, *Superior, Wisconsin Papers, 1831 – 1942* (Superior: Area Research Collection, University of Wisconsin-Superior).
43 Ibid.
44 *Superior Chronicle*, January 5, 1858.
inconveniences in this unsuitable structure, chief among which was to be awakened at night in summer by those sudden and severe thunder showers which sprung up about the lake after a hot day,” Wise wrote. “Frequently every case and form in the office was thoroughly soaked with water, jobs bespattered, press saturated and rusted, and everything damp and wet by the water which ran in streams through the bark roof.” The little log cabin housed all activities associated with putting out the newspaper, including content development, production, layout, printing, and business and subscription activities, and provided living quarters for Wise and Ashton, along with Ashton’s young wife. The cramped conditions impacted all aspects of the publishers’ early lives in Superior. “Mr. and Mrs. Ashton fared no better in their apartment,” Wise reminisced. “More than once I have gone in to start the fire for the morning meal and found them both comfortably snoozing on their feather bed, placed under the dining table as a protection against the water, and a closely drawn net over the whole to keep out mosquitoes, little pests so abundant and so persistently annoying in pioneer days.”

An inadequate and outdated building did not pose the only challenges to newspaper operations in early Superior. As the newspaper’s primary employees, Ashton and Wise were responsible for all aspects of newspaper production, in addition to fulfilling additional publishing jobs, such as the printing of legal documents and pamphlets. They had some help, in the form of two printers, who occasionally worked alongside them and mostly aided in typesetting and mechanical work. Because Ashton and Wise were the strongest physically, they operated the printing presses, a grueling and labor-intensive task. Future Superior newspaper publisher James


46 Ibid.
Bardon, who served as a printer’s devil (or apprentice) at the Chronicle, described early newspaper work in Superior as an all-encompassing enterprise, one where the work was hardly steady. “There were no patent insides or plate matter in those days, no telegraph wires here to bring the news, and no mails save those received by boat during the season of navigation and in the earliest years on men’s backs weekly from St. Paul and later up to 1870 by the weekly stage from St. Paul,” Bardon wrote. “These mails were generally irregular and often newspapers would be left in some camp on the road for weeks, while only the letters came through. The early papers frequently contain apologies for being obliged to go to press without any fresh outside news for the week, the eastern papers having been delayed.”

The mail service was so unpredictable that the Chronicle published a notice in the fall 1855 that it would have to change the publication schedule if the mail service did not improve, on account of the lack publishable material.

Lack of content was not the only concern for Wise and Ashton, and their fellow frontier publishers. The struggle to collect on subscription fees was often a time-consuming task, one whose financial repercussions ultimately dictated the longevity of a publication. A number of American households could not easily afford newspapers and magazines, observed the historian Tom Leonard, and the haphazard issuing of bank notes often left citizens short of cash in the pre-Civil War era. Paying in advance, which would greatly ease this problem, was not yet an

48 Wolner, 33.
49 While economic constraints may have limited the consumption of print materials, literacy did not. The United States boasted a high level of literacy among its white population, with literacy rates among white northerners reported to approach 90 percent by the mid-19th century. The U.S. Census first asked about literacy in 1870, when 20 percent of the population self-reported as illiterate. However, as Carl Kaestle noted, historical attempts to determine literacy rates often face limitations from inadequate data and “fuzzy” conceptualizations of literacy itself. See: Carl F. Kaestle, “The History of Literacy and the History of Readers,” Review of Research in Education 12
option. Publishers, as a result, often adopted a barter policy, where they accepted corn, cattle, beeswax and other goods in exchange for a subscription.\textsuperscript{50} The \textit{Chronicle} offered to take “all descriptions of farm produce” in lieu of money for subscriptions, to be used for a series of articles on the agricultural products of the region.\textsuperscript{51} Despite this flexibility, country printers learned to expect “a large and loyal list of delinquent subscribers,” according to the novelist William Dean Howells.\textsuperscript{52} Throughout the Midwest, printers noted the scourge of unpaid subscriptions, and the difficulty in their collection. The inability—or unwillingness, in some cases—to pay for a newspaper was egalitarian in its distribution. Citizens of all classes and creeds, across all regions, did not pay for the news they continued to consume. The \textit{Chronicle} routinely reminded its readers of the importance of subscription fees: “The tightness of the times, and the great difficulty experienced in making collections, make it necessary that we should demand the cash for all work done in this office. Our materials are costly, and we are obliged to pay cash for our stock; in view of this we shall be obliged to adhere strictly to the foregoing rule,” Ashton and Wise wrote in an editorial.\textsuperscript{53} The struggle for content, and fight to collect subscription fees, made the mere existence of the paper “one of the more strenuous problems of the community,” but by whatever means necessary, it made its weekly appearance throughout the year.\textsuperscript{54}

Despite these difficulties, Ashton and Wise succeeded in producing a paper that

\textsuperscript{50} Thomas C. Leonard, \textit{News For All: America’s Coming of Age With the Press} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 37.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Superior Chronicle}, May 3, 1862.
\textsuperscript{52} Leonard, 38.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Superior Chronicle}, Jan. 5, 1858.
accomplished the publicity objectives of Senator Douglas and the Proprietors, and established itself as a “vital agency” in the advertisement of Superior, closely linked to its purported future success.\textsuperscript{55} The \textit{Chronicle} broadcast news from Superior as well as predictions about its future potential to an audience well beyond the head of the lake. The first issue contained four pages, and its initial print run of 1,000 sold out within one week, as Superior’s 400 or so residents rushed to send the newspaper to friends and family throughout the country.\textsuperscript{56} The six-column, four-page paper was filled with “carefully written editorials and local items, as well as choice selections, with usually a poem or a short story on the first page, besides six or seven columns of advertisements, mostly in the shape of business cards.”\textsuperscript{57} Circulation records indicate a concentrated effort to cultivate a strong out-of-town readership. Its subscription list included 800 out-of-town readers across the entire Midwest and East Coast. Ashton and Wise sent more than 200 free copies to all hotel reading rooms and railroad waiting rooms in Chicago, Milwaukee, and Mississippi River towns as a means of advertising.\textsuperscript{58} During its first summer of publication, the \textit{Chronicle} invited editors from newspapers such as the \textit{St. Louis Daily Intelligencer}, \textit{Cleveland Plain Dealer}, and \textit{Toledo Blade} to visit Superior and report on the new town, and reprinted these glowing reports in order to increase their circulation and expand their influence.\textsuperscript{59}

In its commitment to the city of Superior, the \textit{Chronicle} demonstrated a booster mentality that characterized many of newspapers started in the territories and new states settled in the first half of the 19th century. According to Boorstin, boosterism, both in terms of newspaper content and business activity, assumed economic interests of local businesses and outside investors were

\begin{footnotes}
\item[55] Wolner, 31.
\item[56] Wolner, 128.
\item[57] Bardon.
\item[58] Armour, 52.
\item[59] Ibid, 51.
\end{footnotes}
identity to those of the community. As the historian Sally Foreman Griffith explained, the booster ethos was “essentially idealistic” as it “addressed the need in newly created towns for both economic growth and social order. It offered a vision that fused economic and moral values in the belief that a town’s prosperity rested upon its spiritual condition.” The businessman was not in business for himself, but for his community. Newspaper publishers were a particular type of local businessman, and for them the booster ethos meant printing news and information that enhanced a settlement’s chances for success. In addition to land prices, boat schedules and job opportunities, that also included positive pieces that presented an overly optimistic take on future prospects. Newspaper publishers and their underwriters, like Douglas and the Chronicle, were often invested in their community’s success. By touting a place’s advantages, they hoped to secure not only the interest of potential settlers and businesses, but also drive up land prices by attracting major investments, such as railroads, and government building, such as being named a county seat. The historian Richard White noted that the location of railroads often created—and destroyed—towns. These places competed “desperately” against one another for railroad connections because of the expected increase in business and property values. Atherton noted in his study of towns along the Middle Border in the 19th century that newspaper editors often took a defensive stance for their home communities, especially when there was a “danger” of losing settlers and investment to other places. The competition for these businesses, government offices and all-important railroad lines was fierce. To lose out could mean the end of

63 Atherton, 8.
Superior.

Yet, all the boosting and boasting found in the *Chronicle* could not solidify Superior’s somewhat shaky economic foundation. Most of the investment that poured into the city came from eastern capitalists and land speculators, individuals with few permanent ties to the community. It was also primarily financial, and consequently depended heavily on larger political and economic forces. A change in policy, an unrealized land grant, or even the effective publicity of a rival could immediately stem the flow of capital. Economic speculation, which drove places like Superior, could ultimately prove temporary and fleeting. The Northwest and Western territories were littered with towns and small settlements abandoned when economic prospects began to dim.

Little investment was made in Superior itself that would help it transform from a frontier boom town into an established city. Much construction was temporary; frame buildings and shanties sprung up to meet initial demand, but were not replaced with more enduring structures. With relatively poor soil conditions and difficult farming, an agriculture-based economy was out of the question for Superior; yet there was no concentrated attempt made to establish a manufacturing industry. The majority of the city’s downtown buildings were occupied by lawyers, land agents, and stores, a commercial mix characteristic of boom towns.\(^{64}\) Tree stumps littered the streets outside of the main business core, and the red clay of the region made travel difficult on the street in most months; sidewalks were badly needed but not adequately provided. The mineral resources that initially attracted interest to the area were undeveloped, and most shipping centered around imports needed for daily life and exports of fur, a slowly declining

\(^{64}\) Shaw, 57.
economic activity. But more importantly, the railroad that justified Superior’s existence never arrived. A letter from a visitor reprinted in the *Chronicle* described the contradiction between the town as told in its newspaper and reality: “It was amusing, as we sat at the dock at the close of our rambles, to contrast the City Directory as given in the *Superior Chronicle* and the City on Paper, with it streets, squares, docks, etc., with the straggling rough and unsightly settlement before us.”

For all the excitement and interest in the city at the head of the lake, the lack of permanent businesses and the preponderance of outside investment resulted in a rather flimsy foundation on which to build a city. Superior was a planned, created city, and not a natural development. The *Chronicle* could promote its prospects and create a narrative about Superior’s destiny, but it could not control the larger political and economic fortunes to which Superior’s future was tied.

**The Crash of 1857 and Superior’s Decay**

The balloon the drove Superior’s hopes upward burst in the late 1850s, as the financial panic of 1857 slowed the flow of settlers and business to the new community and constrained the amount of outside capital. The news of bank failures in the East dampened enthusiasm, and the value of land plots plummeted. Superior’s population dwindled to 500 within one year, and its “ride of fortune ebbed as rapidly as it had risen.”

“This is the bluest-looking town you ever did see,” wrote Mrs. Dean to her mother in October 1857. “There is no money in town, and nothing of course to bring any, because lots are worth nothing, and real estate is all that has brought in money. ... This town based upon on a hypothesis and dependent upon projected [railroads] must

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66 Bertrand, 8.
suffer very much by the crisis of the time. ...”

A letter from a visitor published in the *Superior Chronicle* described the city’s remnants: “Superior fell, the capitalists chiefly abandoned her ... and premature decay laid her hand upon everything.”

As these letters indicate, part of the reason Superior fared so poorly in the financial crisis was its dependency on outside investment. When a proposed railroad that would have connected Superior to the Mississippi River was canceled because of a lack of money, the intense speculation that fueled Superior’s initial growth seemed misplaced. Douglas and other early investors, who had already sold their land shares for several multiples of their original value, were no longer inclined to support the community. Those who stayed often lacked the financial means to move. “They have no heart to improve, and scarcely sufficient encouragement to keep things generally from going to ruin,” observed a visitor to the *Chronicle*. As Atherton noted, the concept of progress that drove the initial growth of cities like Superior also signaled their potential for collapse: “Only a very few cities could find satisfaction in a philosophy of superlatives in which each community had to surpass all others in rates of growth if it expected to achieve maximum possible ‘progress.’” Without a railroad connection, without a local industry beyond real estate, and without a strong push for business development and investment from settlers, Superior became a ghost town, its boom proven to be “premature ... dependent on artificial stimulation and general prosperity of the United States.”

Even as the city experienced severe economic hardship in the wake of the panic, losing

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70 Atherton, 335.
71 Shaw, 78.
investment dollars and population at a steep rate, the *Chronicle* continued to boost Superior’s prospects, albeit via a much smaller and more irregularly published paper. The city’s persistent push to print a newspaper demonstrated its belief in the importance of print materials in its recovery. Wise sold his stake in the newspaper in 1858, when its fortunes looked grim, and left Ashton to run the publication alone. Facing financial hardship, Ashton managed to print a one-page *Chronicle* and maintain its weekly schedule. By 1861, money from the advertisements of tax sales was enough to increase the size of the paper, and Ashton publicly committed the paper to the publication of material that would “prove beneficial to the Lake Superior region.” The revived paper would devote its columns and pages solely to the interests of Superior and the surrounding area, Ashton wrote in an editorial, with the aim of bringing the newspaper “up to its old standard of usefulness” by promoting the interests of the region and attracting attention. In each issue, Ashton promised to publish “information and statistics” that would bring in new settlers and businesses. This included “reliable information” about the area’s soil and climate, as well as market prices of provisions, groceries, lumber and grain prices. He also continued to publish optimistic editorials that emphasized Superior’s unparalleled natural advantages and future prospects. On the New Year in 1861, the *Chronicle* described Superior as “destined to become a place of considerable importance.” Later on, it reminded readers of the city’s earlier promise, noting its “commanding position, with a magnificent harbor, penetrating nearly the heart of this continent.” These features, seemingly bestowed on the town by a higher being, assured that Superior would be the “site of a vast city” and its future growth and rise was just on the horizon. The following year, there were signs of “prosperity” and increasing demand for

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72 *Superior Chronicle*, Jan. 1, 1861.
73 *Superior Chronicle*, Jan. 19, 1861.
iron and copper, a “bright prospect” for future shipping commerce on Lake Superior. For industrious, hard-working settlers, Superior continued to offer the best opportunity in the Old Northwest, at least according to the narrative the Chronicle promoted.

Ashton continually reminded his readers that the Chronicle’s true value lay not in the circulation of information among Superior residents, but in the circulation of information via personal and commercial networks to places far beyond the head of the lake: “The publication of the paper for the past three years has been no source of revenue to the publisher,” he wrote. He called on residents to subscribe “liberally,” and to assist in “giving the paper as wide a circulation as possible.” “The wider it is circulated, the greater the benefit to all property owners,” Ashton concluded, reminding readers that the value of the land on which they lived depended on renewed interest in Superior as a point of settlement. The Chronicle’s repeated requests to readers to send the newspaper to their personal networks demonstrated the perceived importance of the circulation of print materials in attracting new people to the region. Personal networks played an important role in settlement patterns in the American Northwest in the 1840s and 1850s, as the historian Kathleen Conzen demonstrated. The circulation of guidebooks, pamphlets, and published letters in Germany often carried strong booster messages of Wisconsin’s excellent soil, good transportation, healthy climate and inexpensive land. The state of Wisconsin sent an agent to New York, tasked with circulating positive mentions of the state in English, Norwegian, German, and Dutch language pamphlets. The commission also secured advertisements in newspapers and engaging in personal conversations with immigrant

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74 Superior Chronicle, June 14, 1862.
75 Superior Chronicle, June 21, 1862.
76 Superior Chronicle, Dec. 15, 1860.
communities, in the hopes they would pass the message on to their relatives in letters. Minnesota also engaged in a publicity campaign, but was more reliant on the establishment of newspapers, which often carried similar messages encouraging readers to send the newspapers beyond their town and territorial borders.\(^{78}\)

The *Chronicle* was not the only piece of print materials disseminated in an effort to revive interest in Superior among settlers and capitalists. Two pamphlets were also produced in quick succession with the intention of spreading reliable information about Superior far and wide, further demonstrating the centrality of print culture to Superior’s revitalization efforts. Both claimed to be the products of a citizen-driven effort to bring unbiased, factual information to the reader regarding Superior and the surrounding reader; despite these claims, they read more like pieces of propaganda than a sober overview of the area’s climate, resources, and weather patterns. Distributed throughout the 1860s, they kept the name of Superior known among potential emigrants, even if they did not directly result in a major population increase. They also were meant to combat publicity pamphlets produced by rival towns and settlements attempting to capitalize on Superior’s decline.\(^{79}\) While no records exist as to the extent of their circulation, which makes it impossible to ascertain their influence, later histories on the city frequently mention the pamphlets as part of the effort of Superior to correct its course.

The *Chronicle* financially backed the printing of one pamphlet, *Superior: Information for Emigrants*, and republished its contents weekly in the years following its initial printing in 1858.\(^{80}\) In an editorial announcing its publication, Ashton wrote: “We need emigrants. ... With

\(^{79}\) Wolner, 78.
\(^{80}\) *Chronicle* records indicate *Information for Emigrants* appeared each week from January 1861 to May 1863. For several issues, it was often the only content aside from sheriff sales and tax notices.
this view, several of our oldest residents a short time ago carefully prepared a pamphlet containing all these facts clearly set forth and we have printing at our own risk a large addition for general circulation. ... The larger the number circulated the greater will be the benefits accruing to all." He encouraged Superior residents to purchase additional copies to be sent across the Midwest, as well as the Eastern and Southern United States, and to Europe. The 24-page pamphlet was filled with personal testimonials from Superior residents, letters sent to Congress advocating for the city, and observations from visitors and other newspapers that appeared to offer unbiased, corroborating evidence as to the area’s potential. That it was a citizen-led effort granted the pamphlet credibility in an environment where land speculators circulated exaggerated claims about their holdings—a key theme emphasized throughout the publication. “It is given to the public with the assurance of the citizens of Superior that it is not put forth for speculative purposes by large landed proprietors, but by the actual residents to desire to under-state, rather than exaggerate the facts; and to communicate only the results of personal observation and experience. ... They deem it their duty to make known the advantages of this region to the enterprising and industrious.” In addition to supplying information and a general overview of the region’s settlement and history, the pamphlet was largely forward-looking; that is, it noted Superior stood to benefit from national infrastructure improvements (specifically, railroad construction). An entire section on Superior’s future prospects noted the continued courtship of the railroad: “Having such pre-eminent advantages of position, Superior, like Chicago, will not depend on the energies of her own citizens for railroad communications ... [railroads] are all pointing in this direction, and striving to reap the advantages of a connection at

81 “Circulate the Pamphlet,” Superior Chronicle, 1858.
82 Information for Emigrants, 3.
the west end of Lake Superior.”  

The *Chronicle* viewed the circulation of promotional pamphlets as critical to Superior’s survival and revitalization. It contracted with another writer, Edward Pelz, a native of Germany and an “emigrant agent” in New York, to produce a chapter in a pamphlet distributed in Germany, Sweden, and Norway. The *Chronicle* justified the expenditure on Superior’s behalf by noting that Pelz’s efforts on behalf of other localities in the old Northwest Territory translated into population gains. “We are of the opinion that his labors in [sic] behalf of Superior and the adjacent country will be of good results,” it wrote in an editorial introducing the effort. The *Chronicle* published an excerpt from Pelz’s chapter, and assured readers it would review Pelz’s work in its entirety before it went to print. “Whoever is seeking an advantageous place of settlement cannot overlook the country of the headwaters of the Mississippi and its vicinity,” the piece began. “The country around Superior possesses every quality to make it a prominent and commanding position in its advancing development, and in the course of one generation it will become evident that at this spot there will be an imposing concentration of power, population, and industry.” Pelz reiterated the claims of the *Chronicle*’s publicity efforts—that a great port city was destined to rise in Superior, Wisconsin, and promising opportunities were available for hard-working, entrepreneurial immigrants.

Another promotional booklet, *City of Superior, Lake Superior*, prepared at the behest of Superior’s residents appeared in 1859, written by James Ritchie and published by the Philadelphia-based T.B. Peterson and Bros. The local attorney and commissioner of deeds

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83 Information for Emigrants, 6.
84 *Superior Chronicle*, Feb. 4, 1862.
frequently published advertisements noting his willingness to correspond with those interested in Superior. One ad read: “Although always ready to answer inquires relating to the Superior Country, yet my correspondence having increased so much of late, that I must request, in future, everyone desiring information, to enclose a postage stamp, if he expects an answer.” 86 His booklet, then, seemed informed by the variety of questions and inundation of letters he received. He wrote it “at the request of many citizens of the City of Superior, who believe that the advantages afforded by this place, and surrounding region, are very insufficiently known,” and, like the *Chronicle* pamphlet, drew on his observations and extracts from letters from residents and visitors as evidence to support its claims. It continued to reiterate the booster themes of the *Chronicle*, and described Superior as a place on the cusp of realizing its destiny as a great American city. This boom tract, which referred to Lake Superior as the “Mediterranean Sea of America,” discussed the region’s benefits at length, particularly those related to shipping and agriculture, as well as the general advantages of life at the head of the lake. In terms of commerce, Superior was as close to New York (and consequently Europe) as Chicago, and Ritchie predicted that soon emigrants will be able to purchase tickets “in the very heart of Europe for the City of Superior ... without transshipments, and no greater inconvenience than might attend the journey from their homes to the ports of departure.” 87 A proposed railroad would connect Superior with the Great Plains and West Coast, furthering the city’s position as a central node in a global transportation network. Superior would be the “principal avenue of intercourse between the Eastern and North-Western portions of our extended country, and of its interior commerce with Europe and Asia.” 88 The development of Superior reflected the emphasis on

86 Ritchie, 2.
87 Ritchie, 12.
88 Ibid, 2.
industriousness, hard work, and progress the defined the history of American development, Ritchie wrote. Echoing the themes of other writing, he closely aligned Superior’s rise with the modern United States.

For all its flowery language, and the perhaps overly sunny picture it painted of the head of the lakes’ notoriously cold, windy, and snowy winters, Ritchie’s pamphlet, along with the Chronicle’s, presented several compelling points regarding the future of the city of Superior. They consistently drew comparisons to other states, particularly Illinois, and put these competing locations in a negative light. They made positive comparisons to places like New England, whose residents Superior sought to attract. They published information on the upward trend in shipping tonnage on the Great Lakes and noted Superior’s proximity to a variety of natural resources desperately needed in a rapidly industrializing economy. They made powerful economic arguments about land prices in the region: there was quite a bit of land for sale, and prices were cheap. And they referenced the very real plans of several railroads to extend their lines northward, which would have made Superior a transportation hub and sent land prices upward. For those with the financial means (and those willing to take the risk), these pamphlets presented a strong argument for settling in Superior. But what Ritchie and the Chronicle neglected to mention was the competition Superior faced for these critical infrastructure investments. They focused entirely on Superior’s seeming natural advantages, and treated the city’s future success as a foregone conclusion. Directly across the bay, however, lay the fledgling city of Duluth, abandoned in the wake of the financial panic but with fierce advocates and investors lobbying for rail lines to terminate on their land and not Superior’s. With no railroad, Superior’s dreams of becoming a second Chicago seemed to be on hold at best, and unrealized at

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89 Ibid, 28.
For two decades, Superior remained in decline, despite improvements to its harbor and the building of two all-season roads to the west and south. The city entered a period of “hibernation,” while it waited for either a railroad to arrive or for the small group of settlers that remained to leave for better prospects. Those who stayed survived on fish and potatoes. More than half the homes and stores in the city sat empty and became uninhabitable due to neglect. The 1860 census taker visited 506 places, and took no count at 280 places, likely due to vacancy. Ten years later, the 1870 census enumerator visited only 250 places, taking no count at 61 of them. The non-sustaining character of the community made it dependent on outside traffic, and the reduced interlake steamer arrivals sent Superior further into decline. Steamer arrivals decreased from 56 in 1857 to 13 in 1860 and 10 in 1868. With no tourism industry and no further land speculation, Superior’s residents survived on tax money from non-resident property owners who continued to hold on to their land. They also generated income from the development of natural resources, particularly the cutting of cord wood for steamers. The hope that the years following the Civil War would see the completion of the railroad early sustained the settlers that remained. But the 1870 announcement that the long-awaited northern railroad connecting the plains of the west with Lake Superior’s harbors would terminate in Duluth, not in Superior, further dimmed the city’s once bright prospects.

The railroad expansion underwritten by Philadelphia financier Jay Cooke connected
Minneapolis and St. Paul to Duluth, and revitalized the once decrepit ghost town abandoned in the wake of the Panic of 1857. A flurry of activity arrived at the head of the lakes, as Duluth began building hotels, warehouses, and wharves in anticipation of railroad traffic an increase in shipping activity. It expanded its residential areas from shack-lined streets to two-story frame houses and invested in infrastructure improvements. Somewhat controversially, its citizens dug a canal to connect the city to Superior’s natural harbor, eliminating it as a competitive advantage and provoking a series of political fights that ultimately ended in Duluth’s favor. Superior lost prominent citizens, who moved across the bay to take advantage of better business opportunities, and its “pathetic” future seemed to be one of “hopeless existence at the end of a small ferry line.” The construction boom in Duluth, as well as the promise of jobs, drew new settlers and attracted national interest.

In 1870, the *Atlantic Monthly* sent a writer to chronicle the building of a new city at the head of the lake. Accompanied by men from the east, the author was impressed by the vitality and energy Duluth exuded, especially in comparison to its sister city, Superior, which festered across the bay. “Civilization is attracted to the line of a railroad like steel-filings to a magnet,” read the article, “and here appears to be the point of a magnet of more than ordinary power.” The power of the railroad extended beyond the attraction of settlement and investment, according to the piece. It also doomed Duluth’s rivals. Without a railroad, Superior “great dejected, and fell into a rapid decline; if true, what its friends still loudly claimed for it, that it was ‘looking up,’ it

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95 According to local legend, when Wisconsin challenged Duluth’s canal building efforts, and asked the War Department to intervene and stop its construction, a group of citizens went in the middle of the night to complete the canal on their own.

96 Bertrand, 143 - 144.

must have been ... because, lying flat on its back, it could not look any other way.” While Duluth boomed, Superior remained a “desolate-looking town of deserted wharves, broken-windowed warehouses, dilapidated shops and dwellings, and one hopeful newspaper which keeps up a constant warfare with the rival sheet at Duluth.”

**Newspapers in Hibernation**

Newspapers did not fare well during Superior’s decadent period. The *Superior Chronicle* operated in fits and starts, benefiting from its virtual monopoly on news from the region, but it could not escape from the economic downturn. It shuttered when there was little news to print and few subscribers to be had, and revived itself when the number of tax sale notices boosted its revenue. In 1863, owing to hard times and a further reduction in population due to the Civil War, Ashton, operating the paper on his own, shuttered the *Chronicle*, “finding it impossible to make ends meet.” A few months after the *Chronicle* stopped, the *Superior Gazette* appeared, a four-page weekly published by Richard Relf, who was, among several claimed professions, a land agent and circuit court commissioner. The paper’s objective was to keep “readers advised of the growth and growth and progress of the various interests and pursuits now established at and in the vicinity of Superior ... to encourage by facts and figures the Commerce of this Lake,” Relf wrote in the newspaper’s first editorial. “The town of Superior may not become a great city in our time; but its natural advantages will be improved and developed by the growth and prosperity of the surrounding interests.” In addition to promotional editorials, the paper carried news items from Milwaukee and from the paper’s exchanges; a series of articles on the

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98 Ibid, 607.  
99 Ibid, 609.  
100 Bardon.  
history of the region; information on the general laws of the state; and an extensive classified section. Ashton joined the *Gazette* in June 1864, and the firm of Ashton and Relf published the newspaper until 1866, when Ashton became the sole proprietor.

The records for the *Gazette* are sporadic, indicating that it was unable to adhere to a strict publishing scheduling. After Ashton’s untimely death in 1868, his wife continued to publish the newspaper and oversaw the *Gazette*’s production for roughly one year, until it was taken over by R.C. Mitchell. In January 1870, Mitchell merged the *Gazette* with another Superior weekly, the *Tribune*, and published “a very creditable paper” for seven months. But with some encouragement from railroad tycoon and Duluth promoter Jay Cooke, he assessed the flurry of activity across the bay and compared it to Superior’s future prospects. Seeing a more promising financial opportunity, he packed up his type and printing press and took them to Duluth for what he saw as a “better field than Superior for a newspaper.”

His *Duluth Tribune* eventually merged with another Duluth paper to become the city’s leading daily publication. Those who remained in Superior viewed Mitchell as a “traitor.”

One newspaper operated in Superior, fighting an uphill battle to revive a decaying city. With the understanding that a newspaper would be key to revitalizing the city, a “prominent and public-spirited land dealer,” Edward W. Anderson, Jr., along with the help of some citizens, purchased a new plant and began publishing in September 1870 the four-page *Superior Times*. James Bardon, who cut his publishing teeth working for the *Superior Chronicle*, began as an apprentice on the paper and served as a local editor. The barebones staff focused on producing a weekly paper, although as Superior’s population continued to shrink—the population of Douglas

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102 Bardon, 40.
104 Early Superior Newspapers, 7.
County was 741 in 1875, and there were only 655 residents in 1880—\textit{the publication of a paper became a “side issue.”}\textsuperscript{105} Despite these population trends, the \textit{Times} worked to keep the hope alive that Superior would one day realize its destiny. When the newspaper changed ownership in 1877, Bardon took over as editor and the last editorial from the outgoing publishers left readers with an “expression of hope that Superior will emerge from its struggles victorious, and that all the bright anticipations of its future growth and importance entertained by its sanguine but plucky inhabitants may be realized.”\textsuperscript{106}

Keeping the newspaper alive was no easy endeavor. The \textit{Times’} business largely rested in publishing tax sale notices, and Bardon filled the inside pages with information from correspondents and visitors, clippings from the newspapers he received via the exchange system, and his own writings, with “invention” often taking the place of actual happenings.\textsuperscript{107} The printing of election tickets generated additional revenue, and Bardon was able to maintain a regular publication schedule while holding out hope that soon new settlers and new businesses would arrive in Superior. The continued support from the community, both in terms of subscription dollars and physical contributions, kept the newspaper going. When new printing materials arrived for the \textit{Times}, a volunteer group was on hand to help unpack and set up the new presses: “About half a score of our volunteer friends clustered around the messy iron press and bore it gently into the premises, as if it were something well worth caring for, and handling tenderly, and in a short time it was placed in position to the admiration of all. ... Had our Duluth friends been present they would have acknowledged that they do not monopolize all the energy

\textsuperscript{105} Bardon, 40.  
\textsuperscript{107} Bardon, 41.
in this section.” This was only one instance among many that Bardon recorded in which the
community expressed its appreciation for the service of the *Times*. He commented on several
citizens noting that the paper marked an “effort in the right direction” and noted the praise he
often received for the paper. “Calling one day upon a subscriber who had moved from Superior
to a nearby town, after the usual salutations, he immediately stated that he wished to pay his
subscription, for he was always glad to get the paper, it was so well edited, it was one of the best
papers he read, there were so many bright things in it, especially on the inside pages, which he
always turned to first,” Bardon wrote. “You may well imagine that in taking his money, I did not
depress his mind as he had depressed mine, by informing him that the inside pages were made up
in Chicago.”

The continued goal of the *Times*, as well as of its predecessors, was to attract investors and
infrastructure improvements, primarily the railroad. As Duluth turned into the railroad terminus
Superior aspired to be, the city’s newspapers never quieted their booster voice or shied away
from attacks on its neighbor. When at all possible, the *Times* criticized the Mitchell and the
Duluth papers and pointed to better opportunities across the bay. These early newspapers
believed “the future of the city and its inhabitants would be bright forever if a railroad could be
secured,” Bardon wrote, and operated as best as they could to secure it. The legacy of the
newspapers and their publishers served as a credit to the spirit of early settlers, and helped lay a
foundation for a community identity tied to hard work and a strong belief in progress that would
later define the city. *Chronicle* co-founder Washington Ashton was eulogized as “little less than
a martyr” for his dedication to the development of the resources of the region and his

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108 Bardon, 42.
109 Bardon, 44.
commitment to its promotion. On the death of Ashton’s publishing colleague John C. Wise in 1900, his obituary described that first Superior newspaper as “a credit to present day journalism. ... It shows that those sturdy pioneers clearly realized the possibilities of the head of Lake Superior,” and did more than any other outfit to realize the city’s promise.

Together, these two “knights of the pencil and the shears” laid the foundations of journalism in Douglas County, and instituted a view of the newspaper as a promotional device that would determine the operational direction of those publications that followed. Primarily, these early newspapers advertised the future promise of a city with tremendous natural advantages at the head of the lake. This rhetoric did not fall on deaf ears, and settlers continued to head toward Superior, albeit slowly, lured by the possibility to capitalize on its unrealized potential. Solon Clough, a Wisconsin judge, uprooted his family from their farm further south in the state to move north. “It seemed to him, as to many others, that on account of its natural advantages [Superior] was destined to become a great commercial center as soon as the union of lake and rail should be consummated,” his daughter, Clara Clough Lenroot, wrote in her memoirs. “However, the bride and groom—Lake and Rail—were destined to wait many long, weary years for their mating.”

The Railroad Arrives

The weary years of waiting ended in 1881, when James J. Hill announced the Northern Pacific Railroad would lay tracks to the city. “The dreams of the founders of Superior are

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113 Lenroot, 35.
coming to pass,” declared the *Davenport (Iowa) Gazette*.\(^{114}\) “The site of Superior City is the only one at the head of Lake Superior that is fit for a great city,” wrote the *Chicago Tribune*.

“Duluth ... will share in the prosperity of Superior City, but the latter, by virtue of its location and railroad connections, must become the principal city of Lake Superior.”\(^{115}\) A correspondent of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* noted that “at last Superior’s day has come and the prescience of those who first pitched upon it, and of those who have held the fort ever since, is vindicated.”\(^{116}\)

Soon, the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha railroads announced plans to build into Superior. John C. Wise, then the editor of the *Mankato (Minn.) Review*, described the city’s revival as an important real estate investment opportunity, due the “encouraging outlook” the railroad presented.\(^{117}\) Notably, Wise quickly sold his Superior land holdings—100 acres acquired in 1857 at $1.25 per acre—for $30,000, turning an immense profit.\(^{118}\)

Settlers arrived in droves. By 1890, the city’s population grew to nearly 12,000 residents, an increase of 1,732 percent. The city’s waterfront transformed. Less than 30 vessels arrived in Superior’s harbor in 1883; by 1885, 200 vessels arrived, and by 1890, that number increased to more than 1,200.\(^{119}\) In response to the increased demand, the low-lying commercial and manufacturing structures that dotted the shoreline transformed. Multi-story grain elevators and

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\(^{117}\) *Superior Times*, August 27, 1881.

\(^{118}\) Wolner, 129.

\(^{119}\) Shaw, 128.
flour mills of “sky line proportions” appeared alongside modern coal and iron ore docks. Piers and slips extended into the bay. In the city’s central business core, construction began on a new hotel, plus stores and office buildings, and new houses appeared. Seemingly overnight, the former frontier outpost was recast as an industrial city.

**Superior’s Second Boom and the Expansion of Print Culture**

The newspapers came fast and thick. Just as newcomers crowded the city’s boarding houses and hotels, newspapers flew off of the presses and into the streets. They were introduced at an average rate of one per year; three newspapers were started in the span of one week. The starting and stopping of newspapers was so common, it seemed “quite a favorite indoor sport with boomers and politicians,” later commented Clough Gates, the son of a prominent Superior educator and himself a Superior newspaper manager in the 1920s. “The puzzle was when they would stop—and how did they keep going.” Between 1882 and 1910, there are records of at least 22 newspapers published in Superior, most of them with a lifespan ranging from a few months to a few years, and more than 30 people were employed in newspaper work in the city.

In addition to the English-language materials in circulation, a number of foreign language newspapers also appeared; Superior residents subscribed to Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, and German-language newspapers. Most were weeklies. The city’s first daily publication, the *Inter-Ocean*, appeared in 1888, and by 1900, there were two daily publications in the city. These publications were largely preoccupied with boosting Superior’s prospects,

120 Ibid, 137.
121 Clough Gates, "40 Years of Newspaper History in Superior Has Brought Many Changes -- Once City Had 9 Papers," *Evening Telegram, 40th Anniversary Edition*, April 21, 1930.
123 Ibid.
since the arrival of the railroad signaled the city was ready to realize its destiny, and because they
were often closely tied to the city’s business community. Their publishers, editors, and business
managers were members of local business associations and chambers of commerce, sat on the
board of trade, and represented the business interests of Superior.

The new crop of newspapers continued to function largely as their predecessors had, and
operated more as a source of outward communication, rather than acting as a cultivator of
community. They largely agreed on the power and importance of economic motivation, and
differed primarily in terms of politics. Frequently, these newspapers carried letters and
correspondence from visitors and articles from other publications that echoed their own sense of
optimism about the city. The Superior Evening Call carried a special correspondence from the
Boston Post describing the well-known natural advantages of the city: “What the original beauty
of the place was I have no idea, as the destruction necessary to building up of a rapidly growing
city is noted everywhere, which denotes the enterprise characteristic of its citizens. ... I bespeak a
future which will mark her as one of the leading cities of the world.”  

The Superior Daily Leader republished an article carried in the Syracuse (N.Y.) Journal, applauding its efforts to
“enlighten” New Yorkers. Describing the development of Superior’s waterfront in detail, from
the launching of its whaleback cargo ships to the towering grain elevators that dominated the
city’s skyline, the letter illustrated how Superior embodied the “enterprise of the Yankee
nation.” Another excerpt from a piece initially published in the Burlington (N.J.) Enterprise

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124 “Superior’s Greatness,” Superior Evening Call, Sept. 21, 1889. In “Newspapers of the Lake Superior Region,
1860 – 1901,” Superior, Wisconsin Papers, 1831-1942 (Superior: Area Research Collection, University of
Wisconsin Superior), Reel 7.

125 A whaleback was a unique type of steamship that carried its cargo largely below the waterline. When full, only
the rounded portion of the hull could be seen. These ships were used throughout the Great Lakes, and the vast
majority (33) of the total 44 that were constructed were built in Superior.

– 1901,” Superior, Wisconsin Papers, 1831 – 1942 (Superior: Area Research Collection, University of Wisconsin
encouraged east coast readers to “keep an eye on Superior.” These reprinted letters and articles echoed the themes long present in Superior’s newspapers: the city’s unparalleled natural advantages; the abundance of resources at the head of the lakes; the promise of the rise of a great port city on the shores of Lake Superior. Largely optimistic, the newspapers stressed the importance of the future and believed in the doctrine of progress. Superior’s future lay in their hands—and aligned with their business interests—and so they led the movement to promote the city’s growth and prosperity. Now that the railroads were a reality, and Superior’s connections to eastern commercial centers was secure, they offered more concrete evidence pointing to realizing the initial belief that Superior would rise as a “second Chicago.”

These newspapers expressed the belief that the city would only growth through the constant effort of its citizens. Most of Superior’s business leaders agreed that newspapers were the “most effective medium for civic advertising,” and Superior papers quickly capitalized on the opportunity. They produced, printed, and distributed special editions, promotional issues, brochures, and pamphlets that circulated throughout the region and beyond. More than 9,000 copies of an 1893 special edition of the Telegram was sent with Superior delegates to a real estate convention in Chicago. The Telegram also published A Souvenir of Superior, a 176-page paper book, richly illustrated with depictions of Superior churches, residences, business establishments, and factories. It included statistical data of the city’s government, commerce, manufacturing, schools, and climate, and a detailed overview of the region’s history. The Leader

Superior), Reel 7.
128 Birr, 108.
129 Birr, 116.
130 Ibid.
produced an 1896 annual edition that included a 40-page, magazine-like illustrated section. And the *Times* regularly published a “year-in-review” issue that looked back on the city’s achievements throughout the decade.

Pamphlets and books also played a large part in the print culture promotion of Superior. The City Statistician Report became the most ornate publication in circulation. Its first edition, *The Eye of the Northwest*, was an extravagant, liberally illustrated 200-page book fully funded by the city, which printed 50,000 copies. Only 10,000 copies of the next year’s report were produced, with businessmen providing considerable financial backing in the place of public funding.\(^{131}\) Local organizations also produced print material. The West Superior Chamber of Commerce, one of two chambers of commerce in the city, published a 24-page pamphlet of topically arranged material designed to answer the most frequently asked questions about the city. In 1896, the Superior Commercial Club began a tradition of publishing an annual edition, typically between 40 and 80 pages. The South Superior Improvement company produced a 32-page “pocket-size pamphlet advertising the advantages of its property for manufacturing purposes” and distributed it internationally.\(^{132}\) The proliferation of promotional print materials worked to attract businesses and new residents. Settlers continued to flock to Superior, driving its population to more than 31,000 by 1900.

One of the new arrivals in Superior during the city’s second boom was John T. Murphy, a Massachusetts native driven westward by the prospects of fame and fortune. Trained at a variety of newspapers across New England, he had arrived in St. Paul, Minnesota, to follow up on a job opportunity with the circulation department of the *St Paul Globe* after failing to strike it rich on a

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\(^{131}\) Ibid.

\(^{132}\) Birr, 120.
gold expedition in the Canadian Rockies. From there, the ambitious 27-year-old journeyed to the head of the lakes to build the out-of-town circulation for the *Globe* and assess the market potential for further publications. Personally, Murphy was also interested in prospective real estate interests. Stationed in Duluth, he viewed the lively activity in Superior from a distance. He decided to join “with a lot of other easterners who were planning great things for Superior.”

With a push from “several men prominent in the civic affairs of the bustling and ambitious new town,” Murphy started a new publication in a city already home to 11 newspapers. He moved into a building on the edge of town, where the activity of the commercial district faded into the wilderness, and set about putting the first issue of the *Superior Weekly Telegram* to print. Within one year, it became a daily publication.

Superior’s success depended on a vibrant, robust print culture that would promote the city’s seemingly God-given natural advantages far and wide. From the beginning, its investors predicted that the small settlement on the southwest shore of Lake Superior would emerge as a major commercial hub of the Western United States, due to its geographic advantages, proximity to mineral and natural resources, and the entrepreneurial prowess and dedication of its early settlers. Newspapers, pamphlets, and brochures advertised the city, and were one of the main channels for attracting investment and new residents to the city at the head of the lakes. The promise of its initial rapid settlement proved to be short-lived, as Superior’s ties to the national economy and dependency on political favors made it especially prone to market fluctuations, and

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135 Since becoming a daily newspaper, the *Telegram* has alternated between the *Superior Evening Telegram* and *Superior Telegram*. 
the settlement nearly collapsed in the wake of the Panic of 1857. But throughout, residents managed to produce and distribute a newspaper, as well as several promotional pamphlets, in an attempt to renew interest in the City of Destiny and revive its prospects. This faith in the power of print to advertise and attract new investment reflected a strong support of print culture that would define Superior’s progress throughout the 19th century.

When the railroads did arrive, these print publications tied Superior’s future to a decidedly urban, industrialized, and modern vision. They began emphasizing the infrastructure expansion as part of Superior’s portrait of progress, advertising the miles of docks built along the city’s waterfront, the number of railroad lines and depots, and scores of miles of railroad tracks emanating from Superior in every direction. They highlighted the city’s continued growth, in terms of population, new construction, bank deposits, and tonnage of ore and coal processed at the city’s docks. Throughout, these print publications established a narrative about Superior that would ultimately form the foundation of the city’s identity. Born out of the wilderness, the city of Superior was created out of necessity, due to the demands of the modern age. Entrepreneurial and committed settlers arrived, and dedicated themselves to the city’s revival during its decline—when Superior’s rapid re-settlement began in the 1890s, it was taken a sign that the “spirit of the age of commercial enterprise,” where “capital united with brains,” had finally arrived in Superior. The city’s newspapers, in the booster spirit of previous publications, maintained this narrative and one in particular, the newly founded Telegram, extended this narrative to all community activities.

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136 *A Souvenir of Superior* (Superior, Wis.: Superior Telegram, 1891), 13.
Chapter Two

Building a Community Newspaper

In an 1885 illustration, a train pulling cars marked wheat, corn, ore, and cattle surged forth from the western plains. Small representations of Omaha, Kansas City, Minneapolis, and St. Paul stood aside in awe of Superior, as the train reached a bustling waterfront crowded with ships, gigantic warehouses and smokestacks. The caption below read “Superior—the last possible great marine city in the interior of North America.”¹ Another illustration in circulation, this one a bird’s-eye view map that appeared in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, portrayed the city as an industrial manufacturing hub and an active port.² In it, ships came and went from the harbor, plumes of smoke from the city’s factories drifted above blocks of houses and storefronts, and long docks extended from the shoreline. The flurry of activity in the city provided a stark contrast to two inset illustrations of Superior’s first log-constructed buildings: the small cabin that had housed the *Superior Chronicle* and a farmhouse. And yet another, more powerful, illustrated map from the 1880s hinted at Superior’s true value and commercial role: It demonstrated how a water route from Superior to the Atlantic Ocean was shorter than the trade route originating in Chicago. An abbreviated form of the map appeared on letterheads and in pamphlets. There, Superior sat at the center of North America, with lines stretched outward to Australia, China, Europe, India, Russia, and Japan. Its caption: “Superior—the City of Destiny.”³

¹ Wisconsin Historical Society, View of Superior, Wis., Image 38020. Viewed online at https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM38020
² Appeared in July 26, 1890 issue. Superior businessmen raised $1,500 to pay for the article (Birr, 116). Wisconsin Historical Society, Bird’s-Eye View of West Superior and Superior, Wis., Image 22774. Viewed online at https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM22774
When the tide of Superior’s fortunes began to turn in the late 1880s, the city eagerly shed its provincial past and embraced a decidedly modern and industrial future. It had the hallmarks of a larger city. Tracks were being laid for an electric streetcar system; roads were extended and paved; and the city was working on an upgraded sewer system and electrical grid. Businessmen proposed, and secured the financing for, new hotels and an opera house. This new iteration of the city of destiny was “youthful and boisterous” and defined largely by growth in terms of population, shipping tonnage, railroad lines, housing construction and bank receipts. For the determined John T. Murphy, Superior offered a “vista of opportunities.” He found himself among entrepreneurs, investors, laborers and opportunistic settlers looking to take advantage of the “hectic” and “exuberant” business environment.

Yet, “one feature essential to the life and development of a nineteenth century city of progress” was missing: a daily newspaper. Duluth, that already-realized city that haunted Superior’s boosters and advocates, had three daily newspapers. Superior had none. For all the promising rhetoric of its advocates, the absence of a daily newspaper—a product closely associated with cities—revealed an obstacle to Superior’s urban aspirations. In order to move forward on the path toward modernity, and further the progress of its second boom, it needed a daily publication.

As Superior’s first daily newspaper, the Superior Telegram operated as a platform to establish and promote Superior’s modern, progressive identity within the community and

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5 “John T. Murphy, Publisher, Dies,” Superior Telegram, Dec. 15, 1932.
7 N.W. Ayer & Son’s American Newspaper Annual 1889.
beyond. Print culture offered an important channel to articulate this new urban vision, and the *Telegram* occupied both an internal and external position within the city. It acted as an important social and cultural institution, which cultivated a sense of community through its coverage choices, the sponsorship of activities, and the underwriting of various initiatives within the city. It also sought to interpret and mediate the new complexities of life introduced in the first few decades of the 20th century. Specifically, it reflected on the opportunities new cultural forms and institutions presented for a forward-thinking city, while promoting a narrative about the city’s identity that extended to other forms of print culture—such as promotional pamphlets, city advertisements, and administrative reports—and were echoed in Superior’s civic clubs and associations. Throughout, the *Telegram* continued to boost Superior’s prospects to potential businesses and investors.

Although Superior appeared to be realizing its potential, its future position as a leading port city and as an important commercial center was not assured. As these hopes were challenged in the 1920s, the *Telegram*, and the additional print products it produced and circulated, continued to embrace a promotional rhetoric akin to its predecessors. Murphy and his editorial team justified this interpretation of the newspaper through the lens of community. While Murphy advocated an objective and accurate approach to reporting the news, he also knew Superior’s future depended, to a certain extent, on its continued promotion to business and investing circles. At a time when the *Telegram*’s counterparts in larger cities were embarking on a path that embraced objectivity and rejected boosterism as a hallmark of professionalism, the newspaper’s overly positive, optimistic and at times bombastic local coverage stood in stark contrast to the increasingly somber sheets in circulation in the cities that Superior aspired to be.

Building on its initial mission to be a community-focused newspaper, the *Telegram*
furthered its commitment to be a “home daily” for the self-proclaimed most important city in the Northwest. Here was the space where progress and modernity were defined, as citizens sought a way to navigate the future. That meant uniting the city population in aggressive building and boosting campaigns, and fostering the belief among residents that they controlled their destiny, all supported by their newspaper. The *Telegram* sought to make itself “the worthy representative of a city whose future destiny is to lead the Northwest in many other ways,” wrote the papers’ editors in its 20th anniversary edition. Superior and the *Telegram* were “nearly twins,” their destinies intertwined.\(^8\)

This chapter discusses the *Telegram’s* rise in the 1890s and 1900s as the city’s most successful English-language newspaper. It examines Murphy’s editorial approach and direction as a publisher, and his goals for the newspaper. Through its coverage, the *Telegram* constructed a shared sense of community and a common understanding of life at the head of the lakes. Its involvement in local events and sponsorship of activities expanded its influence beyond the page and took it into the street. Beyond merely offering a chronicle of the day’s news, the *Telegram* operated as an important community institution. Consequently, the newspaper enjoyed a privileged position in shaping and maintaining a seemingly unified vision of the city. It elevated the voices of the city’s boosters, quieted the voices of its critics, and eliminated stories that challenged the cohesive narrative it presented.

Ultimately, Murphy believed a successful community newspaper could become a thriving regional publication. He dedicated the *Telegram* to chronicling life in Superior and publicizing

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\(^8\) *Superior Telegram 20th Anniversary Edition.*
its opportunities, and also pursued a content and circulation strategy that would build the newspaper into the representative publication for all towns that fell within Superior’s orbit. In doing so, Murphy demonstrated a decidedly urban vision for the newspaper that matched the ambitions of the city’s business class and echoed the narrative of the city itself. This reveals that the concept of the urban, consumer-oriented newspaper was not limited to major urban areas. Small cities throughout the United States, such as Superior, attempted to align themselves with large cities, such as Chicago, Milwaukee, and New York, by claiming to produce a similar print product. Yet these newspapers were completely different, at once provincial and sophisticated, boosting Superior’s prospects while claiming accuracy and objectivity. As Superior began to boom again, and seemed poised to realize its earlier promise, the *Telegram* and its associated print publications responded by advancing a community narrative that emphasized the city’s progress and highlighted its urban future.

**Becoming the ‘Home Daily’ for Northwest Wisconsin**

John T. Murphy prepared roughly his whole life for publishing a newspaper. As a young boy, he worked in the printing department of his hometown newspaper, the *North Adams (Mass.) Transcript*, where he became interested in newspaper production and management, which stood in stark contrast to the work in the mills and factories that dominated the economy of North Adams. His parents, both Irish immigrants who emigrated to the United States during the Great Famine, settled in the small city nestled in the Berkshires region of Western Massachusetts, where his father worked as a construction laborer on infrastructure projects in the area. John, the eldest of three children, attended the city’s public schools, and completed his education at Drury Academy, the local high school. He was set to enroll at nearby Williams College, but withdrew before the term started to pursue his “first love,” newspapers. The fast-paced world of publishing
proved more enticing and attractive than a classical liberal arts education. He soon joined the Springfield (Mass.) Republican, then one of the largest circulating newspapers in New England outside of Boston, as a reporter.

There, he worked under the tutelage of Samuel Bowles, a “straight-laced, accurate newspaper worker” and veteran of early American journalism, who left a deep impression on the young Murphy. Bowles promoted a “news-first” approach to content, which emphasized reporting on the activities of Springfield and western Massachusetts over pontificating editorials and opinion pieces. This was a relative rarity at a time when powerful personalities helmed newspapers and saw the publications as an extension of their individual viewpoints. Bowles built a successful newspaper by making the Republican a “necessity” to the community, and adopting the principle to “make every department such that everybody will want to read it.”

For Bowles, the primary objective of the newspaper publisher was to comprehend the “general tastes and needs of his audience,” recognize its importance to the community, and deliver the news of the day in an accurate, interesting, and easily understood way. For Murphy, the most important of these principles was Bowles’ emphasis on community, and insistence on publishing a newspaper that reflected the city or town that it served, rather than larger interests.

When Murphy arrived in Superior in the early 1890s, he observed a city that lacked a true community newspaper. Most of the newspapers practiced a type of personal journalism, which over-emphasized editorial writing and carried overtly-partisan pieces. Appearing weekly, they published few pieces on local events, and instead devoted most space to political news and

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9 “John T. Murphy, Publisher, Dies,” Superior Telegram, Dec. 15, 1932.
proceedings from Washington, D.C. These newspapers embraced a different philosophy from the news-first approach Murphy developed under the Bowles’ influence. The *Telegram* pursued a content and circulation strategy that aspired to make it the “home daily of the people of northern counties.”\(^{13}\) With a mission of “tying Northern Wisconsin and Superior together from a news standpoint,” the *Telegram* signaled its difference from the purely booster and political newspapers that dominated Superior.

Murphy viewed his *Telegram* as a regional newspaper preoccupied with the activities of Superior residents and the towns scattered across the northern half of the state. He hired a circulation manager charged with developing readership outside the city. The *Telegram* grew to the point where it assumed the dominant position in the northern half of the state and soon resembled its peer publications in much larger cities. Clough Gates, an early *Telegram* reporter in the 1890s and later its business and circulation manager in the 1910s and 1920s, recalled that Murphy and his partners “wished to make it a newspaper equal or better than any paper in cities of 100,000 or more.”\(^{14}\) Under Murphy’s direction, the newspaper grew from publishing four text-heavy pages with very few illustrations to a daily newspaper with multiple sections—news, and a combined business, sports, and a women’s section—often numbering 12 pages, while weekend editions routinely totaled 16 or 20 pages. It developed specialty inserts to appeal to different audience segments, including the biweekly *Farmer’s Telegram, Junior Telegram* (with articles produced by local school children), and news sections detailing the activities of the surrounding villages and towns. Its weekend edition, which contained a substantial number of photos, illustrations, and comics, also carried real estate listings and an automotive section.

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\(^{13}\) Clough Gates, “40 Years of Newspaper History in Superior Has Brought Many Changes -- Once City Had 9 Papers,” *Superior Telegram 40th Anniversary Edition*, April 21, 1930.

\(^{14}\) Clough Gates, "40 Years of Newspaper History in Superior Has Brought Many Changes -- Once City Had 9 Papers," *Evening Telegram 40th Anniversary Edition*, April 21, 1930
There were several pushes throughout the 1920s to make the *Telegram* Wisconsin’s official newspaper, and the newspaper regularly advertised its circulation statistics, especially its out-of-town readership.

Observers praised Murphy’s drive, and the newspaper’s first few editions attracted accolades from the Minnesota and Wisconsin publishing community. The *Stevens Point (Wis.) Journal* applauded the *Telegram* for its “metropolitan style” and the quality of its printing; the Brodhead (Wis.) *Independent* described it as “one of the brightest and liveliest papers” in its exchange, and promised to give Superior “the inside track” on business development in the Northwest (while recognizing the paper’s additional role as a means of “legitimate advertising” of the city and its prospects). Unlike other Superior newspapers, which started and stopped with surprising regularity, the *Telegram* looked “as if it had come to Superior to stay.” More importantly, it seemed to have attracted the attention of the remaining Proprietors, who “have subscribed for it, read it, and like it.” The *Telegram’s* competition in Superior slowly dwindled; gradually, the city’s newspapers merged and eventually closed. By 1920, the *Telegram* was the city’s only English-language newspaper, an endorsement of Murphy’s initial strategy and the content and services the *Telegram* provided to Superior and the surrounding area.

Part of the *Telegram’s* success rested on its ability to navigate a period of intense change not only for Superior, but for the United States as a whole, while maintaining a close connection to the community. The 1920s marked the conclusion of the decades-long Progressive Era, which

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15 Vermillion Iron Journal (Tower, Minn.), *Superior Weekly Telegram*, May 12, 1890.
16 “We’re Almost too Modest to Print This,” *Superior Weekly Telegram*, May 7, 1890.
17 “Everything is Fish for Superior,” *Superior Weekly Telegram*, May 20, 1890.
18 “Stick a Pin in There,” *Waupaca (Wis.) Republican*, published in *Superior Weekly Telegram*, May 13, 1890.
19 *Superior Weekly Telegram*, May 17, 1890.
eroded the autonomy of the community and replaced its personal, informal ways with a new scheme derived from the “regulative, hierarchical needs of urban-industrial life.”

The increasing prominence of the urban market, coupled with the expansion of transportation and communication networks that further increased the ties between the metropolis and the hinterland, began to exacerbate the tensions between urban and rural areas. A distinctly urban mindset was beginning to dominate the American economy, as well as culture and politics.

The growing complexity of society wrought by industrialization, urbanization, increased immigration, and the preponderance of new technologies restructured how individuals thought of themselves in relation to one another, their community, and the country. The basic concepts of time, space, matter and self were changing, uncertainty was rampant.

The outbreak of world war and subsequent U.S. involvement furthered a growing sense of disillusionment that seemed to permeate the psyche of the general population, as well as the country’s intellectuals and cultural and political leaders. A “bewildering” rate of change continued the “commotion, turbulence, and flux” that began in the late 19th century, and, according to the historian Roderick Nash, made Americans nostalgic for the past.

Further, the 1920 census revealed that, for the first time, the majority of Americans lived in urban areas, effectively signaling American culture, politics, and the economy had largely abandoned—or at least moved on—from its agrarian roots. Historian Richard Hofstadter summed it up best: A nation “born in the country” had “moved to the city.”

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24 Hofstadter, 23.
Superior seemed well-suited to this new time period, an age of industrialization, mechanization, and interconnectedness. It was, its founders asserted, a city “born of necessity,” to meet the demands of the modern age (specifically, to provide a hub for the exchange of goods needed for the country’s steel mills and connect with its railroad network). The urbanization of the United States, and the movement of more people from the countryside into the city’s, served as validation to the city’s boosters. From its beginning, the *Telegram* positioned itself as a key platform for making the case for Superior as a “progressive and growing city.” In its *A Souvenir of Superior*, the *Telegram* described the city as ready to provide for a larger population and an influx of “wide-awake businessmen.” From the beginning, the *Telegram* emerged as the city’s publication most closely aligned with Superior’s future expectations.

However, the post-war era introduced new societal elements that challenged traditional patterns of life, not entirely in ways Superior’s elites welcomed. A growing generational divide between a newly emergent youth culture and previous generations raised questions about the implications of young people who held values that stood in stark contrast to their parents and grandparents. Youth in Superior, like their peers across the country, drove and danced; smoked in public; and wore shorter skirts and shorter hair. They took their dates to the movie theater, free from the supervision of adults and exposed to a seemingly more powerful medium. They were better educated. In droves, they extended their education beyond grade school, achieving high school diplomas and pursuing higher education at state normal schools, colleges and universities. And they consumed cultural products that communicated distinctly urban values. The commercialization and adoption of new technologies and consumer products such as the

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26 *A Souvenir of Superior*, 19.
27 *A Souvenir of Superior*, 35.
telephone, radio and most notably the automobile further enhanced connections between places. This mitigated the sense of isolation that characterized these communities in the 19th century and challenged the position of more traditional media outlets such as the newspaper.

The *Telegram* maintained its social and cultural position because it effectively operated as a platform to articulate and debate the meaning and the nature of the challenges the city faced: the challenges to its culture and social norms, the challenges of new institutions, and challenges of economics and politics that could undermine booster dreams that the city would become a major inland port. As the decade wore on, frustrations over Superior’s repeated failures to realize lofty expectations manifested themselves in print, and raised question about the city’s future. The *Telegram* became a repository for debates about Superior’s future, as well as what it meant to be a modern and progressive city. What shape should its institutions take? Where should investment be directed? What external, promotional messages should be broadcast to attract new businesses and improve the city’s national standing? And how should Superior’s citizens feel about the new institutions—the high schools and motion picture theaters—that were slowly starting to change how its youth were educated, and the values they held? Murphy’s *Telegram* proved to be the city’s most successful newspaper venture due to his embrace of a community-centric coverage strategy, and the new shape newspapers took in the early 20th century.

**A new vision for the newspaper, for the city**

By the turn of the 20th century, newspapers solidified not only their centrality to American cultural and political life, but also their position as one of the hallmarks of modernity. The United States had grown to become world’s largest newspaper market by 1900. According to the 1880 U.S. Census, there were 11,314 newspapers printed in the United States; by 1890, the number of newspapers increased to 17,616, with more than 68 million total subscriptions, well
over the national population of roughly 62 million.\(^{28}\) Newspapers were a part of everyday life.\(^{29}\) Entrepreneurial publishers began to take notice, and recognized the newspaper as a capitalistic endeavor. Gone were the days when country (and city) editors were lucky to turn a meager profit, and focused most of their efforts on boosting the political fortunes of one party or the business prospects of their town. Additionally, the rise of a national market for brand goods, the advent of chain grocery and pharmacy stores, and the spread of department stores created a need for a mass advertising platform.\(^{30}\) Newspapers were uniquely positioned to take advantage of this market opportunity, and gradually advertising revenue replaced subscription revenue as publisher’s primary profit generator. As a result, these publications could be big businesses and abandon their provincial tendencies if they cultivated a large enough readership. The shift from viewing readers as citizens to viewing readers as consumers, per the terminology of the historian Gerald Baldasty, resulted in a new definition of newspaper content, and a new type of newspaper.\(^{31}\) This introduced a different vision of the role of journalism in American society, for both newspaper publishers and newspaper readers; one that, aided by new printing and information-gathering technologies, would produce a larger, more complex news product designed to appeal to a mass audience, rather than a political faction, and serve the broader


\(^{29}\) Thomas C. Leonard, News For All: America’s Coming of Age With the Press (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 36.


interests of society, rather than simply the business community.

This industrialization of the newspaper, and the push for sky-high circulation numbers, was largely a product of urban publishers of the late 19th century. Yet, their new approach to content, format, and distribution impacted newspapers produced in less populous areas, especially those with distinctively urban ambitions such as Superior. Newspapers were undergoing an evolution that reflected large-scale changes in American society during the Progressive Era, and this transformation occurred in small cities and metropolises alike. While New York had been the center of journalistic innovation in the 19th century, the type of journalism that flourished in Manhattan was no longer equipped to meet the challenges society faced. And so the push for a reconceptualization of the newspaper largely came from Midwestern and Western publishers. Joseph Pulitzer, the Hungarian-born publisher of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, capitalized on the idea of a newspaper crusade to push the *Post-Dispatch’s* circulation to record heights. William Randolph Hearst used sensationalized news coverage and human-interest stories at the *San Francisco Examiner* to grow it into the most-read newspaper in the city. In Milwaukee, L.W. Nieman purchased a controlling interest in the failing *Milwaukee Journal*, where he introduced a strict policy of political independence and oversaw the publication’s rise to become the city’s dominant newspaper. And in Detroit, E.W. Scripps, a co-founder of the *Detroit News* and later the head of the E.W. Scripps chain of newspapers, “pioneered the model of a modern newspaper organization” by “creating a centrally managed and economically efficient chain of newspapers.”

32 The historians Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone continued Baldasty’s original argument in their examination of the form of newspapers, specifically the textual and visual elements that comprised a newspaper. They observed a new form of newspaper, which they distinguished as “modern,” emerged at the end of the 19th century. See: Barnhurst and Nerone, *The Form of News: A History*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2002).

observers, largely credit these publishers with introducing a new view of the newspaper and its relationship to the audience, as well as a new type of journalism. This “new journalism” emphasized the enhanced civic role newspapers accomplished by exposing corruption, embarking on crusades, and engaging in promotional stunts that highlighted the newspaper’s institutional position. It also emphasized dropping official party ties to obtain the largest circulation possible. For all publishers applauded the role their newspapers played in civic affairs, and all the good their investigations and crusades accomplished, a profit-seeking motive drove many of these editorial decisions.

These newspapers took on additional role in the newly urban, industrialized landscape of the United States: They cultivated a sense of community among readers. The growth of cities led to an increase in readers’ appetite for news, and they increasingly turned to newspapers as a guide to daily life and for the sense of place they offered in an increasingly impersonal urban environment. While news articles created to some extent a “mental world” for these new city residents, all sections of a newspaper acted as a sort of guidebook for urban living. Advice columns provided instructions on how to navigate new social interactions and expectations; gardening tips, recipes, and sewing instructions attempted to help housewives. The newspaper became “not only the interpreter of this environment but a means of surmounting in some measure its vast human distances, of supplying a sense of intimacy all too rare in the ordinary course of its life.” The University of Chicago urban sociologist Robert Park observed the newspaper’s ability to forge connections in the early 20th century: “The motive, conscious or unconscious, of the writers and of the press in all of this is to reproduce, as far as possible, in the

35 Hofstadter, 189.
city the conditions of life in the village,” Park argued.\textsuperscript{36} According to the media sociologist Michael Schudson, modern journalism took root in an urban society marked by weak ties between community members, where “living became more of a spectacle of watching strangers in the streets, reading about them in the newspapers.”\textsuperscript{37} The increased urban population rendered the spread of news via personal experience and interpersonal communication, such as through gossip, no longer viable. Newspapers, then, re-imagined their position within the urban environment and forged a new connection to community. These publications could link together the disparate parts of the American urban landscape, noted the historian Maury Klein, and “only the newspaper ... could cover every area of urban life.”\textsuperscript{38} This led to new practices of journalism and new visions of the newspaper that were, as Baldasty observed, “singularly urban.”\textsuperscript{39} The modern newspaper, remarked Park in the 1920s, was “a product of city life.”\textsuperscript{40}

By mimicking certain content characteristics and taking editorial cues from their urban counterparts, hinterland newspapers such as the \textit{Telegram} attempted to replicate the publications of larger cities in order to strengthen their connections to them. Newspapers, specifically dailies, became a signal of modernity. Influenced by the broader move toward industrialization, newspaper production began to exhibit the attributes of the modern economy. Printing and distribution reflected a high degree of mechanization, resulting in more mass-produced, standardized products, and required a higher capital investment than the decades prior. Newsrooms and newspaper business and circulation offices reflected the tendency toward

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  \item\textsuperscript{36} Robert Park, “The Natural History of the Newspaper,” \textit{American Journal of Sociology} 29(3): 273-289.
  \item\textsuperscript{39} Baldasty, \textit{Commercialization of the News}, 49.
  \item\textsuperscript{40} Park, 273.
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bureaucratic management that was dominating the corporate world, and the process of putting
the newspaper together closely resembled the method of factory production. New news gathering
and printing technologies facilitated the development of mass audiences, whether in Superior or
Chicago, and the mechanization of newspapers demonstrated that the publications embodied the
spirit and style of modernity.

The Telegram often touted its bureaucratic management and technology investments as
a sign of its commitment to Superior’s modern, urban vision. “This policy has been an expensive
one, not only in the matter of the purchase of high-priced equipment but in constant outlay to get
the news the constituency has required,” it told readers in its 20th anniversary issue, careful to
mark its progress in terms of printing presses and stereotyping equipment acquired. In a special
issue commemorating its new, 25,000-square foot facility, the newspaper detailed the process of
producing the newspaper, highlighting the machinery used. The Telegram’s eight typesetting
machines—two Intertype machines and six Linotype machines—represented an investment of at
least $27,050.41 Its two printing presses were most prized possessions and “inspired” the
community as well as the owners by their speed and efficiency. Its Goss 36-page four-color press
and Potter 24-page press could print 400 papers per minute, and the Telegram compared the
quality of its printing facility to that of the leading Chicago newspapers.42 Observers often
commented on the Telegram’s “modern newspaper office,” and in 1926, the annual meeting of
the Wisconsin Press Association was impressed by a demonstration of the speed of the
Telegram’s printing presses; a photo of the group was developed, made into newspaper halftone,

41 Total based on advertising figures listed for Linotype models in The Fourth Estate, August 16, 1919, 8. The
price of an Intertype machine was listed as $2,150 in 1912. There were, of course, cheaper machines available
second hand, but nothing in the Telegram’s materials indicated the machines were purchased used.
stereotyped and printed in an extra souvenir in less than two hours. The Telegram received several congratulatory messages from WPA members in response to the stunt.43

For communities such as Superior that aspired to be seen as progressive and modern, the outward embrace of technology and an urban-minded newspaper enhanced their claim. These elements became part of a newspaper’s promotional strategy, Baldasty observed. Quantitative measures of a publication’s influence (such as the number of pages, circulation statistics, advertising lineage), as well as testimonies to its speed in news-gathering, featured prominently within the pages of the paper itself. The Telegram often emphasized the quality and extent of its wire service subscriptions, “which few newspapers in cities the size of Superior are equipped with.”44 “It is very doubtful, whether there’s a newspaper in the United States, printed in a town of 75,000 or less, which supplies a better news and wire service than which comes from The Evening Telegram printing room.”45 It boasted whenever it beat the Duluth newspapers to a national story, or if it was the first to carry photos of a major media event. When the Telegram published photos of Calvin Coolidge’s inauguration, the newspaper announced the scoop with a banner headline (“Washington Inaugural Pictures in Superior the Day After! Chalk Up Another Victory for the Press”); and it included an article which described the Telegram’s coverage “as good as possible were the President inaugurated in Superior;”46 plus an editorial chiding the Duluth newspapers. “Telegram readers have become so accustomed to getting this kind of up-to-date service, and this newspaper so accustomed to giving it, that no particularly hornblowing seemed called for,” it wrote, feigning humility. “Then the Telegram suddenly realized that it

43 “Badger Editors Are Impressed With Superior,” Superior Evening Telegram, Sept. 1, 1926.
46 “Telegram Takes Pride in Being the Frist to Give People the News,” Superior Telegram, March 9, 1925.
either had been exceedingly enterprising or somebody else has been more or less asleep.”

Technology gave the Telegram the edge.

In the numerous small cities, towns, and villages that fell outside of the orbit of the urban metropolis, newspapers took on another role. The United States grew increasingly networked. Places were tied to one another via transportation routes and communication lines, syndicated newspaper content made more newspapers gradually resemble one another, and a national, mass culture encroached on communities. Newspapers, however, seemed to preserve an element of (idealized) small-town living. Notably, William Allen White, Murphy’s contemporary and the publisher of the Emporia (Kansas) Gazette, achieved national acclaim by becoming an advocate for a vision of the newspaper as an “agent of community.” In White’s conception, the newspaper published seemingly unimportant local news that chronicled life in Emporia and told “the sweet, intimate story of life.” The small newspaper, with its seemingly provincial news items, “reveals us to ourselves,” White wrote in Harper’s Monthly. The Telegram’s embrace of community and mass circulation simultaneously reflected a change in the ownership and operation of newspapers that had been building throughout the later decades of the 19th century. The Telegram encouraged a sense of community rooted in the present, but it also promoted an aspirational view of what the city could be. The newspaper strove to be an urban product in a distinctly modern age, without abandoning the more provincial values of Superior’s past.

47 “Blowing Our Own Horn,” Superior Telegram, March 9, 1925.
50 White, 891.
Twin Destinies: The Growth of the *Telegram* and Prosperity for Superior

From the beginning, Murphy tied the *Telegram*’s success to Superior. Its transformation from a small, four-page weekly with a limited circulation to a multi-section daily that claimed a statewide readership exemplified Superior’s destiny. The editorials, articles, and, to some extent, photos published on its pages created a narrative of progress that defined the city, and pointed it toward an urban future. “The *Telegram* industrially and its people personally have grown up with Superior. Both have shared its hopes and its disappointments,” the newspaper wrote in its 20th anniversary edition. “It has been The Telegram’s constant endeavor never to lag in preparation for the future but to always give its constituents a paper that would rank with those cities which in size, even if not in prospects, outranked Superior.” By 1902, the *Telegram*’s publishing facilities had become unbearably cramped. In order to pursue its goals—continuing to grow the newspaper’s circulation, promote Superior’s prospects and become a regional media outlet—it needed to move. Fittingly, Murphy purchased space in a new, 18,000-square foot building in the center of town, solidifying his paper’s position as a community institution and its centrality to life in Superior.

The editorial direction of the *Telegram* reflected Murphy’s vision of the newspaper as a community institution. First and foremost, Murphy established the *Telegram* as a “home-grown” product. Company ownership was centered in Superior, and Murphy filled the newspaper’s newsroom, business office, and printing facility with employees recruited from local schools. He cultivated a familial environment, managed the newspaper in a stern but kindly manner, and knew every employee by name. “They were his boys,” an early employee recalled. Second,

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51 *Superior Telegram 20th Anniversary Edition.*
52 “John T. Murphy, Publisher of Telegram, Dies.”
53 For most of the *Telegram*’s first 40 years the newsroom, advertising, and business offices were male dominated. Female labor was largely concentrated in the circulation department, where they worked as bookkeepers and
Murphy insisted that employees understand the newspaper’s primary audience: the community. He instructed that the *Telegram’s* editorial door should always be kept open “so that the public might enter and tell the editor or anyone else his business.” When the newspaper’s offices were remodeled, Murphy ensured the news room was plainly marked and seats provided so that anyone might enter and find a welcome. Reporters’ work was, according to Murphy, “the public, and when a newspaper man has to lock himself up he ceases to be a newspaper man.” He emphasized this sentiment in a series of editorial in the *Telegram*. “Reporters are more important than editors,” he explained in a 1926 piece. “They mingle with the public and whether justice is to be done in recording the happenings of the day depends almost solely upon the reporter.” When Murphy learned that a reporter had been rude to a Superior resident on the phone, he reportedly rapped the reporters’ desk with the closest object he could find—a paperweight—and commanded the newsroom’s attention. Typewriters stopped clicking, and a room full of people looked up. “I just want to make a brief speech.” Murphy announced. “If there is a newspaper man in this organization who thinks the newspaper is being printed for this staff, or for himself, individually, and that he can regard with levity the people for whom this paper is printed, he had better think of doing something else.”

Much of space on the *Telegram’s* pages throughout the 1920s chronicled the life of Superior’s residents and reflected the daily activities of the city. The typical issue numbered 16 pages, with the weekend edition carrying more than 20 pages. The front page was reserved for stenographers. The few females that were on the editorial staff were largely relegated to covering society news or acting as proofreaders. However, two women did serve as editors in the 1920s. Gertrude Allen was the assistant state editor in the first half of the decade, and France Risdon, former editor of the women’s and society sections, became state editor in 1929.

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54 “John T. Murphy, Publisher of Telegram, Dies.”
55 Ibid.
57 “John T. Murphy, Publisher of Telegram, Dies.”
international or national news, typically provided via one of the *Telegram’s* three wire service subscriptions, state news, and the occasional local story. Most local news appeared on the paper’s interior pages, organized into sections based on neighborhoods or interests, such as the Women’s Page and sports section. Despite the increased costs associated with acquiring and printing photos, its editors were not shy about including photos in the newspaper; any edition would contain photos of politicians, sports stars, motion picture celebrities, socialites, and royalty, as well as local notables and events. Advertisements abounded. By the 1920s, the city had three motion picture theaters, all of which regularly promoted their line-up, and hosted traveling theater groups and individuals on the lecture circuit. Ads for local stores appeared alongside nationally known brands. The *Telegram* of the 1920s was a lively, visual paper focused on the people, businesses, and prospects of Superior.

Seemingly mundane news items and photos cultivated a shared sense of community and an investment in the city’s future. Scattered across the *Telegram’s* main news section and divided into neighborhood-specific sections, the content of the items rarely changed (beyond names and addresses). Whether in the East End, Billings Park, or South Superior, the life of each neighborhood’s residents carried on with a comforting uniformity. People traveled and entertained out-of-town visitors; they attended lodge meetings and gatherings of lady’s associations and aid societies; they competed in bridge tournaments and held sheepshead nights; they graduated from high school, married, and had children—all chronicled in the newspaper. The Women’s Page, tucked inside the main news section, granted even more space to community activities, and often included photos of prominent and noteworthy Superior residents. Here photos of young brides-to-be appeared alongside portraits of the president of the Superior Women’s Club and the chairs of charity balls. Even the sport’s section took a decidedly
community-first angle. The football team from Superior Normal, the local teacher’s college, could command as much space as the more heralded Badger squad from the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and recaps of local curling bonspiels often followed professional boxing reports.

Whenever possible, the *Telegram* reported on the exploits of former residents who had achieved national acclaim, and used it as an opportunity highlight the strength of the community and instill a sense of civic pride. When Ernie Nevers, former Superior High School football standout, Stanford University alum, and the “greatest gridster,” announced his retirement from professional football, the *Telegram* chronicled his long ties to the area and promised readers he’d return to the city.58 When former Superior resident Dave Bancroft, a shortstop with the New York Giants, returned home after winning the World Series, the *Telegram* covered his homecoming extensively. More than 10,000 fans greeted his train at the station; the *Telegram* sponsored the filming of a short news reel; and a banquet was held in his honor at Superior High School. Each story was covered extensively in the paper. The *Telegram* seized on the opportunity to write about former residents with Hollywood ties; the paper highlighted film producers, movie actresses and actors, and scenario writers in an effort to demonstrate the connections between Superior and the national culture. Here, the *Telegram* extended the values that defined Superior from its initial founding into the present day. It repeatedly singled-out citizens on its pages for their drive, hard work and entrepreneurial spirit.

The shared understanding of these successes was rooted in a narrative the *Telegram* promoted that emphasized Superior’s promise, the struggle to realize its potential, and the role of its citizens in securing its future. Historical observations in interviews, general commentary in

news articles, and reflective editorials advanced the commonly-held view that the 1920s represented the culmination of decades of progress at the head of the lakes. The city had been cut out of the wilderness, the *Telegram* liked to remind readers. As late as the 1880s, settlers saw a place “covered with woods and brush so thick it was impossible to see a distance beyond 20 feet.” There were no amenities, no amusement in early Superior: “We didn’t have much in the way of recreation and pleasure, and didn’t expect much,” recalled an editorial. Early settlers were admired for their perseverance, spirit of cooperation, and commitment to the city’s success. After the struggle to tame the wilderness, the struggle to survive, the struggle to make a living, and the struggle to revive a city once left for dead, it seemed Superior’s moment had arrived. The *Telegram* painted a picture of progress and improvement. “I can easily see ... that Superior is progressing as it never has before,” a visitor told the *Telegram*. “There certainly is a big change in the appearance of Superior today and the memory picture I took away 21 years ago,” commented a visitor from Portland, Oregon. “Superior has improved wonderfully,” observed another former resident.

The *Telegram’s* historical narrative of Superior’s development, then, always concluded on a positive note that emphasized the city’s growth and transformation, and boosting its future prospects. Editorials did much to extend this theme throughout the decade. “A much brighter and better day is now dawning,” reflected a 1921 editorial. Read another a year later: “The people all over the Northwest understand that destiny cannot be forever defeated. ... The tide is turning.

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60 “Twenty Years Ago,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, June 19, 1922.
61 “Hotel Pleases Old Resident,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, August 1, 1923.
62 “Visits Superior After 21 Years,” *Superior Telegram*, July 11, 1921.
64 “Do You Know of Any Other?” *Superior Telegram*, Feb. 24, 1921.
this way, and already this whole region is beginning to feel the effects.” Articles reinforced the observations of the editorial page. “Coming up on the train I saw fine farms, the equal of any in the country,” N.C. French, a former newspaper publisher, told the Telegram. “Prosperity is evident on every hand.” Bustling streets, new commercial buildings, modern factories, an opera house and movie theaters impressed visitors. Business conditions seemed especially strong. The city exhibited “undeniable evidence” of “a sure, steady, and substantial growth,” and the increasing diversity of its manufacturing concerns, which produced chairs, bread, tractors and steel, provided it with a surer foundation than other places. No business seemed a better representative of Superior’s success than the Telegram. “The fact that the Telegram is prospering ... is proof positive that Superior and Northern Wisconsin are coming into their own,” a former Telegram staff member told the newspaper.

Discerning the true level of reader interaction with a publication, as well as audience interpretation of the materials presented within a publication’s pages, has long been a difficult component of any historical researching involving print culture. Letters to the editor have emerged as one way to better complicate the relationship between publication and readers. But they, too, are complicated artifacts to study, namely because of the selective nature of their publication. Typically, not all letters sent to editorial offices were published, so those that do

67 “City Growth is Substantial,” Superior Evening Telegram, April 28, 1924.
68 “Member of Telegram’s Original ‘Staff’ Sends His Congratulations,” Superior Evening Telegram, March 3, 1923.
69 Letters to the editor have become a focal point for several communication historians. David Nord’s study of letters to the editor sent to the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Herald both published and unpublished, suggested that readers responses to newspapers were based on the reader’s notion of what a newspaper should be and how it should function within the community. Often, these perceptions were at odd’s with the publisher’s. However, not all scholars are as lucky as Nord to stumble on a collection of both unpublished and published letters. See: Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2001). See also: Brian Creech and Amber Roessner, “Declaring the Value of Truth: Progressive-Era Lessons for Combatting Fake News,” Journalism Practice 13(3): 263-279.
appear in newspapers reflect a cultivated collection selected by an editor. Further, not all readers wrote to the newspapers they read, and those that did write did not always do so consistently. Yet, in terms of evaluating the response to the narratives the Telegram promoted and the type of coverage that appeared on its pages, the community response in the paper’s Public Forum section does provide some illumination into the publication-reader relationship.

Many of these letters regularly congratulated the Telegram for its Superior-centric reporting and its effort to drive investment and interest to the region. They demonstrated a largely positive response to the Telegram’s content from readers, and reveal, to some extent, the wide circulation of the newspaper. While most letters originated from Superior, the Forum included pieces from across a roughly 150-mile radius, as well letters from Milwaukee, northern Minnesota, New Jersey, and Ohio. Throughout the 1920s, the Telegram published letters thanking the newspaper for providing the space. “The Superior Telegram is to be congratulated for giving privilege to people of different opinions on various subjects space such as the Public Forum affords,” read one letter. “It is a most interesting part of the paper.”70 Another letter applauded the Telegram for its commitment to giving space to “anything that would help Douglas County and North Wisconsin as well as the city of Superior.”71 “I am a subscriber of the Evening Telegram and delight in reading the Public Forum,” wrote a reader in 1926.72 Polite requests for the space to make commentary were a common feature of letters published. “Please allow me a little space in your valuable paper,” opened one letter.73 “May we have some space in the Public Forum in the hope that it will bring out discussion, and facts of value to taxpayers?”

70 Hugh Manity, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, March 23, 1921.
71 Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, October 8, 1925.
72 Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, May 8, 1926.
73 Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, December 16, 1927
began another that addressed the school budget.\(^{74}\) "Would like a little space in the Forum to express my opinion on a question that should interest every sportsman and every dog lover in the city," started a letter that went on to admonish Superior residents for contributing to the city’s stray dog problem.\(^{75}\) The level of civility and formality that accompanied these pieces indicate the high regard the Telegram’s readers had not only for the publication, but for the space and opportunity to offer their own commentary.

To a certain extent, the Telegram cultivated this narrative with an external audience in mind, although, again, difficulties arise in determining how effective these messages were and what impact they had on Superior’s economic development and population growth. Throughout the 1920s, the Telegram’s circulation fluctuated around 20,000, which gave it the highest newspaper circulation in Wisconsin outside of those newspapers produced in Milwaukee.\(^{76}\) It had the highest out-of-state readership of any Wisconsin newspaper, likely due to its proximity to Duluth and the level of commercial and cultural exchange between the two cities, and the Telegram claimed 180 towns in Northern Wisconsin subscribed to the newspaper. The newspaper even boasted of an international readership—the Telegram routinely published short features on its readers in Europe and Egypt, although its two features on Egyptian subscribers, separated by several years, featured the same Athanase G. Psaltis. There was a push in the mid-1920s to make the Telegram the official state newspaper, due in part to its tradition of local ownership (rather than selling stock to out-of-state businessmen), but the Telegram fell one vote short in the State Senate, which named Madison’s Capital Times the state’s official newspaper.

\(^{74}\) Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, May 25, 1923.
^{75}\) Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, November 1, 1927.
^{76}\) Several newspapers published in Milwaukee reported significantly greater circulation statistics than the Telegram. According to N.W. Ayers and Son’s 1923 Newspaper Annual Directory, the Journal had a circulation of 114,676, the Sentinel 78,973, and several daily foreign-language papers all had higher numbers than the Telegram. The Telegram was much closer in circulation to the third newspaper in Wisconsin.
However, despite these efforts to distribute the Telegram beyond Northern Wisconsin, the effect of this self-congratulatory content is ultimately unclear. Beyond winning accolades from within the community for its Superior-first reporting, the Telegram’s reporting work went largely unnoticed by a larger audience. Yet, it replicated this narrative frequently in other venues throughout the city.

This strong emphasis on progress and transformation reflected the boosting tradition observed in earlier Superior publications, and extended to Superior’s other print products. It appeared in advertising for the Tri-State Fair, a major summer attraction in Superior that drew thousands of visitors from across the Northwest. It penetrated the city’s civic associations, public affairs committee, political associations, and social groups. It formed the basis for advertisements carried in national publications, such as Editor & Publisher; displays at regional events, including the Chicago Outdoor Show; and business reports and promotional pamphlets in circulation. During the 1910s, the Telegram published several lushly illustrated magazines and pamphlets that extended the theme of prosperity and supplemented it with a statistical analysis of the business opportunities available as well as photographic evidence of the progress made at the head of the lakes.

The cover of the 1912 City Statistician’s report declared Superior the “new steel center,” as smoke stacks stretch the length of the publication and smoke plumes swirl around the cover. An interior graphic reminds readers that they’ll “prosper in Superior.” For the opening of Superior: A City of Superlative Industries, a 1914 pamphlet, a woman draped in classical robes stands atop gears representative of industry, pointing toward a skyline full of factories and

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77 See: Old Settlers Association, Superior, Wisconsin Papers, 1831 – 1942 (Superior: Area Research Collection, University of Wisconsin Superior); Superior Commercial Club, Publicity Items.
railroad terminals. The cover text concludes: “Superior is the commercial metropolis of the most productive region now under development east of the Mississippi River.” Superior, the City of Opportunities began with a photographic collage of the city’s new steel plants, showcasing the blast furnaces and stoves, pit furnaces, coke towers, and railroad terminals at the heart of this modern industry. A 1928 handbook published by the city’s Public Affairs Commission, a group organized to advertise and advance the commercial interests of Superior, promised to distribute statistics and “information of value” in order to “further increase the general prosperity of the people of Superior.”

Each of these publications contained similar content; after an overview of the progressive-minded historical narrative of Superior, they provided metrics that pointed to the city’s financial stability. These included the strength of the city’s banking deposits; volume of the city’s building program; and shipping activity at the city’s port, specifically the amount of grain and iron ore processed at Superior’s docks, which routinely positioned Superior as a leading U.S. port in terms of tonnage. The Public Affairs Commission deemed its work a success; its booklets and supporting articles were widely distributed, according to its 1927 annual report, throughout the state and at regional events.

Throughout these materials and in its regular newspaper coverage, the Telegram emphasized the human element as key to Superior’s growth and furthered the notion that Superior’s destiny remained firmly in the hands of its residents. Their support of local businesses and embrace of forward-thinking initiatives (or lack thereof) was critical to the city’s prosperity.

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81 In terms of total shipping tonnage, Superior and Duluth ranked as the second-largest port in the United States behind New York.
82 “Public Affairs Committee Reviews Work of Past Year,” Superior Evening Telegram, Dec. 8, 1927.
These boosters, according to Telegram editorials, had a shared understanding of Superior’s past and its assets, rooted in the historical narrative the newspaper sought to advance. They placed the needs of the community first and foremost. “The idea of giving the old home town first consideration is not ‘small town stuff,’” read a 1926 editorial. “It is good business. It is good economics. It is good citizenship. ... Boost Superior, buy in Superior, know Superior better, then take part in the benefits which will come and are coming to this city of promise.”

Stated another: “Loyalty to the hometown is the finest contribution any citizen can make. Without that loyalty, the entire community suffers.”

Public offerings of stock in local companies provided an opportunity for Superior residents to act on this booster rhetoric. When the Stinson Tractor Company need additional financing, the needs of the city and its ties to Superior became the key message of its campaign: “You are being offered an opportunity to aid in keeping the company here—and do so with a good investment for yourself,” read the copy of a full-page ad that appeared in the Telegram. “Superior wants the industry—you want the investment.” As a “permanent, prosperous Superior industry,” the success (and the survival) of companies like Stinson were crucial to developing the diversified manufacturing industry the Telegram claimed the city needed. The campaign won the endorsement of the city’s Civic and Commerce Association, the organization responsible for developing Superior business, and the Telegram. When it appeared the $50,000 stock offering would be claimed in a matter of days, the newspaper applauded the “gratifying” community response: “The Telegram believes strongly that Superior should become a city of factories and

83 “Superior First,” Superior Evening Telegram, March 20, 1926.
that wisdom dictates that we should encourage the worthy small ones to become bigger.”

Another campaign to finance a new, modern, “million-dollar hotel” that city boosters claimed Superior needed drew on similar messaging. Led by H.G. Pickering, an “aggressive fighter for Superior,” the plan to build the Androy Hotel in the heart of the city’s business district proved Superior was “marching onward” and served as a “prophecy of rapid and important expansion in the near future.” Marked by a “spirit of enthusiasm,” the campaign centered on the unity of the community. A “spirit of energetic cooperation, the spirit of taking a municipal rather than a personal point of view in connection with this enterprise, are worthy of congratulations,” read a front-page editorial. “The future of a city depends upon ... the spirit of its citizens.” Cooperation was key to civic prosperity: “For the first time in the history of Superior every section of the city is united. ... It looks as if Superior is in for some real cooperation and civic prosperity.” At its completion, Pickering and the Telegram’s editorial writers applauded the “loyal-minded Superior citizens” who subscribed to hotel company stock. “This merely demonstrates what the people of Superior can do when they really make up their minds to put across a project,” Pickering said. “What the future will hold for Superior can largely be determined by herself.” “There is no good reason why Superior should not be as large as many of the western cities,” commented a resident after returning from a trip to the Pacific Coast, after the hotel campaign proved successful. “It makes me feel that perhaps we

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87 The Androy Hotel Campaign often featured the tagline “Superior’s Million-Dollar Hotel,” but the total cost of construction was closer to $750,000.
88 “City Can Do What It Wants,” Superior Evening Telegram, May 20, 1925.
89 “Hotel Drive Starts Off With Great Enthusiasm,” Superior Evening Telegram, July 17, 1923.
90 “Congratulations, Superior!” Superior Evening Telegram, July 24, 1923.
91 “United We Stand,” Superior Evening Telegram, July 19, 1923.
93 “City Can Do What it Wants,” Superior Evening Telegram, May 20, 1925.
have changed our tactics here, and there is a real future in Superior for the enterprising businessman with civic spirit and pride.”

In addition to its published content, the *Telegram* cultivated an engaged, unified audience ready to act in Superior’s best interests through its sponsorship of activities and local promotions. These events worked in tandem with its coverage efforts to enhance the feelings of community the newspaper argued were essential to the city’s future, as well as to solidify the *Telegram’s* civic position within Superior. Many of these events occurred annually and targeted the city’s children. When a series of drownings occurred in Lake Superior, the newspaper launched a free Learn to Swim campaign in conjunction with the YMCA, open to any boy between 10 and 18 years old. Its goal was to “eliminate drownings due to lack of instruction,” and it remained a staple of the *Telegram’s* community outreach throughout the 1920s, teaching hundreds of area boys to swim. Its yearly holiday motion picture show entertained thousands of area children; pictures of the packed Palace Theater often appeared in the newspaper in late December, as well as reminders for the children attendees to keep track of the hats and mittens they often left behind. The *Telegram* also acted as a key supporter of local charity events and fund-raising drives, especially for local orphanages. When Babe Ruth visited Duluth, he made the trek across the bay at the *Telegram’s* request to visit St. Joseph’s orphanage and the Superior Children’s Home and Refuge Association. A photo of the *Telegram*-sponsored visit appeared on the paper’s front page, with the Mighty King of Swat engulfed by small children. The caption made sure to credit the newspaper for coordinating the opportunity.

Reader contests also provided another avenue to highlight *Telegram* readers as well as to

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95 “Find the Babe!” *Superior Evening Telegram*, Nov. 6, 1926.
broadcast its reach. The newspaper claimed to be the home paper to 180 cities and towns in
Northern Wisconsin, a region encompassing more than 15,000 square miles. It consistently
earned the second-highest circulation in the state throughout the decade, behind the two English-
language dailies from Milwaukee, the Journal and the Sentinel. Contests often included the
opportunity to print photos of readers and share their stories. The “Doll Lady” invited more than
200 young girls to stop by the newspaper’s office to have their photo taken, which would appear
in a future issue of the paper.96 The Telegram solicited stories about readers’ dogs, and
published a picture collage featuring canines attending the city’s annual dog derby. The launch
of a contest to find the largest family within the Telegram’s readership resulted in a series of
pictures of families from across Northwestern Wisconsin and short profiles of the families with
eight, nine, and ten children. The Holmberg family of St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin, winners of the
1926 largest family contest with 12 children, wrote to the Telegram in appreciation for the
hospitality shown during their first visit to the city. “Most of all we wish to thank ‘Uncle
Johnnie,’ as we like to call the Editor ... and all of the members of the Telegram staff who
arranged for the trip and all they did for us.” Mentioned in the letter was the gratitude the
Holmbergs felt on account of their prize: a Telegram-sponsored new pair of shoes for each child.

But the Telegram’s role as a community actor was displayed best during the World
Series, when it erected a large electronic scoreboard in the heart of downtown Superior and
broadcast play-by-play action of each game.97 This endeavor showcased many of the themes the
newspaper often emphasized when it reminded readers of its value to the city; it displayed its

96 “Children Who Have Won Their Dollies Invited to Have Picture Taken,” Superior Evening Telegram, Sept. 18,
1924.
97 The Telegram did not limit its electronic scoreboard usage to the World Series, although this was the most
consistent event it publicized. It also broadcast electronic election returns throughout the 1920s, and sponsored
“fight parties” at the Telegram building, where wire reports were broadcast to an audience via a megaphone.
commitment to new technologies and demonstrated the cost undertaken by the newspaper to enhance life in Superior. It also treated its wire services as a community resource, the information they provided meant to be shared beyond the walls of the Telegram building. The Telegram was not the only newspaper to offer an electronic scoreboard—Editor & Publisher contained several ads for electronic scoreboards throughout the 1920s and various reports from other newspapers about the goodwill and subscription sales such events offered. But it was the only newspaper at the head of the lakes to do so. For the 1920 World Series, the Telegram promised its “super-service” would transport fans to the heart of the games some 850 miles away in Cleveland and more than 1,200 miles away in Brooklyn.98 “Every ball throw and every play, to the minutest detail, will be produced,” it promised readers on the eve of the much-anticipated 1921 Series between the New York Yankees and New York Giants.99 Photos of the crowds in the streets, clustered around the Telegram building and gazing at the electronic scoreboard, often accompanied the annual stories about the Series. Captions mentioned the number of fans the board attracted: “A huge and enthusiastic crowd stood for two hours in front of the Telegram electric baseball scoreboard. ... The shouts of the fans drowned out the sounds of street cars and automobiles when the game drew near the end.”100 Taken from multiple angles—likely from the upper-story windows of the Telegram—the photos provide a visual representation of the centrality of the newspaper to life in Superior. More than 3,000 fans packed Tower Avenue, creating an issue for through traffic, to watch the 1927 Series.101 Letters of appreciation streamed into the newspapers’ office. The Telegram claimed it received “hundreds of letters and

100 “Superior Crowd Sees the Series,” Superior Evening Telegram, Oct. 6, 1924.
phone calls” in response to its 1925 World Series coverage, which included radio broadcasts on its new station, WEBC. It reported responses from fans covered “practically every city and village within 200 miles of Superior,” and included residents of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota.102

The sponsorship of local activities, the promotion of newspaper contests, and the underwriting of electronic scoreboards underscored the importance of the *Telegram* to Superior. The newspaper boasted of its contributions to the community. “The Telegram is essentially a Superior institution and may be regarded as a fair epitome of the opportunities that Superior has held forth to those who come early and consistently put their faith in Superior,” it announced in a supplement dedicated to the opening of its new building. As a “monument to the enterprise that has been characteristic of the Telegram from its initial issue,” the building and the publication it housed should instill pride in Superiorites, especially as the *Telegram* looked to take a place among the best metropolitan newspapers.104 Of all its accomplishments, the *Telegram* was most proud of its role in cultivating active, engaged readers seemingly unified in the desire for a progress future for city. A front-page editorial highlighted this theme: “The Telegram has a larger daily circulation than any daily newspaper in the United States of in the world publishing in a town the size of Superior. ... While several cities in Wisconsin have been trying to push Superior off the map for second place and some of them have succeed in doing it, this is not the case with the Telegram. ... There is no town in the state, large or small, which is as prosperous this fall as Superior. So the Telegram can congratulate Superior and incidentally

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103 “Story of Telegram, Upper Wisconsin’s Big Daily,” *Superior Telegram*.
104 “Member of Telegram’s Original ‘Staff’ Sends His Congratulations,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, March 3, 1923.
congratulates itself.”

**Challenges to Presenting a Unified Community in Print**

If the *Telegram* actively supported the creation of an army of boosters, united in a common understanding of Superior’s past and holding the same hopes for its future, it also carefully fought off attacks from the boosters’ enemies, dubbed the “knockers.”

A 1928 citywide survey revealed that the “only obstacles to [Superior’s] advancement as a trade, commercial and industrial center are largely imaginary in the minds of certain citizens.” It stated that confusion over Superior’s status as a city hindered business development, a finding the *Telegram* found “ludicrous.” The newspaper squarely placed the blame on those who failed to support various initiatives the *Telegram* and Superior’s civic associations promoted as progressive and modern, such as the (successful) Hotel Androy project and (unsuccessful) civic auditorium proposal. To the *Telegram*’s editorial writers, the knockers’ hesitancy to back these projects reeked of a civic disloyalty that directly opposed the civic boosterism the *Telegram* and others advocated.

Consequently, *Telegram* delegitimized the opposition, portraying these individuals as out of step with the community and as those opposed to a new, distinctly modern vision of Superior. Often, it used generational lines to mark a divide between Superior’s future and its past. During the hotel campaign, articles referred to its proponents as the “younger men” of the city, a new

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105 “Let’s Have Prosperity!” *Superior Evening Telegram*, Nov. 5, 1924.

106 While the exact origin of the word “knocker” is unclear, the *Journal of Education* attempted to explain its origin in 1918: “When the Creator had made all the good things, it seemed there was still some dirty word to do … He still had some old scraps leftover that were too bad to put into the Rattlesnake, the Hyena, the Scorpion, and the Skunk; so He put all these together, covered it with suspicion, wrapped it with jealousy, marked it with a yellow streak, and called it a Knocker.” “Knocker or Booster,” *Journal of Education* 88(12), 329.


generation dedicated to the “resurrection of Superior” and the realization of its potential. The knockers—or, in some articles, the croakers—resisted these initiatives. The *Telegram* simply portrayed them as old-fashioned and out of step with the community’s needs. “The only thing that they did do was to sit-back and say it couldn’t be done, that they were opposed to it, that they had no faith in Superior, that they did not believe in the civic and community spirit of the city.” County Judge W.E. Haily told the newspaper: “For many years we older citizens of Superior have seen the community stand stagnant, when, with the multitude of natural advantages it possessed, it should have gone forward with rapid strides. ... We were asleep. ... I feel confident that [this hotel] marks the birth of a new era for the city of Superior—one of prosperity and substantial growth.” His comments were met with outbursts of cheering and applause.

Throughout, the *Telegram* presented a seemingly unified, cohesive community that was White, predominantly middle class, free of ethnic and racial conflict, and adhered to a Christian morality. Despite a substantial immigrant population, the portrait presented was that of fully Americanized residents. The reality of life in Superior was much more complicated and ethnically diverse. More than 27 percent of the population was foreign-born, according to the 1920 U.S. Census, and many of the city’s citizens were first-generation Americans, including *Telegram* publisher John T. Murphy. During Superior’s second boom in the 1890s, new residents flocked to the city from Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Germany, bringing diverse religious affiliations and competing conceptions of what shape life in the United States would take. The Finns in particular, who had first arrived on the shore of Lake Superior to work in the copper

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111 Ibid.
mines of Upper Michigan, found themselves at odds with the other ethnic groups in the area, mostly due to their socialist political views, staunchly pro-labor stance, and more active efforts to create an ethnic enclave that would preserve certain Finnish cultural elements, rather than pursuing full assimilation. Firm believers in “the importance of the printed word,” the Finnish successfully operated their own newspapers in Superior, including one of the most popular Finnish socialist publications in the United States, the daily *Tyomies*, whose name translated to “The Worker.” Its publishers not only sought to advance a political agenda, but also promote a conception of community that encouraged working people to “win a peaceful, secure, and better life.”

That included printing articles not otherwise found in places like the *Telegram*, which largely applauded Superior’s Americanization efforts and smoothed over ethnic differences.

While the *Telegram* muted ethnic diversity, it essentially deleted the region’s racial diversity. Native Americans and blacks rarely appeared in the *Telegram* or the other print materials the city of Superior or its commercial, political, and social associations produced. In the mid-19th century, members of the Ojibwe tribe were forced onto a nearby reservation after White settlers colonized their lands and secured ownership via treaties; although their communities fell within the *Telegram*’s purported coverage territory, they only appeared in articles discussing the city’s past and its present transformation. The turnover of the city site from Native Americans to whites marked a significant step forward in its progress, and the elimination of camps and people from along the shoreline—including the last few camps along Wisconsin Point—signaled the arrival of civilization in Superior. Two nearby reservations, Red Cliff in Bayfield County (population 186) and Bad River (population 2,731) in Ashland

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County, technically fell within the Telegram’s purported coverage area yet were absent from its pages.

Superior’s small black population suffered a similar marginalization in coverage, due primarily to its small size. The 1920 census recorded only 107 black men and women, a decline from the 182 reported in the 1910 census. Nearby Duluth had a black population of 495. Throughout the region, blacks found employment in steel mills and factories, and some worked as janitors, waiter, and porters. But in the Telegram, blacks only appeared as part of advertisements and promotions for touring minstrel shows; as the butt of the joke in comic strips; and in short, often lurid articles that upheld a racial hierarchy that elevated whiteness. Mixed race relationships attracted some interest, especially when it involved local people. The Telegram covered the stories of runaway white women, including one who was arrested in a nearby Minnesota city with the black man she intended to marry. It also devoted attention to the story of a Superior black man who won visiting rights in divorce court not based on the strength of his case, but so that his children would never believe themselves to be fully white. Judge Solon R. Perris explained his reasoning, noting his aversion to racial mixing: “I make this provision because of the danger of misapprehension not entirely on the part of these children, but on the part of others, members of the public—before these children arrive at the age of puberty.” On the rare occasion the Telegram quoted one of Superior’s black residents, it did so by publishing their words written in dialect, furthering marginalizing the city’s black voices and establishing

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them as low-class. For example, in a short piece on a brawl that erupted in Superior’s Darktown, an area near the docks just north of the central business district, one of the three women arrested dismissed the severity of the conflict: “We’s just brawlin’, thass all,” the Telegram reported.¹¹⁷

Yet, the Telegram still saw itself as largely progressive on racial issues, the result of its regional competition with other cities. When a mob lynched three black men in Duluth as revenge for a reported assault on a White woman, the Telegram was quick to criticize the mob mentality that took hold across the bay. Initially police held six men in the city jail, all traveling through town as part of the John Robinson Circus. But as news began to spread about the assault, and a crowd of up to 10,000 appeared outside the jail, weapons in hand. They forced their way into the jail, held a “trial” for the six men that stood accused, and hung three of the men from a lamp post in the middle of the city.¹¹⁸ Duluth had a “serious problem on its hands,” the Telegram noted, as police failed to prevent the situation and provide the accused men of adequate protection. Lynching, according to the Telegram’s editorial writers, was an “unspeakable offense” that was never justified.¹¹⁹ “That kind of lawlessness easily grows and becomes an instrument in the hands of that element which is moved by prejudice and whose craving for excitement is greater than its sense of justice. It easily becomes a public peril.”¹²⁰ The violent outcome of Duluth’s racial conflicts, and the exposure of its police force as racist, could stand to hurt its national standing. “No city can retain the respect of its neighbors and at the same time condone and foster those sworn to defend and enforce the law, a spirit of weakness and

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¹¹⁷ “‘Just Brawlin’, Says Negresses When Arrested,” Superior Telegram, April 18, 1924.
¹¹⁸ Ralph Greenfield, a Superior photographer, took photos of the bodies, and payed a group of young boys to sell photos of the lynchings on street corners. He allegedly made thousands of dollars on the photos. Bob Dylan later memorialized the photos in his song Desolation Row: “They’re selling postcards of the hanging.”
¹²⁰ Ibid.
incompetency such as permitted Tuesday’s triple lynching,” read a *Telegram* editorial.121 Worse was the revelation that assault victim largely exaggerated the event, and that no evidence corroborated her claims.

The public murder of three black men provided the *Telegram* with an opportunity to position Superior against Duluth, for the better. However, slowly, letters to the editor started to appear in the newspaper, and community conversation started to grow around banning traveling circuses and carnivals from the city, claiming the detrimental moral effect on boys and girls. Later in the decade, when a reader accused the *Telegram* as supporting the Ku Klux Klan due to its rather tepid criticism of the increase in Klan-related activities in the South and Midwest, the newspaper’s editors were quick to dismiss the charges with a publish response. “... As to the The Telegram condoning violence, or racial discrimination—far from it!”122 But the *Telegram* still advocated for a view of blacks that preserved a view that elevated Whites and sequestered black men and women into the jobs Whites would not do. In writing about the northern movement of blacks during the Great Migration, the *Telegram’s* editorials described the value of blacks being limited to meeting the demand for unskilled labor, “for a kind of labor which most white Americans do not care to do.”123

But vice proved a stronger and more pervasive challenger to the *Telegram’s* narrative of Superior. With a high number of transient workers, including sailors and shipyard laborers, as well as relative isolation from the statewide law enforcement entities, Superior became a hotbed of gambling and prostitution. It was “notorious” for being a “wide-open town” where

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121 “Aftermath to Deal With,” *Superior Telegram*, June 17, 1920.
122 Response to Letter to the Editor from Louis M. Harris, “Wonders if Telegram Leans Toward the Klan,” *Superior Telegram*, Nov. 16, 1923.
commercialized vice thrived in the blocks bordering the waterfront. Of the 48 brothels found in the 1913 investigation of vice in Wisconsin from Teasdale Vice Committee, led by Wisconsin Senator Howard Teasdale, 21 were in Superior. “I am not prejudiced against Superior, but the testimony we heard there shows that Superior is the worst city we have found in Wisconsin,” Teasdale told the Milwaukee Journal. The diversity the pages of the Telegram lacked could be found on the streets of the city’s red light district, or in the police department’s official Registry of Sporting People. Here, police officers diligently recorded the height, weight, and ethnicity of the male and female prostitutes that worked the city’s streets—French, French-Canadian, Italian, black, Creole, and Native American. What to do about the city’s vice problem perplexed the Superior’s city government, and occasionally resulted in a published letter to the editor or articles covering the mayor’s response to vice reports. But largely Superior residents dismissed the claims about the prevalence of vice in the city as just the work of the knockers. “Some people are always kicking about something,” read one letter. “If they don’t like this town, instead of trying to reform it, why don’t they move out of town? We would be better off without such people.”

For all the prosperity boosterism promised, it served to quiet discontent, de-legitimize contradictory voices, and eliminate competing narratives. In the landmark study Middletown, the Lynds compared civic pride to an offshoot of the fervent national patriotism that emerged in the post-war era. They saw this type of boosterism as a largely negative force in small cities, one that quashed dissenting viewpoints, suppressed “news judged unfavorable,” and promoted a

124 Birr, 33.
uniformly optimistic narrative about life. The result was the “muzzling” of critics by deploying
terms like “knocker” and “croaker,” and “drowning” any social problems under the “public
mood of ‘fine and dandy.’” They found this tendency in basketball games, the Chamber of
Commerce, associations and clubs, and, especially, on the pages of the local newspaper. The
Lynds were not the only critics of boosterism. The novelist Sinclair Lewis also satirized the
booster ethos in his novel Babbit, but it remained a key part of life in places like Superior
because the stakes seemed especially high. To not boost was to ward off potential threats to
prosperity. Knockers did not just display a reluctance to support local businesses, or a refusal
to invest in forward-thinking building projects. They also could exhibit a reticence to embrace
any element associated with modernity; in Superior’s case, this hesitation manifested itself in
public funding discussions related to a hallmark of the city’s new age: the public high school.

Within Superior, the Telegram occupied a privileged position, drawing on the decades-
long centrality of newspapers in American culture. Since its founding in 1890, it carefully
established itself as a civic institution dedicated to the advancement of the community’s interests.
From the Telegram’s beginnings as a newspaper uniquely devoted to the city of Superior and its
interests, it encouraged community collaboration and the cultivation of a unified, civic spirit
based on a singular understanding of Superior’s past and future prosperity. Constructed and
perpetuated by the Telegram’s editorial and publishing staff, which consisted largely of white
men, the Superior narrative emphasized the city’s progress and path toward modernity. It sought
to highlight the individuals and organizations that best exemplified this ethos, and marginalized

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128 Lynd and Lynd, 222.
129 Ibid, 488.
the voices and stories of those that did not. While claiming to have all the hallmarks of a modern, urban newspaper—notably accurate reporting and robust coverage of the day’s news from across the world—the Telegram also continued to exhibit the booster tendency that defined its predecessors. In reality, the Telegram operated as a hybrid of two newspaper forms, uniquely catered to the interests of the small city with larger ambitions.

To borrow James Carey’s phrasing, the narratives the Telegram defined, maintained, and shaped over time contributed to a cultural understanding about Superior that was translated into other print forms. It appeared in promotional pamphlets and brochures produced by the Telegram as well as the city’s civic and commerce associations. It was repeated in organizational meetings and in political advertisements. And it was echoed in a new form of print culture that began to emerge in the 1920s, the high school student newspaper. Superior’s schools had produced print materials since their beginnings in the mid-19th century, but the modern student newspaper represented a significant departure from these earlier efforts. It was produced more frequently, carried more content, and was distributed more widely than its predecessors. These products added a new dimension to Superior’s print culture, and also elevated a new set of voices closely associated with the modern age: high school students.
Chapter Three
A New Vision of the Future: the High School, the Telegram, and Student Print Culture

“Mr. Mahnke, please xplain [sic] your pi,” read a tongue-in-cheek editorial in a 1924 issue of the Devil’s Pi, Superior Central High School’s student newspaper. “What does the name mean? Some poor sophomore blurts out the question before he thinks and then suddenly feels by the way folks look at him that he has asked something he ought to know. His situation is pathetic for this matter of pies is perplexing. ... Angel Cake and Devil’s Food we can understand, but we can’t get at Devils Pi.” It was somewhat unfortunate that the newspaper’s name went over the head of students. The straight-laced, bespectacled Pi adviser and Superior Central printing instructor Harold L. Mahnke, himself a veteran of the newspaper and printing trades, intended the publication’s esoteric name to reflect their unusually active role in producing the paper. “The word ‘Devil’s’ was conceived from a term given to apprentices in the printing profession, and the world ‘Pi’ is a printing office term meaning a ‘mixture’ of type or type material,” he wrote in a piece for high school printing and journalism instructors.1 The paper’s first masthead described it as a “mixed up matter of school news, put together by printer’s apprentices.”2

Since its inception, the Devil’s Pi was the complete product of Superior high school students, who wrote articles, solicited news items, sold subscriptions, designed pages, set type, and operated the ancient platen presses in the cramped Room 6 that housed the printing department and gave life to the newspaper. This level of student involvement and student

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control, Mahnke asserted, was essential to the success of any student publication, especially the newspapers that were becoming increasingly common in the 1920s. Active in the Central Interscholastic Press Association, a scholastic journalism organization, and the lead organizer and inaugural president of the Central Association of Printing Teachers, Mahnke often stressed the importance of student involvement in published articles and speeches given to newspaper advisers and printing instructors.\(^3\) The resulting “all home product” would generate greater interest from the student body as a whole.\(^4\) Minimal faculty involvement, and limited input from school administrators, created a more authentic product that would be sustained primarily by student support, rather than advertising. And a strong student newspaper would reflect well on the community.

Drawing on his experiences at Wisconsin and Minnesota newspapers, which included summer work at the *Telegram*, Mahnke transformed a fledgling printing department crammed into a 200-square foot room with outdated equipment into one viewed as essential to the functioning of Superior Central. With a reputation as a tough but fair teacher, enrollments in his printing courses soared throughout the decade. Students scribbled in his yearbook, thanking him. “I’ll never forget printing — it was a joy to come in here,” one student wrote Mahnke at the end of the 1927 school year.\(^5\) “Here’s to Mr. Mahnke, the printing teacher who helps the students whenever he can,” another scribbled in his yearbook.\(^6\) “I’ll never forget the day I broke the chase and the big press,” wrote student Florence Zimmerman. “If you hadn’t been so kind about it, I

\(^3\) The organization, founded in 1925, initially featured 34 printing instructors from across the United States. Its goal was to “promote the welfare and improve the status and aim of printing teachers, and especially those engaged in the supervision of the printing of school publications.” *The Scholastic Editor*, March 1926, 6. In addition to writing, Mahnke also spoke about high school printing and publications during CIPA’s annual conventions.


sure would have fainted. Here’s luck to a teacher I will never forget.”

Under Mahnke’s oversight, the student newspaper at Superior Central High School emerged as a point of civic pride in Superior in the 1920s. The newspaper’s revival in 1919 won accolades from the students behind The Echo, Superior Central’s yearbook, who described it as a “necessary part of the school life.” The Pi expanded dramatically over the decade, growing not only in size but circulation. What began as a one-page edition grew to regular editions of eight pages and special editions of more than 20 pages. Subscription rates increased steadily; in the 1924-25 school year, nearly 1,105 students, 85 percent of the student body, purchased subscriptions. This was a significant increase from the 250 subscriptions initially sold in the 1920-21 school year. The newspaper’s circulation peaked at 1,500, making it the largest school newspaper in northwestern Wisconsin, and it regularly won awards in national student press contests throughout the decade. The Telegram covered the Pi’s honors, published photos of its staff members, and chronicled changes to the newspaper, including its growth, names of students involved, the type of content published, and the success it enjoyed within the high school and beyond. It hired several high school students to work as special correspondents and cub reporters. And, at least initially, it celebrated the expansion of the vibrant print culture that had defined life at the head of the lakes from the city’s streets and into its high schools.

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7 Florence Zimmerman, marginalia in the yearbook belonging to H.L. Mahnke. The Echo, 1927.
8 The Echo, 1925, 77.
9 “Boost!” The Devil’s Pi, October 1, 1920, 2.
10 Kathy Laakso and Teddie Meronek, Central A to Z: The History of a Superior School, (Duluth: Xpresso Books, 2010). The Devil’s Pi won CIPA second class honors in 1921 and 1926; it received first-class honors from the organization in 1927, 1928, and 1929.
11 Nelson Dewey High School (later named Superior East) also published a school newspaper, but it did not attract as much attention as the Pi. Part of the reason was likely related to the haphazard management of the newspaper, its erratic publication schedule, and the heavy turnover among advisors. There are records of at least three iterations of the student newspaper published at Dewey/East High in the 1920s: The Waste Basket, The Spatterinx, and East Hi Times.
The work of the *Pi* staff and their counterparts at the school’s yearbook, *The Echo*, served as a testament to the possibilities a modern educational curriculum could create for students. Mahnke and his colleagues in the English Department demonstrated the importance of print publications to the culture of a progressive high school.\(^\text{12}\) Print culture, embodied by yearbooks, newspapers, and, later in the decade, student handbooks, connected the academic and social worlds of an educational institution that occupied an increasingly prominent position within the community of Superior. It also helped form a sense of community identity within the high school, and establish a set of values and norms that would define the city’s youth culture and help articulate their expectations of the future. While students drew heavily on the themes of Superior’s dominant narrative—namely, that hard work and a commitment to community (the school) would ensure success—they also offered different interpretations of what those themes meant to the next generation, and challenged the authority of the *Telegram* and with it the authority of adults. As the number of communication platforms available to high school students increased, clashes over Superior’s future frequently manifested in print. Questions over what role high schools should play in the community, what type of education they should offer, who should attend high school and what they should expect after graduation appeared in the *Telegram*, as well as on the pages of student publications.

By building a robust print program at both of the city’s high schools, Superior continued to demonstrate a strong belief in the power of print and created a more complex print marketplace. In addition to the *Telegram*, foreign-language newspapers, national magazines, and now, student newspapers, circulated alongside one another. The *Telegram* frequently reminded

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\(^\text{12}\) While Mahnke was consistently involved with the production of the school’s newspaper and yearbook, a teacher from the English Department, often joined him as a co-advisor. The co-advisor changed often in the first half of the decade. In the late 1920s, the school’s journalism instructor, Alice Baker, worked alongside Mahnke.
Superior high school students of its position as the primary cultivator of community at the head of the lakes. One advertisement in the *Echo*, Superior Central’s yearbook, read: “Are you learning to specialize? So is the Superior Telegram. Your specialty is teaching the young folks. Our specialty is publishing a newspaper that shall be the home paper for all of Upper Wisconsin.” Another in the *Wa Wa Ta*, the annual for East High, asserted: “Your home town will grow more and more dear to you the farther you get from your school days. Don’t let this attachment weaken. Wherever you are, read your home town newspaper. It will always be the Superior Evening Telegram.” While the *Telegram* contained some features targeted at high schoolers and younger readers, such as advice columns, fashion reports, comic strips, and sport recaps, student newspapers and yearbooks were produced with the high school reader in mind. They cultivated a unique sense of community and articulated a new set of values based entirely on the world of the high school.

With students solely responsible for content, decisions regarding representation, including coverage of activities and clubs, as well as where to direct attention on the editorial page, reveal the issues students grappled with as they attempted to offer their own definitions of and prescriptions for progress. Taking cues from their more professional counterparts, high school reporters and editors put into their newspapers what they saw from the world around them. School administrators might have embraced the high school newspaper movement as a symbol of their own modern approach to education, that did not necessarily make the student staffs mouthpieces for the school system. To some extent, these student publications did present an institutionally-approved version of high school, which emphasized qualities and character

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traits adults wanted high school students to embody. But they also used their print platform to challenge institutional decisions and articulate their own expectations of the future. Further, they manipulated certain conventions and spaces to present an alternative record of their experience. They scribbled in the margins of their yearbooks to comment on student popularity, describe unsanctioned social gatherings and driving parties, and express opinions about teachers, administrators, and the high school experience in general. They wrote jokes and drew cartoons that poked fun at adults. And later in the decade, Superior’s high school students used their newspaper training to produce and distribute publications critical of those leading the school system as part of the largest student strikes in the country, the subject of Chapter Four.

This chapter explores the rise of high school student print culture, which included yearbooks, newspapers, and literary magazines. The rapid expansion of journalism programs within high schools and explosion in the number of student newspapers nationwide during the 1920s signaled the emergence of what one observer called a distinctly new and important form of journalism. By the middle of the decade, any high school wishing to be seen as modern or progressive needed to have a school newspaper, and often these newspapers circulated widely within their community and beyond. This chapter examines how students used these publications to develop their own sense of identity and establish a high school-based community that catered to the needs of an emerging youth culture. Through these outlets, students articulated a different set of concerns and expectations absent from mainstream community newspapers. This chapter discusses the early structure of these publications—their production process, place within the curriculum, and acceptance within the high school—and examines how they facilitated the development of the youth voice. It also views them in conversations with other forms of
institutional media, specifically the *Telegram*, and explores how an increasingly complicated media environment challenged the cohesive community narrative the *Telegram* attempted to advance.

**The Promise of Secondary Education**

Print culture was essential to Superior’s past revitalization and achieving its promise in the present. As part of ensuring its future, strong financial support for the city’s high schools emerged as one of the avenues its politicians, business class, religious leaders, and educational advocates pursued. They believed modern high schools that offered a progressive educational curriculum would equip the next generation with the knowledge and skills necessary to continue the city’s commercial growth. As a merit-based institution, they promised to benefit all Superior residents, regardless of class. “High school is a poor man’s school and the only aristocracy that prevails is the aristocracy of brains,” C.G. Wade, principal of Superior Central High School, once said to parents.\(^{15}\) Those leading Superior’s public schools often referenced the adaptability of these institutions and critical role within the community. “The schools are recognizing this changing life and are investigating and experimenting to discover where they may better equip the child to fit will into his environment and become a useful and happy citizen,” Superior Superintendent Grace Geary told the Superior Women’s Club in 1922. Schools prepared students for the challenges of the modern age. Bishop G.G. Bennett of Duluth implored the Lake Superior Teachers Association to remember that they had “opportunity to mold [students] ... to send them into the world joyfully and gladly, so they can take the world, broken, crumpled, bleeding and bruised, and mold it again with the fire of a new vision on their eyes, a vision that the teacher has

placed in the minds of that generation.”  

And in a 1927 baccalaureate address before the graduating classes of both Superior high schools, the Rev. J.E. Cooke asked what would define the future of the country and of Superior. The answer: “It is the graduate with a mind trained in the schools that will determine what America will be. ... [T]he scholar determines the future because, more than other people, he is a man of visions. ... The scholar will control the future because of the power there is in character.”

The city’s early settlers recognized the importance of building a robust public school system almost from the beginning. This reflected a statewide belief in education that dated back to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which established the process for admitting new states from the old Northwest Territory (including Wisconsin), and included a partial provision for education which stated “religion, morality and knowledge being essential to good government and to the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.”

Superior’s first superintendent of schools was elected early in April 1855, when the settlement consisted of only 35 buildings, two stores, a partially completed hotel and wharf, and no school buildings for the superintendent to oversee. When the state superintendent of schools visited later that year to assess the interest in building a school, the Chronicle encouraged parents to call on the superintendent, to make their case for the institution. It worked, and construction began on a log school building. The city’s first school opened in January 1856, with 17 pupils and one teacher.

The new school house suffered from the same limitations as most early structures in Superior; students attended class in a building prone to leaking and with warped floors that

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17 “Central, East Seniors Hear Baccalaureate,” Superior Evening Telegram, June 6, 1927.
18 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Biennial Report 1924-26, 61.
shrank as they weathered, leaving large gaps between the basswood planks. Yet, most early students viewed their education fondly. They learned general subjects including reading, writing, and mathematics, with most activities overseen by Irvin W. Gates, an early settler, educator, and sometime editor of the Superior Chronicle. Nicknamed the “Father of Schools,” Gates was responsible for teaching “almost every youth” in the first few decades of Superior’s existence. Students remembered him for his “patience and forbearance,” his “inspiring personality,” and his commitment to building a strong public school system as a way to boost the settlement’s future prosperity.

Despite the Panic of 1857 and economic downturn that followed, Superior continued to fund a public school system. There were only 17 business establishments in Superior listed in the 1870 U.S. Census, and a total population of 1,122, but there were two common graded schools with four teachers and 92 students, two ungraded common schools with four teachers and 95 students, and one private school with one teacher and 20 students. In 1865, as the population dwindled, Gates and the Superior Gazette called for the city to finance a local high school, even as families fled the area in the wake of its first financial collapse. “Such institutions are necessary in every community,” the Gazette wrote in 1865, expressing concern that students would be sent out of town or abroad to complete their education. The next year Gates taught high school courses in a space provided by the First Presbyterian Church, attended by the small

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20 Wolner, 40.
22 Achille H. Bertrand, Recollections of Old Superior (Denver, Colorado: 1923), 73. Superior, Wisconsin Papers, 1831 - 1942 (Superior: Area Research Collection, University of Wisconsin Superior).
23 Wolner, 105.
24 July 22, 1865 issue of the Superior Gazette quoted in History of Education in Superior, vol. 1. In Superior, Wisconsin Papers, 1831 - 1942 (Superior: Area Research Collection, University of Wisconsin Superior). Reel 12, 8.
handful of young adults that remained. Five years later, the high school closed.  

With roots in the 19th century, the American high school heralded the “coming of a new educational order” and became an increasingly important segment of public schooling. The high school began as a bourgeois institution, shaped to meet the needs of elites by “opening the doors of opportunity to the few and elevating the symbolic and cash value of their formal education.” Gradually, the idea of the high school changed. Advocates emphasized that high schools would promote republican values, reward talent, and secure social order and democratic progress. Non-elites were attracted to the institution because of its promise to provide an education to all students as well as economic advancement, and in this spirit of democracy, it spread from the East Coast throughout the United States. By the turn of the century, high school attendance became more of a normative experience among the children of the professional and business classes. Cities and towns went on a building spree. Between 1880 and 1900, the number of public high schools increased 750 percent. In Wisconsin, the number of high schools increased from 169 to 288, enrollment from 11,449 to 27,768 and the number of teachers from 376 to 1,334 between 1890 and 1906. High school enrollment doubled between 1915 and 1925.  

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Reese, xvi.  
28 Part of the critique of American high school education centers on its inability to provide an education to all students, which was due in part to a lack of agreement among high school advocates on what function the school should serve. For more on the shortcomings of high schools, see David L. Angus and Jeffrey E. Mirel, *The Failed Promise of the American High School, 1890 – 1995* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).  
state as a sign that not only were these communities growing, but that they were invested in the needs of citizens.

As the tide of Superior’s fortunes began to turn, residents began to advocate more vocally for the establishment of a robust public education system. The city’s few schools were “hard-pressed” to keep up with the rapid population growth of the 1890s. Between 1890 and 1893, five new schools were added, and the city developed high school departments and kindergartens. But residents quickly recognized that a dedicated high school building would be key to keeping pace with their urban counterparts. The small number of high school students in the city attended classes in facilities scattered across Superior, which had grown to a land area of approximately 55 square miles—roughly the size of Buffalo and Milwaukee. These included, at various times, a set of rooms in the Board of Trade building; part of the Broadway Hotel; and unused rooms in three neighborhood schools. In 1892, the city entered a contract with a private individual to construct a building to be used for high school classes, but this solution was short-lived. Families with means sent their children to private academies in the East, and community leaders worried that the construction of the new, modern Duluth Central High School would draw Superior residents across the bay. Duluth Central’s hillside location and imposing 230-foot clock tower, modeled after London’s Big Ben, was easily visible for miles, and reminded those in Superior what they lacked.

The absence of a centralized, modern high school made education proponents observe the new high schools in places like Milwaukee, Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth with jealousy. “We

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need the institution, and we are going to have it,” argued an 1889 editorial in the *Superior Times*. Despite the city’s claim to value education, the lack of educational facilities was a “disgrace to the city,” commented the Superior School Board president in 1892. A few years later, the opinion page of the *Superior Daily Call* continued to advocate for the institution: “The city of Superior should build a respectable high school—that is one which would be considered good enough for a city with prospects like this.” The city’s “zeal” for educational facilities culminated in the building of its first centrally located high school in 1909. In 1910, after years of planning, the $300,000 Superior High School opened its doors. Built in a neo-classical style, columns flanked the entrance to a two-story brick and sandstone structure that housed 70 rooms, a lunchroom to accommodate more than 200 people, and an auditorium. A graceful, manicured lawn surrounded the school, which occupied an entire city block.

Superior spent much of the 1920s building and expanding its public school system, with special attention paid to the development of its high school curriculum. The city’s school district enrolled as many as 11,428 students during the decade, and its high school enrollment was well above the state average. The high schools added new courses, especially those categorized

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37 Superior educational advocates’ dreams of a completely centralized high school were never quite realized, however. Students on the city’s east side were directed to the Nelson Dewey School, which housed grades six through 12.
39 The city of Superior enrolled 92.3 percent of 14- to 15-year-olds (compared to 77.8 percent statewide), and 62.6 percent of 16- to 17-year-olds (compared to 46.2 statewide), according to the 1920 U.S. Census. The Department of Public Instruction’s biennial reports did not provide statistics for the total number of children in the school districts over the age of 16, and only calculate the percentage of students enrolled as it relates to the total number of 4- to 20-year-olds per city and town.
as industrial and manual arts, and changed the focus of more traditional courses, such as history, to focus on their practical applications. In doing so, high schools positioned themselves as able to provide adolescents with the training they needed to be successful in this new, modern age, and stood as a symbol of a city’s progress. Residents also pushed for the construction of more modern facilities, and drew on these themes in their campaigns. By labeling the crumbling Nelson Dewey school building in the city’s East End as a “fire trap,” they positioned it as unworthy of a city with Superior’s ambitions.\textsuperscript{40} Without a gymnasium or auditorium and with rampant overcrowding, the school was unable to provide an adequate education to the hundreds of students it was supposed to serve. “The surroundings and equipment of a school have a great deal to do with the success and prosperity of the students,” the salutatorian of the 1921 class remarked during commencement. “The efficiency of future classes of Dewey students will be more and more impaired as the school grows ...”\textsuperscript{41} Residents said they would rather pass on paving projects and street improvements in order to modernize the school, and they threatened to boycott public schools if conditions did not improve. “No community should economize to the extent that the schools are in danger of being crippled, for there is no other thing in the community so valuable as the schools,” V.E. McCaskill, president of Superior Normal, told the crowd at a Nelson Dewey PTA meeting.\textsuperscript{42} When the brand new Superior East High School opened in 1923, it was a physical testament to progress. In a collage of interior and exterior photos published in the \textit{Telegram} a few years later, the caption observed that “few communities ... can boast of such a modern high school building” which had done much to “promote the

\textsuperscript{40} “May Boycott Dewey School, East Enders Dislike to Send Children to Building, Called Unsafe,” \textit{Superior Telegram}, Feb. 24, 1921.

\textsuperscript{41} “Graduate Says Poor Building Hits Student Efficiency,” \textit{Superior Telegram}, June 16, 1921.

\textsuperscript{42} “Says School Success Depends on Community,” \textit{Superior Telegram}, April 20, 1921.
progressive spirit” of the city. Like Superior Central, the new Superior East had a printing department, offered journalism courses, and produced a newspaper—the *Spatterinx*—as well as a yearbook, the *Wa Wa Ta*. By advancing these programs and constructing new school buildings, Superior’s educational administrators were investing not only in the city’s youth, but also in its future.

By the 1920s, high schools became central to a city’s or town’s social structure. High schools challenged the family and the church as the most significant institutions for teenagers. Enrollments increased and students spent more time in the classroom and filled their spare time with extracurricular activities. In addition to providing a comprehensive curriculum, public school educators believed high schools should serve as an agency of socialization and provide civic training. They acculturated newly arrived immigrants and imparted middle-class, American values on students. They inculcated the values of hard work and efficiency that were prized in the marketplace. They gradually expanded the school’s extracurricular offerings and began taking responsibility for more aspects of a student’s life. As a result, high school became the “defining experience of American adolescence,” and one of the dominant sites of culture creation in the 20th century. They also became integral to the community experience. Their elaborately designed buildings, such as that of Superior High School, occupied prominent places in town,

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44 Mintz, 198.
45 For immigrant families, high school stood at the juncture of tradition and change. Compulsory education in the United States created an institutional space for childhood that challenged traditional relationships between immigrant parents and their children. As children learned individualistic, middle-class values through schools, they graduated forgot the family-centric lessons their parents hoped to impart. High school was key to this process. For more, see Steven Lassonde, *Learning to Forget: Schooling and Family Life in New Haven’s Working Class, 1870 – 1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). See also Jeffrey Mirel, *Patriotic Pluralism: Americanization Education and European Immigrants* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).
and, especially in Northern cities and towns, public high schools “helped shape urban identity.”

In just a few short decades, high schools transformed into pillars of community building and acted as an antidote to the negative effects of modernity. The “primary importance” of the high school, according to University of Wisconsin Professor Thomas Lloyd Jones, was to prepare students who could effectively participate in the “affairs of the world.” Jones, a faculty member in the Department of Education and the university’s high school relations director, issued a call to Wisconsin residents for “cooperation among the home, the community, and the school in the interest of a society that is yet to be.” The modern high school was never a site just for the acquisition of knowledge. For all the benefits high schools offered in the present, one of the most important contributions was preparing students—and the towns and cities where they lived—for the future.

The Growing World of the High School and Its Newspaper Coverage

For the high school to fulfill its mission and train the next generation of American citizens, a consensus materialized that the social functions of the modern high school had to expand in order to meet the challenge of life in an increasingly complex society. Schools needed to grow the social side of education, just as they had grown enrollments. A new kind of educational environment emerged in the first decades of the 20th century, one that emphasized academics along with extracurricular activities. In Middletown (Muncie, Indiana) scholars observed the widening of the high school’s function within the community, observing a “strong

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drive toward education,” especially among members of the business class.\textsuperscript{50} Yet this push was not entirely academic; the study noted the number of extracurricular activities that made the high school the “hub of social life”\textsuperscript{51} entailed a “fairly complete social cosmos in itself.”\textsuperscript{52} For many educators, debate teams, the school chorus, booster clubs, high school versions of the YMCA and YWCA, and other organizations supplied the arena where students could exercise self-determination and self-government, cornerstones of the American democratic ideal, and put into practice concepts learned in the classroom.\textsuperscript{53} Educational administrators in Superior recognized participation in extracurriculars as an “integral part of the work of secondary education” and just as important, if not more so, than the scholarly pursuits of the classroom.\textsuperscript{54} The only way for the school to give the type of training required to be a good, active citizen was to “develop a live school community with organizations similar to that of the adult community.”\textsuperscript{55} By 1920, the high school needed to offer more than a robust academic program; it had to provide access to clubs, associations, and activities. Increasingly, these activities, more so than academic ones, attracted attention from local newspapers, such as the \textit{Telegram}.

Newspapers chronicled all aspects of high school life throughout the 1920s. In addition to regular coverage of Board of Education meetings and administrative changes, the \textit{Telegram} routinely reported the major milestones of each school year. That included short features on the first day of school and expected enrollment for the school district (and a comparison to previous years); news briefs on the exam period for high school students; and an eye-catching graduation

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, \textit{Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture} (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1929), 184.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Lynd and Lynd, 187.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 211.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Fass, \textit{The End of American Childhood}, 139.
\item \textsuperscript{54} City of Superior, \textit{Report of the Superintendent of the Public Schools, 1925 - 1926}, 110.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 111.
\end{itemize}
section that included the names and photos of each graduate from the city’s two public and one private high schools, as well as the text of graduation speeches and baccalaureate remarks (published alongside advertisements for gifts from local businesses to celebrate). Throughout the 1920s, the Telegram also devoted increased space to the news of high school clubs and associations, and irregularly included short news briefs summarizing the activities that occurred within the high schools’ halls, usually provided to the newspaper by the students themselves. On its sports page, the Telegram printed photos of the city’s high school football teams, basketball squads, star players, and the “inside dope” on upcoming games. When one of Superior’s varsity football or basketball teams made the state tournament—a frequent occurrence during the decade—the newspaper’s front page covered its journey, and editorial columns applauded the teams for their grit, determination, and strong character. In the 1927 edition of The Echo the editors acknowledged the work of the Telegram with a special advertisement: “The students of the Central High are thankful to the ‘Great North Wisconsin Daily’ for the publicity given their sports, plays, and all other activities, realizing that this publicity has been a constant source of enthusiasm and encouragement.”

High school advocates began to recognize in the 1920s that programs both inside and outside of the classroom served as an important point of community connection. The 1920-22 Biennial Report from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction commented that in a progressive school system, much of the “effective community service rendered by a school is accomplished outside of the classroom.” Extra-curricular activities help the school secure “the permanent interest and support of both pupils and patrons, and is thus able to give back generous

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56 The Echo, 1927.
returns in student scholarship and stability of character.”

And as newspapers, like the Telegram, began to give these activities more coverage, newspapers assured their readers things like football, debate, and theatrical performances preserved the qualities most important to the community and instilled them in the next generation and advertised the advantages of a place like Superior. While citizens expressed their concerns about the high school’s ability to ward off the temptations of the modern age, and worried about the morality and character of the younger generation, the Telegram’s content was largely positive about the impact of secondary education. Its editorials and news pieces conveyed a consistency in messaging that focused on Superior’s investment in youth and the importance of a robust education system to the city’s status. A public school system focused on the “cultivation of the mind of the youth” and providing “modern facilities” in both instruction and educational equipment was just as essential to the city’s success as advertising its natural advantages and boosting its commercial prospects.

Education took on a more important role as the younger generation had to deal with the complexities of the aftermath of World War I. The Telegram granted extensive space to comments from educational leaders regarding the possibilities schools offered: “There have been few times in the history of mankind when there has been such a crucial changing from the old to an unknown new. The schools are recognizing this changing life ... and experimenting to discover where they may better equip the child to fit well into this environment and become a useful and happy citizen,” noted Superior School Superintendent Grace Geary in a speech before the Superior Women’s Club.

Superior Normal President A.D. Gillett noted that the public

57 Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Biennial Report 1920-22 (Madison, Wis.), 165.
59 “Superintendent Grace Geary Urges Greater Interest In Our Youth,” Superior Telegram, April 1, 1922.
school system’s major purpose was to “make democracy safe for the world,” ⁶⁰ and high schools in particular operated on the front lines.

These trends in newspaper reporting were not unique to Superior, and fit within a national movement among educators and school officials to shape the coverage narrative of public school systems. Due to the rising recognition of public opinion, education officials urged formal publicity outreach to win support for building campaigns, budget increases, and greater general acceptance of school programs, which depended on public opinion. Lack of popular understanding could be detrimental as schools expanded their roles within a community. “The development of public schools in our cities, especially in the last generation, has far outrun the development of widespread popular understanding of them,” read the introduction to Publicity and the Public Schools, a 1924 manual authored by Clyde R. Miller, the director of publications for Cleveland Public Schools, and Fred Charles of the Cleveland Plain Dealer. ⁶¹ “The public press, the chief avenue of general publicity, has found it easy to present educational innovations in a sensational and unfavorable light to a public whose standards of interpretation have been mainly derived from childhood experiences.” ⁶² The Manual for Free High Schools of Wisconsin, issued by the state superintendent of schools in 1924, implored high schools to bring their needs to the attention of their districts via the newspaper: “The high school is a cooperative enterprise, dependent on the undivided support of the local community. The pupils of the high school, their parents, and the local press should all be enlisted to serve in high school betterment.” ⁶³

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⁶⁰ “Says Educational All Important,” Superior Evening Telegram, Oct. 7, 1925.
⁶³ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, A Manual for the High Schools of Wisconsin (Madison, Wis., 1924), 19.
In Superior, some residents questioned the value of educational spending when other civic expenditures (namely dock maintenance and harbor expansion) seemed more immediate and more economically prudent. “I tell you the most important thing now is the prosperity of this city,” read a letter to the editor published in the Telegram’s Public Forum. “The schools and everything else are of secondary importance.”\(^{64}\) Others expressed concerns over the new youth culture that the city’s high schools fostered. Throughout the 1920s, the Public Forum published a variety of letters from readers listing their specific worries about young people in the city; it was “alarmingly apparent” they lacked discipline and were given too much leeway at home and at school;\(^ {65}\) high schools “infected” them with a desire for “immodest luxuries;”\(^ {66}\) girls wore their hair too short and their skirts too short; boys gambled too much and smoked too many cigarettes. And both sexes danced far too suggestively: The modern style was “uncivilized”\(^ {67}\) and not reflective of proper “moral standards.”\(^ {68}\) While many of these critiques were heavily gendered, and directed at female students, they spoke to overall concerns that the group identity high schools cultivated rested on values and norms that were distinctly modern in their outlook. But here modernity was equated with moral transgression and frivolity, rather than progress and economic expansion.

These types of community attitudes represented a challenge to high schools, especially as they considered expanding their curriculum offerings and engaging in more expensive vocational and manual training programs. Publicity programs would help as more was expected of public schools, and as they became an increasingly costly undertaking. At the 1924 National Education

\(^{64}\) William Gill, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, March 22, 1921.
\(^{65}\) Mrs Edith Smith, Letter to the Editor, Superior Telegram, Jan. 18, 1924.
\(^{66}\) Mrs. H.R.S., Letter to the Editor, Superior Telegram, March 9, 1921.
\(^{67}\) Mrs. Jessie Gurnoe, Letter to the Editor, Superior Telegram, April 25, 1923.
\(^{68}\) Mrs. Edith Smith, Letter to the Editor, Superior Telegram, Jan. 18, 1924.
Association convention, the then-Superintendent of Schools for St. Cloud (Minnesota) Paul R. Spencer observed that “no organization is safe today which depends upon public support which does not carry on an intelligent educational program in acquainting the public with its work and problems.”69 Spencer would become Superior’s superintendent of schools the following year. It was the responsibility of the schools themselves, and not the press, to produce better coverage of education. Spencer believed in implementing programs designed to reply to “attacks and criticism” of the work of schools.70 One year into his tenure in Superior, he introduced a newsletter, Our Public Schools, and hired a full-time publicity agent. The newsletter included news of the schools, updates on P.T.A. meetings, and other items. In its first issue, it compared the citizens of Superior to “investors” that were “entitled to know what their schools are doing. ... We want parents to understand exactly what the Superior public schools are seeking to do for the individual child.”71

School publicity should not be conceived as the same type of promotional practices used by businesses, cautioned Miller in Publicity and the Public School. “... Pains must be taken by school administrators to see ... that it does not carry any suggestion of press-agentry, of covering up facts unfavorable to the school administration while putting the best foot forward.”72 “If school men want more matter about schools in the press, school men must do more things that have legitimate news value in the minds of the editors,” said Glenn Frank, the president of University of Wisconsin-Madison and former editor of The Century magazine, at the 1925 NEA convention. That meant that schools had to develop a better understanding not only of the type of

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70 Ibid, 933.
72 Miller, 8.
news articles that would be of interest to newspaper editors and writers, but also communicate information that was in the general public’s interest. The most successful form of publicity would recognize the that the high school was ultimately a partnership with the community, set on achieving mutually agreed upon interest—specifically, ensuring a shared vision of the future. “If the press and the school can be brought to realize their joint responsibility in giving wide currency to these new ideas, idealism, and spiritual values upon which our future depends, we shall have both a better education and a better journalism, and that will be an achievement far bigger than the mere increase in the space devoted to school news.”

While there was no evidence that the Superior public schools engaged in a systematic publicity campaign, it did have a strong ally in the *Telegram*. As long as the actions of its students continued to reflect well on the community, the *Telegram* largely supported the institution, and quieted concerns about youth.

In the *Telegram*’s view, high schools instilled timeless values and developed strong character traits in students. As a result, Superior’s younger generation was ready to tackle the problems of the modern age. The *Telegram* dismissed readers’ concerns about high school “mischievousness” and relaxed morals as misplaced—“[viciousness] is bred on street corners and questionable places, not in classrooms.”

Youth was “ascendant,” read a 1924 editorial. “Just about as often as editorials are written on this age as the golden age for young people others are written on this age as one of notable achievement and advance. ... Youth welcomes the new more easily and readily ... This is so striking an age of ascendant youth simply because it is so

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74 “Regulating the Young,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, Jan. 19, 1926.
strikingly an age of new things.”75 The growing number of high school graduates and college students ensured progress and were key to “building up civilization.”76 With two public high schools, a state normal school, and a robust high school alumni network that included graduates at the University of Wisconsin, military academies, and Ivy League colleges and Seven Sister Colleges, Superior had all the prerequisites for a bright future. As a further endorsement of the high schools’ place within the city, the Telegram counted a number of Superior High School (and later Superior Central) graduates among its staff in the 1920s, including Morgan Murphy, the eldest son of John T. Murphy, and Gordon MacQuarrie, a former high school track star who became the newspaper’s city editor in 1925.77 It also relied on the contributions from Superior Central High School’s journalism students, who covered meetings and lectures for the Telegram.

The Telegram was largely supportive of the mission of Superior’s two high schools and the actions of its students when it fit within the community norms and values it had established. This endorsement of the high schools by the city’s primary media outlet—itself an important civic institution by this point—positioned their emergence and community expansion as indicative of Superior’s narrative of progress and future destiny as an urban center. When the schools introduced curriculum changes, new educational initiatives, or expanded manual and vocational training programs, they thus translated the rhetoric of modernity and transformation the Telegram used to tell the story of Superior into a reality. The Telegram applauded its educators for being forward-thinking, and for seeing education as practical, as well as intellectual. The modern high school should offer “laboratory work, manual training, and

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75 “Ascendant Youth,” Superior Evening Telegram, Dec. 3, 1924.
76 “Might By Education,” Superior Evening Telegram, May 6, 1926.
77 MacQuarrie would go on to find fame as an outdoors writer for the Milwaukee Journal, where he is credited with becoming the first full-time outdoors writer in the country. His semi-autobiographical short stories about The Old Duck Hunters’ Association made him a nationally famous writer.
domestic science” as part of the “desire to teach as well as knowing,” and to prepare students not just for college, but for the new business world. The greatest testament to the work of the high school was the work produced by its students, and their embrace of the qualities and characteristics Superior prized; specifically, their united desire to continue the growth and economic expansion of the city, and secure its future. Initially, the city’s high school print culture echoed the themes the Telegram promoted and continued the grand narrative about Superior’s history and future progress in front of a new audience.

The High School Newspaper’s Place in the Modern, Progressive School

During the 1920s, student newspapers represented an important trend that reflected the civic mindset of high school administrators, the expanding extracurriculum, and the community-oriented approach of professional newspapers. Observers called these student publications the “most significant new type of publication in American journalism” in part because of their service to both schools and students, and their ability to provide practical training influenced by other academic programs, including English, mathematics, and civics. While supporters of high school journalism often applauded the student newspaper’s ability to support the objectives of the secondary education advocates, these publications’ true value lay in their ability to provide a window into the high school world, as seen and interpreted by students.

Scholastic print culture occupied a crucial position within the school activities movement. By the mid-1920s, educators recognized the school newspaper as one of the essential assets of a modern, progressive school. Drawing on the work of John Dewey, who articulated the centrality of communication to a vibrant democracy, they promoted student newspapers as a means to

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78 “Education in Appreciation,” Superior Telegram, Nov. 23, 1923.
foster democratic ideals and forge a sense of community among high school students. For school system administrators, high school print culture helped educational institutions advance their democratic mission beyond establishing this community. Producing newspapers, yearbooks, and handbooks would teach students skills such as accuracy and reliability and instill a sense of personal responsibility. Their development and the display of English is its chief aim, the study is an active force for democracy,” wrote high school English teacher and newspaper adviser Bessie Huff. “It seeks to furnish many students a laboratory in which to develop American ideals. ... The personal growth in self-control, business achievements, and executive ability that students gain from actual work in a school paper alone justify the establishment of a school paper in any school.” By working on the staff of a school publication, students developed an understanding of the newspaper as an “organ of democracy,” and were ready to assume their civic duties.

Educators saw how student publications could promote the activities of the high school and foster goodwill among the community, a key asset when public support might be needed for future building projects or budget referendums. They became “useful interpreters” of school activities, and published not only the interesting personal items related to daily life within the classroom, but also more significant news about academic courses, new faculty members, and the activities of clubs and organizations. In other words, they would mimic the content and style of a “real newspaper” to help the school “acquire a healthy self-consciousness and educate the

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81 Huff, 1.

community to a better appreciation of what the school is doing for its young people.”83 A 1925 survey listed 12 values of school publications, including to “unify the school and foster school spirit,” “give authentic news of the school to parents, patrons, alumni and to other schools,” and “advertise the school.”84 Growing interest in the activities, athletics, clubs and organizations, plays, debates, class activities, social activities, and community activities created a definite need for the student newspaper to chronicle the day-to-day activities of the school, and transformed the yearbook from a scholastic record book into a celebration of student participation. Together, these two forms of print culture85 placed an emphasis on community and allegiance to the high school above all else, often captured in the concept of “school spirit” and its close relative, “pep.” An article on the influence of the high school newspaper in Scholastic Editor described its role: “No other force has yet arisen which can equal the newspaper ... since that intangible something we term ‘spirit’ is of such primary importance to the success of a high school, I deem its arousal and maintenance as the high school newspaper’s greatest accomplishment and duty.”86

This ability to act as a liaison between the school and the community, and capacity to serve the individual, the faculty, and the school, was one of the most important attributes student publications could offer.87 Thinking of the newspaper as a publicity organ allowed administrators to highlight the “progressiveness” of their schools. “The school is the workshop of the community where the future leaders are prepared,” wrote Dan A. Edkins, the executive

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83 Flint, 31.
85 Several schools also published handbooks, which acted as a sort of guidebook to the high school. However, these were largely a product of the late 1920s, and did not appear in Superior until the early 1930s.
87 Huff, 2.
secretary of the Indiana High School Press Association. Consequently, the general public would be naturally interested in what happened within the school building. Promoting the activities and the work of students was a natural use of student publications. Outwardly, the seemingly rapid growth of student publications fit within the democratic framework the school promoted. For school administrators looking to modernize their offerings and provide educational opportunities that would prepare their students for the challenges of a new era, the establishment of printing vocational courses and the practice of journalistic writing helped achieve their objectives.

This boom in student print culture coincided with the expansion of journalism education at the collegiate level and amid a broader push to professionalize reporting as an occupation. The number and variety of high school publications significantly increased during the 1920s. A 1935 Columbia University study described the rapid expansion and the importance of journalistic enterprise as “one of the phenomenal developments of modern life. ... It is natural, then, that high schools should have been greatly affected by these journalistic activities of adult society.” The study, which based its conclusions on a survey of 269 student newspapers, revealed the number of student print materials grew substantially during the first few decades of the 20th century. Most student newspapers were introduced after World War I. The average year for the introduction of magazines was 1900; for yearbooks 1907; and for handbooks, 1922.

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90 Galen Jones, Extra-curricular Activities in Relation to the Curriculum (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1935), 79.
91 Jones, 17. The study found 22 newspapers originated prior to 1910; 44 from 1910 to 1919; and 85 from 1920 to 1929.
to the *National Survey of High School Journalism*, of 506 newspapers reporting the date of origin, nearly three-fourths were founded before 1930.\(^92\) A questionnaire sent to Kansas high schools in 1928 found 55 of 72 published papers, 48 had classes in journalism, and five offered advanced courses.\(^93\) Scholastic organizations sprang up the across the country to provide guidance and resources to the growing number of teachers tasked with advising newspaper and yearbook staffs, and those teaching journalism courses.\(^94\) The most prolific of these, the Central Interscholastic Press Association (later renamed the National Scholastic Press Association) introduced its own magazine, *Scholastic Editor*, which claimed a circulation of 3,700 by 1930.\(^95\)

By the middle of the decade, the organization’s annual gathering routinely attracted close to 1,000 delegates from across the United States and Canada. Its 1924 meeting was thought to be the largest journalistic meeting in the world.\(^96\)

While these publications did need institutional approval, it was the students, by and large, who shaped their content and determined their role within the high school. High school print culture provided a platform for students to articulate their distinctive worldview, a voice somewhat neglected by the mainstream publications that dominated their local news networks.\(^97\)

In one sense, these publications operated as official school records, capturing details about faculty and course offerings, student enrollment, and club and athletics activities. In a second

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\(^{94}\) Often these press associations were tethered to a university or college program in journalism. The University of Washington organized a Washington High School Press Association, Michigan State University was behind the Michigan Interscholastic Press Association, and Columbia University introduced the Columbia Scholastic Press Association, and other organizations popped up in Indiana, Illinois, Texas, California, and elsewhere. Initially based at the University of Wisconsin, CIPA was the largest of these early organizations.


\(^{96}\) As reported in the *Journal of Education* 99 (1924).

\(^{97}\) Miller, 28.
sense, they were produced and, to a certain extent, controlled by students. They offer a glimpse into high school life and adolescent concerns from the student perspective. In a city like Superior, where its future trajectory preoccupied the *Telegram*, these publications illuminated what the next generation thought of its path forward.

**Organized Chaos: The Origins of Superior’s Student Newspapers**

Superior’s high school publications originated in the print shop, where they developed as part of a manual arts curriculum that included printing alongside carpentry, mechanical drawing, and auto mechanics. The expanded manual arts program met the calls from reformers that the high school serve all students, not just the college bound. Demands for greater manual and vocational training intensified throughout the 1920s, as more students entered high school without the intention of pursuing more advance degrees. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, whose biennial reports and studies provided guidance and recommendations for the operation of high schools, scolded principals and school systems across the state for their critical lack of vocational course options and inability to prepare students for jobs in in-demand industries, such as printing. In its 1920-22 report, only three school districts in the state offered an expanded manual arts department that included printing. Superior was one of these three.\(^98\)

Superior Central started its printing program in 1915 with 40 students, a few cases of type, and one printing press. The earliest record of printing classes at Nelson Dewey High School is 1919 – 20 school year.\(^99\) Academically, this area of study offered students the

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\(^98\) Department of Public Instruction, *Biennial Report 1920-22*, 140.

\(^99\) Nelson Dewey High School closed its doors in 1922, and beginning in the 1923 school year former Dewey students attended the new Superior East High School. The schools are referred to throughout this chapter.
opportunity to apply the skills learned in courses such as English, mathematics, and art courses in a practical setting. The 1914-15 *Report of the Public Schools* from the city reprinted a piece from Dr. Andrew S. Draper, New York commissioner of education, that advocated for printing programs in high schools and justified the district’s $1,000 expenditure to get the program at Superior High School up and running. “The art of printing, a great national industry, has done more to foster and extend education than any other single agency ... for regardless of whatever life-work the pupil may afterward enter upon, a knowledge of printing and of types must prove helpful and profitable,” Draper wrote. As the district’s main printing instructor, Mahnke often commented on its applicability in other fields. Most of his students, Mahnke noted, took printing as a means to improve their knowledge of English and spelling, not necessarily because they aspired to become printers or work at newspapers. The department’s objective was to enhance lessons learned in other classrooms, and make the student “self-reliant, observative [sic], creative, original, and accurate,” skills that would easily translate beyond the halls of the high school into any number of professions.

The ability to offer academic as well as economic advantages solidified the Superior school district’s decision to back these programs. In addition to student newspapers, the print shop at Superior Central High School, and later at the new Superior East High School, produced report cards, pamphlets, programs, Board of Education reports, and other printed materials. Printing classes at Superior Central saved the school (and district) thousands of dollars, and Principal C.G. Wade applauded the efforts of Mahnke and his students: “I would rather lose any

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100 City of Superior, Wisconsin, *Report of the Public Schools 1914 - 1915.*
101 Mahnke, “Producing the School Paper.”
102 *The Echo*, 1924, 73.
103 City of Superior, Wis., *Report of the Public Schools 1914 – 1915.*
104 *The Echo* reported the printing department saved the school district $2,000 in 1920, and then $3,000 in 1925.
other department of my school than the printing department. It is one of the most useful in the building.” Student publications tended to further memorialize the centrality of the department to high school life. “But yet one profession alone, that of printing, can least afford to be removed. ... The printing department has become an almost indispensable part of the daily routine of the school,” The Echo staff wrote on the five-year anniversary of the printing department. During its tenure, it had been of “incalculable value to the students and thus to the school.” The print shop of Nelson Dewey High School was the “Bee Hive” of the school, despite its lack of equipment and a full-time printing instructor. Both schools emphasized the importance of printing to the school as a whole and its ties to other subjects, and published course enrollment statistics in their respective yearbooks as a testament to its utility.

The production of newspapers further underscored this fact. The move to publish a newspaper came from the students in the printing class at Superior Central, who decided in 1917 to produce a four-page, two-column issue of the Devil’s Pi on small paper stock. An unpretentious affair, the paper was a “good start” for a school with population of 800 students, but it was short lived and discontinued the following school year. A push from administrators revived the Devil’s Pi, which began production again in February 1919. Nearly one year later, the first edition of the Waste Basket rolled off the presses at Nelson Dewey High School, also due to the demand from the printing students to “record the happenings of the school and to express the school spirit.” These newspapers joined the more formal yearbooks, which the

106 The Echo, 1920.
107 Wa Wa Ta, 1921, 30.
109 The Waste Basket, March 12, 1920. The student newspapers at Nelson Dewey High School and later Superior East High School went through a number of name changes. The Gleam succeeded the Waste Basket in 1921, and was later renamed the Spatterinx in 1924 and the East Hi Times in 1925.
high schools had published since the early 1910s. Although the content, which included poems, short stories, jokes, witty observations, and even informal photos, was student-produced, yearbooks acted as a more institutionalized record of high school life than the more informal reporting and writing that appeared in student newspapers.

These early student newspapers in Superior bore a closer resemblance to a Colonial-era pamphlet than to the more modern Telegram. Slim and short, they were often four to eight pages, with news items arranged in a simple two-column or three-column layout. Headlines appeared in the same font size, and no more than four news items appeared on an early front page. The front page of a 1921 issue of the Gleam, for example, carried two articles, one announcing the formation of a Nelson Dewey alumni association, and the other detailing the activities of the school’s new Latin Club. The front page of the Devil’s Pi first issue of the 1920–21 school year was typical: two articles, one thanking the Rotary Club for hosting a dental clinic, and the other chronicling senior class elections. The rudimentary design of these early newspapers did not distinguish between sections, and often did not adhere to a set structure nor a set number of features. Illustrations were rare, as were photographs, due to their cost and the limitations of the printing equipment provided. When they were included, they were typically of athletic contests or teams. Often, only short articles packed the newspapers, broken up by black lines of varying weights, and advertisements were minimal in number and diminutive in size.

110 The first records of a student newspaper in Superior come from Clara Clough Lenroot, who noted students published a monthly newspaper under the supervision of I.W. Gates called The Literary Enterprise. The first edition of Wa Wa Ta was published in 1911. The Echo began as a student newsletter published by the students of the Blaine School, later renamed Superior High School. In 1912, it became a combination yearbook/student newsletter published by the senior class.

111 While no complete runs of either the Superior Central student newspaper or Nelson Dewey/Superior East newspaper exist, there are fairly substantial collections of the early years of both publications. The Devil’s Pi (April 1919); Devil’s Pi (March 1920); Devil’s Pi (September 1920 – May 1921); Devil’s Pi (March 1924); Devil’s Pi (May 1924); Devil’s Pi (May 1924); Devil’s Pi (September 1926 – May 1927); the Waste Basket (March 1920 – May 1921); and the Gleam (November 1921).
These pieces usually focused on various activities associated with the school’s athletic teams and extra-curricular organizations, as well as reports from the classroom. Poems, short stories, and jokes appeared alongside the news articles. Some were submitted by students, others lifted from the student newspapers the Devil’s Pi and Waste Basket received through their exchanges, and in the early years of both publications these types of literary and humorous features accounted for the majority of content.

The exchange system between student newspapers marked another callback to the earlier days of newspaper publication and distribution in the United States. One of the advantages afforded early American newspapers was the free exchange between editorial offices; this practice predated the founding of the Post Office in 1792, and began as one way to provide editors with nonlocal news to fill their papers. It continued through the 19th century, and was essential to the operations of the settlement press in the West. Because newspaper content was not copyrighted, articles published in one paper often found themselves reprinted in hundreds of newspapers throughout the country. Similarly, the high school exchange system facilitated the free sharing of information between high schools within the state of Wisconsin and beyond. Often, the student newspapers would applaud the newspapers of their peers, and remark on the quality content their fellow student newspapers published. It also connected the student newspapers of Superior with a growing national community of high school students and situated the Devil’s Pi and East High School newspapers within a larger high school print culture. The Devil’s Pi published a reoccurring column featuring highlights from its exchanges; it mentioned receiving papers from Spooner, Wisconsin; Hibbing, Minnesota; Milwaukee; Flint, Michigan; and Santa Rosa, California.

The haphazard organization of the newspapers’ staff contributed to the continual change
in their content and production. As an extracurricular activity, the editors and writers rotated each semester based on student interest. At Superior Central, editing duties alternated between two clubs, the Red Domino Club and the Wranglers, on top of their other obligations. While not necessarily outwardly exclusive in their membership, they tended to draw from students already active in the school. The Red Domino Club, an all-girls club officially described as one advancing debating, oratory and public speaking but in reality an organization of the most popular and “live-wire” girls of the school, oversaw editing and reporting duties for the fall semester.\textsuperscript{112} The Wranglers, an all-boys debating and oratory club, claimed to be a truly representative organization of the school and “the spirit of the student body as a whole.”\textsuperscript{113} Together, these two clubs put on school assemblies and dances. All members—like the student body as a whole—were primarily white and Christian. The clubs followed a similar tactic in their management of the paper and relied heavily on the student body to submit content to supplement the little reporting they actually did. Consequently, the news presented in the paper tended to represent the interests of the organizations where the staff had connections, either through friends or as an active participant. While less is known about the staff and newspaper management structure of the various Nelson Dewey and Superior East publications, the high school’s year books reveal that the staff, when listed, was similarly extensively involved in school activities.

The tendency for the newspaper staffs to feature those active in extracurricular activities and well-liked by their fellow students continued when the students of the schools’ journalism classes replaced clubs as the primary source of reporters and editors. When the \textit{Pi} ran a front-page article announcing its new managing editor (Viola Wick) for the 1926 school year, it listed

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{The Echo}, 1921, 76.
\textsuperscript{113} \textit{The Echo}, 1921.
her qualifications: three years of experience on the newspaper staff, one summer spent reporting for the *Telegram*, and “wide connections with school activities and well-deserved popularity.”

The Pi editor-in-chief for the 1924 school year, Margaret Lang, listed 12 school activities under her senior photo, including her election as a commencement speaker. Bruce Black, the editor-in-chief for the *East Hi Times* in 1927, was a two-time varsity basketball player and member of the Commercial Club. Throughout the 1920s, the student newspapers largely reflected the high school experience of its student editors and reporters, and benefited from their heavy involvement and substantial connections to the student body. Consequently, the issues of the *Devil’s Pi, East Hi Times* (and other Superior East/Nelson Dewey publications) reflected the worldview of their staffs, which celebrated the high school experience and positioned school involvement as a key student characteristic. Despite this position as a school activity for the popular and the connected, the student newspapers did boast a nearly level of involvement among female and male students throughout the decade. The staff of the *Devil’s Pi* was made up of at least 50 percent women, with female students often occupying leadership roles at the newspaper. This marked another important point of differentiation from their professional counterparts. The *Telegram*, which employed two female editors and reporters in the 1920s, and relegated most of its female employees to roles as secretaries, could not claim the same gender diversity.

These early editions were an all-school effort, and were often lively, irreverent, and irregular. A 1919 issue of the *Devil’s Pi* proudly described its publication schedule as “when we

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114 *Devil’s Pi*, October 8, 1926.
115 The *Echo* reflected a similar staff diversity, with a disproportionate number of female students acting as editor-in-chief. A male editor-in-chief was such a rarity during the 1920s that the *Telegram* covered the election of the first male editor in five years in 1927.
feel like it,”\textsuperscript{116} which was later updated to read “Issued when we have the time, the inclination, and the copy. Usually every Friday.”\textsuperscript{117} This appeared as part of the newspaper’s masthead for at least one academic year. The Waste Basket often advertised a hallway box as a means to solicit articles: “We hope that the pupils will put little stories and jokes, and anything that will help us to publish a better paper for you.”\textsuperscript{118} The Devil’s Pi editors routinely pleaded with their peers to submit items. “Everybody, stray freshman included, is requested to hand in all copy possible ... Stories, poems, and jokes or any new events of interest to the students will be gratefully received. Come on now, bring on your masterpieces. This is a paper of the students, for the students, by the students.”\textsuperscript{119} For the paper to succeed, the entire student body needed to submit news tips, write jokes and poems, and “boost” for the papers. “A school paper is almost as important as school studies, because it lets all the students ‘in’ on everything going on in the building of interest to the school,” read a Pi editorial.\textsuperscript{120} The two papers frequently chastised their readers for their lack of contributions or poor subscription sales. When the Devil’s Pi only sold 250 subscriptions in 1920, its editors published a somewhat exasperated editorial and asked “Does that mean that only that many are interested in a school paper? Are the rest planning on reading their neighbor’s paper?”\textsuperscript{121} The popularity of candy sales over subscription sales annoyed the Waste Basket staff: “What has happened to the Dewey spirit? ... When a candy sale is being conducted inside of five minutes after the candy has appeared it is all gone. Why can’t this happen to the Waste Basket?“\textsuperscript{122} 

\textsuperscript{116} Devil’s Pi, April 23, 1919. 
\textsuperscript{117} Devil’s Pi, September 24, 1920. 
\textsuperscript{118} The Waste Basket, April 22, 1921. 
\textsuperscript{119} The Devil’s Pi, September 24, 1920. 
\textsuperscript{120} The Devil’s Pi, September 24, 1920. 
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{122} The Waste Basket, May 5, 1921.
These admonitions for subscription sales and content contributions played into a larger thematic element of early student newspaper content: the definition and cultivation of school spirit. This concept mimicked the booster tendencies of the Telegram and its articulation of the ideal qualities of community members. That is, that Superiorites should be unified in their drive to ensure the city achieved its initial promise; that they should be supportive of local businesses; and, whenever, they should adhere to a group mentality that believed in Superior’s progress and its destiny. The student newspapers often expressed how important strong school spirit was to not only the success of the high school community, but to the individual student. Primarily, these print products sought to cultivate a sense of school spirit by establishing participation as a character ideal among high school students. They defined school spirit, offered suggestions on how to boost it, and reproached the student body when it seemed lacking. And, just as in the Telegram, those students who did not fully embody the sense of school spirit the newspapers demanded risked being labeled as a knocker. By admonishing their peers for disappointing displays of spirit, and reprimanding other behaviors including smoking, improper lunch room behavior, and fashion choices, high school print culture exhibited its second priority: an attempt to set a standard of behavior for students during the decade that largely reflected the societal expectations of an older generation, and to celebrate certain characteristics and personal qualities prized during the decade.

Often, the newspapers described strong school spirit as the duty of a well-intentioned high school student, which reflected the high level of involvement of their writing and editing staffs. They reminded students that while more students were extending their education to include high school, it remained a privilege. Those who did not take advantage of the activities school had to offer through participation wasted an intellectual opportunity. “It’s the student who
takes in all school activities and enjoys them that gets the most out of his school life,” wrote the Devil’s Pi in an editorial published during a semester that was especially preoccupied with school spirit and student decorum. “The boy or girl who is to be someone in the world is the one who takes all he can get good out of observation of many different events.” Two weeks later, the newspaper asked: “Are you getting all that the school has to give you? Are you making the school proud of your work? Are you leaving the school a little better than you found it?” Interviews with faculty members echoed this theme. At the start of the 1926 school year, Superior Central High School Principal C.G. Wade admonished students, “No matter where a student comes from, how many friends he has at his former school, or how much he may dislike Central, it is his plain duty while here to take root and become one of this people.” The newspapers, by stimulating interest in athletics, dramatics, and other extracurricular activities, as well as keeping students up-to-date on the goings on in the classroom, was key to accomplishing this goal.

In addition to editorials that encouraged participation, the newspapers also published a variety of tips and tricks to help students reflect on their role within the school and society more broadly. The Devil’s Pi offered a 10-point list during the fall semester of 1920, which included admonishing students to “start school work in earnest from the beginning;” “remember that you are a part of a great organization and that things you do reflect credit or discredit on the school;” and “remember that a bad record is hard to live down.” Finally, they concluded with a call to participation: “Go in for some high school activity and go in for it strong. Remember all your

123  The Devil’s Pi, November 5, 1920.
124  The Devil’s Pi, November 19, 1920.
125  “Educational Pilots Give Message to Central High,” Devil’s Pi, September 24, 1926.
education doesn’t come from books.”126 By devoting so many editorial column inches and space within the newspaper to the question of school spirit, the student newspaper staffs were echoing the pro-extracurricular arguments of school administrators within a student-friendly framework. By equating spirit with pro-school boosting and participation in extracurriculars, the student editorial staffs reflected the important role administrators assigned these activities. They portrayed them as an essential part of the high school experience, and a critical place for students to derive value that would help them in their future role in society. Future success, for these newspapers, rested on the level of support a student demonstrated for the high school, his or her level of activity, and his or her commitment to the needs of the whole.

The student newspapers furthered this effort by actively policing student behavior. They accomplished this by discussing abhorrent behaviors or student trends on their fledgling editorial pages, publishing student complaints about their peers, and celebrating certain characteristics and qualities of their peers, especially in their coverage of athletics. The editorial page became the primary platform to critique student behavior and articulate concerns associated with the new youth culture, which represented a potential unhinging of the social order. Students were forced to address concerns related to a perceived relaxing of sexual standards and a stripping of Victorian-era genteel manners; a change in dress and fashion (primarily for women); an upheaval in social relationships; and an increase in temptations offered by new social spaces, such as the automobile and the motion picture theater.127 In their writing, students demonstrated a

126 The Devil’s Pi, October 7, 1920.
127 Paula S. Fass, The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 20. Fass’ examination of American youth culture focuses almost exclusively on the experience of college-going native, white, middle-class youth from heavily urban areas. However, there was a complementary relationship between high schools and colleges. Fass noted the importance of changes in adolescence on this segment of the population, and the increased attention given to high school as enrollments increased. Additionally, high schools often took their cues—both in terms of instruction and extracurricular activities—from colleges.
preoccupation with how the community at large viewed them and their actions, specifically women. Editorials critiqued the childish behavior of students during assembly, their lack of courtesy and deference to teachers, their disrespect of public spaces (the lunch room and women’s bathroom in particular), and their de-valuing of long-held ideals such as friendship. Discussions of flapper fashion and dress codes generated substantial coverage in the *Pi*. One editorial asked “Did you ever notice how some girls around you dress?” noting how there seemed to be an abundance of freshman in bobbed hair walking around in silk stockings and high heels. “Why can’t we girls start a uniform dress campaign,” the *Pi* wondered, pleading with the girls of the school to commit to wearing only decent, sensible clothing.128 Later issues of the newspaper discussed the possibility of a dress code as the preoccupation with fashion was creating distractions among the younger students. The *Pi* encouraged seniors to take the lead in demonstrating appropriate apparel, and the implementation of a code of conduct, which included restrictions for dressing, as well as outlawing rouge and the public application of face powder, won the students applause in the *Telegram*.129 The boys tried to follow the girls’ lead, and vowed to stop cutting classes, give up gambling, and support the school’s athletic teams.130

Fashion was but one extension of an overall tendency to spend frivolously that attracted the ire of the student newspapers. The revelation that most young people spent their money on cosmetics, tobacco, candy, and other luxuries generated consternation among the *Pi* editorial staff: “Come on boys and girls, economize as much as possible, and boost the money used on education and reduce the money on luxuries. Help save your country and schools by

128 *The Devil’s Pi*, October 29, 1920.
129 "Local High School Girls Ban Rouge, Smoking and Swearing," *Superior Telegram*, May 9, 1924.
130 "Superior Central High Boys Follow the Lead of Girls," *Superior Telegram*, May 15, 1924.
Cigarettes were particularly troublesome, as the Pi believed the smoking habit reflected poorly on high school students. The newspaper canceled its subscription to another high school paper upon the discovery that it carried cigarette advertisements—a “deplorable habit, even in its lightest forms” and one that might induce the “moral downfall” of students—and published critical letters from students regarding cigarettes. “If we become careless and allow the actions of a few indifferent feeble-minded over-grown infants to sit on the sunny side of our building and suck cigarettes in plain view of all who chance to pass, what sort of an opinion will the patrons, friends, and tourists form of the best high school in Wisconsin?” The newspaper’s attitude toward cigarettes reflected the heart of most of its criticism of its readers and fellow students. Because greater attention was being paid to high school students, and it was crucial students carry themselves with a decorum that challenged public perception of teenagers and adolescents. By demonstrating that they embodied the character ideals of the decade, they delivered on the promise of the high school to train men and women equipped to handle the demands of the modern age.

The Professionalization of the High School Press

By 1922, changes were underway at the two newspapers. At the Devil’s Pi, Mahnke decided to increase the size of the newspaper, change the format to a four-column layout, and raise the subscription cost to 50 cents, which allowed the paper to carry more illustrations. The student response was strong, he reported, and as a result the Pi was able to continue its operations without soliciting advertisements (although they published those that were submitted).

131 The Devil’s Pi, February 25, 1921.
132 The Devil’s Pi, May 20, 1921.
133 The Devil’s Pi, October 7, 1920.
“There is little from preventing the Devil’s Pi from being recognized as one of the greatest high school papers in the United States,” The Echo proudly boasted in its 1923-24 edition. Mahnke continued his push for newer and better equipment for the students. In 1926 the newspaper moved into more spacious quarters and added an electrical cylinder press to its equipment, allowing Mahnke to justify moving to an even larger size. When the first issue of the 1926-27 school year rolled off the presses, the five-column Devil’s Pi bore a striking resemblance to its mainstream counterpart, the Telegram. Photos of newsmakers appeared on the front page. There were clearly labeled sections covering clubs, sports, society, and school news. For the first time, students felt they were producing a “real honest-to-goodness newspaper.” Almost every student in the school was a paid subscriber. These changes in style, content and product coincided with the addition of journalism to the curriculum of the two high schools. Working for the Pi or the Waste Basket (now renamed The East Hi Times) was no longer solely an extracurricular activity. It was now a required part of coursework.

While records are not available for their enrollment levels, photos of journalism students that appeared in yearbooks, in student newspapers, and even in the Telegram show full classes of 20 students or more diligently working on upcoming issues. The classes regularly arranged visits to the Telegram’s news room to observe professional newspaper production first hand, and several journalism students became contributors to the Telegram’s Central and East High Notes sections. At least one, the popular future Pi managing editor Viola Wick, worked as a cub reporter during her summer vacation. Mahnke, along with Superior Central’s journalism instructor Alice Baker, also identified other opportunities to expand their journalism academic offerings and connect their students with other journalism educators. Together they coordinated a

joint one-day educational session for the city’s high school journalism classes with a University of Minnesota journalism professor, and supervised Superior’s delegation to CIPA and later NSPA conventions. On the page, these classes created a more professional student newspaper that largely muted the levity of early editions. No longer fixated on primarily printing poems and jokes, they exhibited a new preoccupation with their future. Specifically, these later editions carried more editorials and more articles on the signs of progress and living in a modern age, a theme furthered in student yearbooks.

Yearbooks as Alternative Chroniclers of the High School Experience

While student newspapers chronicled the weekly (or monthly) activities of the school, often with little musings on the past, yearbooks served as the historical record for the students of Superior Central and Superior East. Here, students demonstrated a fascination with the past, present, and future of not only the high schools and the students within their halls. They described high school as the central defining experience of the city’s youth culture. The 1928 Wa Ta staff dedicated the yearbook “in memory of an honorable Past, and lively appreciation of a busy Present,” while The Echo often invoked the power of nostalgia in its introductions. “Pick up your Echo and look at the pictures of the old school and the best friends you ever had,” read the 1920 edition. “It will be the greatest pleasure for you to live over again those happy days ...” The yearbook served as “a means of reviving old memories” that were largely positive, “of dear old High,” of “old friendships and happy experiences.”\textsuperscript{135} For both high schools, the yearbook reminded students not only of their tenure, but also left a record of their presence in the

\textsuperscript{135} The Echo, 1927.
classroom, on the court, and in the hallways, long after they left school.

The theme of transformation drove student representation within the yearbook. In the evolution from child-like, naive freshman to mature, knowledgeable senior, the students positioned themselves as fully realized adults, equipped to tackle the challenges of the next phase of life. Poems, jokes, short stories, photographs, and news articles chronicled this progression. Freshman, as the punchline of most of the books’ humor sections, were often overwhelmed, lost, and confused when they entered high school. One poem described a freshman as the “cutest little feller,” and a comic strip illustrated the trials and tribulations of freshmen trying to find their classrooms and attempting to open their lockers. The seniors stood in stark contrast. The humor sections portrayed them as all knowing, fully aware of what was expected of them which allowed them to bend the rules. One of the most prominent displays of the seniors acknowledging their development, and flouting convention, appeared during Superior Central’s annual Kid Day, when seniors “turned back the pages of their life,” dressed in “kid clothes,” brought toys to class, and otherwise presented themselves as lower classmen. Photo collages of senior girls sporting oversized bows in their hair and holding teddy bears, and senior boys wearing knee-high socks and playing with yo-yos appeared in *The Echo, Devil’s Pi*, and the *Telegram*. Kid Day provided a somewhat obvious illustration of the students’ development, and offered the students a chance to reflect on their new responsibilities as high school graduates and adults. More nuanced observations appeared in poems and short articles. “Oh schoolmate, my schoolmate! We go into a rosy future / Our senior year has taught us / to weather the storms of

136 *The Echo*, 1922, 104.
137 *The Echo*, 1920.
life,” read one poem in *Wa Wa Ta*. Senior Hilda Dunning, in a long piece on the accomplishments of the senior class, emphasized progress and transformation: “Now we know our High School training has been profitable. ... It has given us a general knowledge of the many subjects needed to carry us through life after school days are over. ... But above all else, it has shown us how little we really know, how to learn some of the things we lack, and that we never can learn too much.”¹⁴⁰ The yearbooks further memorialized students’ progress by tracking marriages of former classmates, as well as publishing an Alumni Section, which listed those at university and college (and where) and the jobs of those employed after graduation.

The yearbooks also exhibited a belief in Superior’s ability to transform itself as a city. Through poems and short stories, these publications echoed the progressive narrative of the city and focused on its future as a great port city. The 1926 edition of the *Wa Wa Ta*—the “Old Town” number—promised to portray the past and present spirit of Superior’s East End in order to “pay tribute” to its “rapidly growing industrial importance.”¹⁴¹ Photos of old landmarks peppered the edition, which featured an illustration of the crumbling lighthouse that stood on Wisconsin Point. This artwork contrasted the photos of the gleaming and modern Superior East High School, as well as the modern ore docks, massive grain elevators, and new lighthouse that signified Superior’s future. A short story by one student described Superior as an “ideal commercial and industrial center ... a symbol of a rapidly progressing modern world.”¹⁴² Another piece, titled “Tales of a Grandfather,” reflected more explicitly on the city’s transformation, and predicted it would become a major ocean port with the coming of the proposed Deep Waterway. The project would transform Superior into a “city comparing

¹⁴⁰ Hilda Dunning, “Profits,” *Wa Wa Ta* 1921, 8.
¹⁴¹ *Wa Wa Ta*, 1926.
favorably in size with Chicago” and would grant all of its citizens a “wonderful opportunity to make a success of your lives.” The next year’s edition of the *Wa Wa Ta* continued these themes. In its foreword, it observed that “some cities stand still. Some other dream dreams. To none is given a fairer civic vision than the lesser twin at the head of the lakes—the vision of a day when the deep-sea fleets come steaming in.”

**The Contradictions Within Yearbooks**

The student yearbooks occupied a contradictory position. They claimed, as the introduction to the 1928 *Echo* described, “to render a truthful, and therefore beautiful, recording of the undertakings and attainments” of the high school. The 1923 edition of *Wa Wa Ta* promised a “glimpse” into the activities of high school students and the school spirit behind them. Yet, they represented a carefully cultivated image of the high school experience, the result of a selected group of students operating under the watchful eye of faculty advisers. While they often contained several pages of candid photos—of students standing on their heads, forming a kick line in winter coats, precariously hanging out of a car, and studying while sitting in a snow drift—the majority of photographs were staged and professionally captured. The content overwhelmingly catered to a small percentage of the high school: the senior class. They are the only students to have individual photos featured, and, in some editions, the only class to appear at all in the yearbook. Extracurricular activities dominated the pages. While the academic programs of the high schools were not entirely absent, their representation was minimal: a faculty page with photos, short descriptions of different departments and course offerings, and an occasional classroom photo. The 1923 Superior Central High School football squad commanded

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144 *Wa Wa Ta*, 1927.
eight pages in *The Echo*, which included a team photo, individual photos of the varsity players and short descriptions of each, and a comic illustration. The yearbook dedicated six pages to the boy’s basketball team (and none to girls’ athletics) The only mention of academics appeared in the five-page section featuring faculty photos.

The official legacy of each class depended on the level of school spirit and pep it exhibited, further elevating the voices and experiences of the students who embodied this character ideal, and nearly eliminating those who did not from the record. The 1923 Superior Central senior class “led in athletics and activities of all kinds;”145 the next year’s senior class claimed to set new records for extracurricular involvement and worked for the “good and betterment of the school.”146 The 1925 Superior East seniors claimed to lead in school activities ever since it entered the school’s hallways, and challenged all future classes to beat its record.147 The staff behind the yearbook’s production, typically juniors, were elected by the students, and often were the popular, “live wire” and active, and the yearbooks tended to reflect their experiences and world views. The 1925 edition of *The Echo* opened with an official definition of school spirit, and operated as a call to action for all classes: School spirit led one “gladly to obey the rules and follow the customs of the school, to guard its dignity, to aid its work ... to support the enterprises of the school, to sacrifice, to endure, and, if needs be, withdraw for the good of the school.”148 A poem in the *Wa Wa Ta* that accompanied the freshman class reflected their understanding of school spirit’s importance: “We’re the class of twenty-eight / We’ll show you

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145 *The Echo*, 1923.
146 *The Echo*, 1924.
147 *Wa Wa Ta*, 1925.
148 Attributed to C.G. Wade, Superior Central High School principal.
lots of ‘pep’ / We’ll try to do our work first-rate / And then we’ll have a splendid ‘rep.’”

Even the portion of the yearbook that was the most democratic in terms of published submissions, senior mottoes, exhibited a strong tendency to emphasize a student’s involvement, especially among the male class members and especially in extracurricular activities. “Greatness lies in getting things done,” asserted Raymond Skoglund. John Hancock, star football and basketball player, noted “he excels in all things outside of school.” “A good fellow at all times and in all branches of school activities,” read Percy Ekholm’s quote — one repeated by several seniors the ensuing years. Female students, on the other hand, downplayed their involvement (despite their own strong records of participation) and emphasized their virtue. Edna Eimon’s motto was typical: “An angel might have stopped to see, and blessed her for her purity.” She listed 11 extracurricular activities.

Similar to the editorials in student newspapers, this emphasis on school spirit and unwavering support for the high school mirrored the adult expectations of high school students. That is, that the next generation would be united in its belief in boosting for Superior, whether the city’s business prospects or its educational institutions, and that it would work to quiet (or eliminate) contradictory voices. In part, this tendency illuminated future expectations of high school graduates; but it also demonstrated the connections between yearbooks and Superior’s business class, whose advertisements populated the back of the books and provided the necessary revenue to fund the enterprise.

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149 Wa Wa Ta, 1925.
150 The Echo, 1920. The Wa Wa Ta did not include senior quotes.
151 The Echo, 1921.
152 The Echo, 1924.
153 The Echo, 1921.
Yet yearbooks, more so than the newspapers or other official school publications, also provided an opportunity for students to annotate the record and provide an alternate, unofficial view of the high school experience. The tradition of signing yearbooks, writing notes in the margins, and annotating photos demonstrated how these fixed objects were in reality dynamic, and left open to interpretation by the user. Historians of education have recently begun to consult these objects as part of an effort to define specific conceptions of loyalty, community, and identity, and better understand the meaning of school for adolescents. In the effort to present a unified, cohesive narrative about the high school experience, yearbooks demonstrated the many ways in which community can become fractured. One student’s copy of The Echo, for example, included hearts around photos of certain boys, and marks through the photos of certain girls. Inscriptions in other discussed a sense of shared experience forged by being considered outsiders: “Most likely the reason we are such friends is that we are both fat and red headed with tempers to match. I am glad that your seat was changed so we could talk during roll call and get on other people’s nerves.” Other yearbooks contained mentions of nicknames otherwise unmentioned in the official yearbook copy—“spark plug,” “pickles,” “cookie,” and “jewels”—or experiences not written up in their official society reports. “I couldn’t begin to tell how much I’ve enjoyed all those good times at your house, I always felt at home, seeing I couldn’t always go to my own home,” read one inscription. Others remembered driving parties and late-night excursions: “I will never forget will never forget one certain nite [sic]. Maybe I should say morning cause I didn’t know about it till A.M. But it was a ... thrill. Sailors.”

155 Anonymous, marginalia in yearbook belonging to Joyce R. Thompson, Wa Wa Ta, 1923.
156 Anonymous, marginalia in yearbook belonging to Lillie Carlson, Wa Wa Ta, 1928.
157 Anonymous, marginalia in yearbook belonging to Lillie Carlson, Wa Wa Ta, 1928.
advice (beware the “revengeful” ladies, one friend wrote to another\textsuperscript{158}) and words of encouragement for the next school year. But most often these inscriptions implored their friends to always remember them.

In order to secure its future, Superior constructed a modern, progressive public school system designed to equip the next generation with the skills and knowledge they needed in order to ensure the community’s success. The \textit{Telegram}, which often fit the activities of the high school into its own narrative about Superior’s progress and destiny, granted the high schools a level of public approval as they expanded their curriculum and their role within the community. But while the \textit{Telegram} covered the city’s high schools, it did not necessarily grant space to the elevate the voices of Superior’s younger generation, who increasingly began to see themselves as distinct from their parents and grandparents, holding a different set of values and expectations for the future.

Superior’s students found their voice in the growing world of high school print culture. By 1920, both of the city’s high schools had their own newspaper, as well as a yearbook, and these outlets provided a platform for students to articulate their unique world view. Throughout all forms of student print culture in Superior, there emerged one strong, common theme: the desire to make an impact and leave a legacy. In yearbooks and newspapers, students articulated the opportunity they saw ahead. There was a “tide of progress” being felt in all parts of the world, according to an editorial in the \textit{Pi}, and “the waves of progress, of reform, [could] be strongly sensed” in Superior. The responsibility of students, the editorial continued, was to create

\textsuperscript{158} Anonymous, marginalia in yearbook belonging to Al Reske, \textit{The Echo}, 1920.
a legacy that would have a strong impact on the future, rather than being beholden to the past.\textsuperscript{159}

While the student publications largely repeated the themes present in the city’s institutional media, small conflicts began to emerge over what Superior was and what it should be. These conflicts started as cracks in the city’s cohesive narrative, and intensified in the latter half of the 1920s, when a conflict over the purpose of the high school emboldened students, revealed fissures among the business community and political leaders, and found debates over the city’s future, and the legacy of its students, manifested in print publications.

\textsuperscript{159} “What Are You Going to Do This Year?” Devil’s Pi, Sept. 24, 1926.
Chapter Four

Community Divisions and Fractures in Print: The Superior Student Strike of 1927

A standing-room only crowd packed Superior’s Tower Hall on a cold and wet Wednesday night in March 1927. More than 1,000 people, many of them high school students, had waited in the drizzling rain long before the doors opened. Inside, six police officers stood at the perimeter to maintain order, and turned away more than 500 people due to a lack of space. It was one of the city’s largest indignation meetings in recent memory, and represented the culmination of increasingly public grievances and escalating tensions over the Board of Education’s sudden decision to dismiss a popular English teacher at Superior Central High School, Lulu “Dickie” Dickinson, who had worked in the city’s high schools since 1904.1

After Dickinson’s firing, rumors spread that the senior class of Superior Central planned to walk out of classes as a show of support. The Telegram reported that a general “furor” was growing among the students, who were increasingly agitated with the arbitrary actions of the Board of Education and concerned with leadership of School Superintendent Paul Spencer. The Telegram reported students and alumni hurled “charges of ‘tyranny, the like of which has never before been known in Superior,’” and went on record to describe the use of “gag rules” by the Board of Education and Spencer to curtail criticism.2 Concerned Superior citizens appointed a committee of 21 “representative citizens” to work with the Board of Education to secure a special meeting to address the Dickinson issue, dubbed the Committee of 21. The senior class at Superior Central elected a student committee of five to represent their interests and work to

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1 “Strike Averted as Joint Board Meeting Nears,” Superior Evening Telegram, March 17, 1927.
2 “Student Strike Threatened as Meeting Nears,” Superior Evening Telegram, March 16, 1927.
reinstate Dickinson.\(^3\) Each of the committee members held leadership positions within a variety of school clubs, all worked at the school’s two main publications, the *Devil’s Pi* and the *Echo*, and all were well acquainted with the tactics needed to win public support. At the indignation meeting, Viola Wick, a senior at Central High School and former editor-in-chief and managing editor of the *Devil’s Pi*, stepped forward to offer a student perspective and win community support for their cause.

With her wavy brown hair cut into a stylish bob, a round, cherubic face, and sporting a string of pearls with a modest dress, Wick represented the very definition of a modern female high school student. A *Milwaukee Journal* reporter later described her as “pretty in a delicate ... fashion and nimble in her conversation.”\(^4\) The only daughter of Norwegian immigrants, she built an impressive resume of high school activity involvement and academic achievement, was popular among her peers, and embodied the school spirit high school administrators, student organizations, and publications sought to cultivate. While she made appearances in school theatrical productions, led various clubs and associations, and served on the committees for school dances, she stood out most for her commitment to the *Devil’s Pi* and newspaper work in Superior. She was involved with the *Pi* throughout high school and quickly assumed a leadership position on the staff. She served as the *Pi*’s associate editor—the second-highest position at the paper—during her sophomore year. Named editor-in-chief the following year, she became the first-ever managing editor during her senior year, while also serving on the editorial board. In the summers, she worked at the *Telegram* as a cub reporter, and her byline appeared on society pieces and short articles about high school activities. Wick “seized every opportunity to get in

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\(^3\) “Central Seniors Appoint 5 to Speed Up Board Hearing,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, March 30, 1927.

\(^4\) Article quoted in “As the Nation Saw the Strike,” *Devil’s Pi*, May 20, 1927.
touch with as many phases of newspaper work as possible,” and as the *Pi*’s managing editor “assumed weighty responsibilities for its success.” But Wick was not only committed to guiding the *Pi*; she also felt an obligation to her peers at Superior Central. When Lulu Dickinson’s dismissal began to cause an uproar among students, Wick was thus a natural spokesperson to air the students’ grievances. She epitomized the model student, progressive and modern.

“Loud cheers” from the students greeted the diminutive Wick and echoed throughout the hall as she took her place. “Miss Dickinson has been in our school over 20 years,” Wick began. “She is not only an institution in herself in Superior but throughout Northern Wisconsin. She has worked for the good of the school, has established its fondest traditions and with her dismissal all those traditions have been torn away.” Wick detailed how, for two years, the traditions of the high school had been under attack. Clubs that formed the backbone of the school’s social life were disbanded. Spencer and the Board of Education threatened to eliminate the *Echo* on the grounds it was unnecessary and a drain on students’ time. The curriculum changed to focus less on college-preparatory coursework and more on practical classes to prepare students for immediate employment. “The aim at Central High School now does not seem to educate the children,” Wick continued. “Rather it is a massive organization overcoming its own ends. ... If the school looks good in headlines it seems to satisfy. Something should be done—and done at once.” She returned to her seat amid a storm of applause, cheering, whistling and the stamping of feet.

The conflict that engulfed Superior’s public schools, as well as its civic life, was

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5 “Manages Pi,” *Devil’s Pi*, October 8, 1926.
6 “Strike Averted as Joint Board Meeting Nears,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, March 17, 1927.
ultimately rooted in a clash over different visions of the future, and an attempt to secure the promise that had long defined life at the head of the lakes. As a series of high-profile civic projects and infrastructure improvements failed to advance beyond the proposal stage, suspicions that the triumphant narrative that that Superior’s boosters (and the Telegram) promoted was all bluster began to take hold. By the mid-1920s, Superior’s position as the “second Chicago” (or even Wisconsin’s second city) seemed to be slowly slipping through its grasp. These frustrations and mounting tensions challenged the optimistic rhetoric of its boosters, who had carefully projected a picture of Superior as a cohesive, unified community, and quietly silenced critics and dismissed dissenting voices. They had also failed to acknowledge new visions of the future and new paths forward for the city, especially those that came from those in less powerful positions, such as high school students.

The city’s public schools emerged as one of the tools best-positioned to help the city realize its destiny. As a result, contesting notions of what the high school should be, and how it should educate its students, increasingly shaped civic conversations and appeared more frequently in print. How would the city’s high schools prepare their students for the demands of a modern age, and who was allowed to participate in that debate? How could high schools best promote the city’s urban aspirations? And what, if anything, would secure the city’s future and deliver on the promise that drew the Proprietors and early settlers to the head of the lakes? These conflicts over what the school should be, what it should teach, how it should run, as well as larger questions about what defined a modern, progressive community, erupted at the end of the decade. At a critical moment for the city’s future prosperity more than 1,000 high school students went on strike.

The students at Superior Central saw themselves as having the training, the tools, and the
publishing access necessary to create a better community. Educated under a high school curriculum that stressed civic engagement and emphasized the importance of the individual to a functioning democracy, the student strike committee drew on their classroom experience to articulate their frustrations with the Board of Education. Walking out of the classroom—and staying away from the high school for more than one month—served as a rebuke of the misguided, petty, and ultimately short-sighted actions of older generations. For these high school students, Dickinson’s firing was one in a series of decisions that attempted to dictate one future course for Superior’s youth. Eliminating the clubs and activities that defined the high school experience demonstrated how little the will of the students mattered to some of Superior’s adult citizens. Changing the curriculum and reducing the amount of college preparatory courses revealed how little control students had over their intellectual development and future opportunities. Rather than follow this path, the students forged their own via student print channels.

Using skills developed in journalism courses and in their positions at the *Devil’s Pi* and the *Echo*, members of the student strike committee used these and other publications to rally support for their cause and contradict the dominant narratives promoted by the *Telegram* and Board of Education. Emboldened by the freedom Harold Mahnke granted them in the newsroom, and encouraged by other teachers, as well as their parents, they demonstrated an understanding of print media’s role in creating a community and building good citizens. But the student strike’s reliance on print materials also revealed the limitations alternative news networks faced when they conflicted with institutional media narratives, and how conflicts over who has a right to speak, and in what fashion, can overwhelm the content of the speech itself.
This chapter examines the 1927 Superior Central student strike, which unfolded in the city’s print materials, and where student publications played a pivotal role. The strike represented a clash of narratives advanced in different print channels, and revealed a series of growing tensions within the community. Superior, like much of the United States, witnessed an expansion in the number of print materials in circulation within the community, which in turn created a more complex media environment. Student publications circulated alongside the Telegraph, and provided an alternative interpretation of the events shaping the city. The Board of Education published several official reports and surveys of the city’s school system in an effort to establish an institutional record of the public schools and articulate its educational vision. And the Telegram, capitalizing on its position as Superior’s institutional newspaper, attempted to synthesize the viewpoints represented in other print materials and incorporate the city’s public school system into its grand narrative about Superior’s progress. Yet, to some extent these new print materials challenged the Telegram’s privileged position, and presented alternative understandings of Superior’s community identity.

This chapter demonstrates how print culture became a site of social and political struggles within the community of Superior. The vibrant print culture that flourished in Superior, and had its roots in developing and maintaining a unified narrative about the city that emphasized its progress and an urban vision, now revealed its fractures. Different materials sought to advance a different narrative about the city’s future, as embodied by its public schools, and discredit competing visions. As the historian Carl Kaestle and literary studies scholar Janice Radway observed, print culture can often act as a technology of power. Within the newspapers, the ability to act as the arbitrator of record—that is, deciding which stories to report, who to interview, and how to interpret the day’s news—can advance a particular viewpoint. But as more
groups had access to publishing platforms, they were able to challenge the dominant narratives institutional media such as the *Telegram* constructed.\(^7\) The *Telegram*, the *Devil’s Pi*, and even the school system reports, offered different conceptions of modernity and progress, and a different future picture for Superior.

As Superior’s residents became increasingly frustrated with the city’s inability to capitalize on its advantages, they began to use the *Telegram* as a platform to air their grievances. Increasingly, their attention turned toward the organization of the city’s public-school system as one way to realize Superior’s destiny. This chapter positions the reconceptualization of the high school as an institution of practical learning (rather than intellectual development) as an important point of tension within the city. By changing the high school curriculum from college preparatory to career-oriented, the Superior Board of Education introduced a new view of the high school, rooted in its ability to train the future generation and secure Superior’s commercial success. The emphasis on efficiency served as a flashpoint for community tensions that had been slowly building, and erupted over Dickinson’s firing.

The city’s various forms of print media became key tools used in the resulting debate over the student strike, the future of the city’s public school system, and the destiny of Superior itself. For some, the strike was a smokescreen for a larger political fight among the mayor, the Board of Education, and disgruntled citizens eager to replace an outdated political appointment process with the direct election of board commissioners. For the commissions on the Board of Education, the strike was about resistance to educational progress. A new age, argued Superintendent Spencer, demanded a new approach to education, one that prioritized efficiency.

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and served all students, not just the college bound. These groups used the *Telegram*, and gave interviews to other publications, to discredit the students and their aims. They reported stories on activities of the strikers that made them appear frivolous and petulant. They circulated gossip and rumors, and published commentary that compared the strikers to spoiled children, Bolsheviks, and Leopold and Loeb.

During the strike, student organizers relied on the print platforms they controlled to create a sense of community among their peers, contradict dominant narratives, and win support from their parents, teachers, local politicians, and Superior residents. For students, this was a fight about the dictatorial-like control of the high school that the Board of Education promoted, and its unwillingness to grant legitimacy to the voices of students. Superior’s tradition of student publication control created an opportunity for students to fully realize the promises of print to question authority, and granted them a platform to articulate their own conceptions of community and visions of the future. Trained at the *Pi* and well-versed in publicity tactics, its student editors drew on these experiences to give voice to the next generation, rather than quieting it in favor of the past. While Dickinson’s firing, and the subsequent suspension of students, served as a catalyst, the strike was more broadly about two visions of the future that were at odds with one another. It spoke to the relations of authority, and the relations of power within the school itself. Ultimately, the strike exposed in print conflicting notions over who had the ability to dictate what it meant to be a progressive, modern community at a moment when its future appeared to be in question.

**The Limits of Superior’s Booster Rhetoric and Frustrations Over the Future**

The Superior Board of Education controversy marked the culmination of growing anxieties within the community. By the mid-1920s, the city of Superior stood at a turning point,
as no sure signs emerged to indicate the city’s future destiny was secure. Superior and Duluth continued to operate one of the top three busiest ports in North America in terms of tonnage, but automation at the docks and in shipbuilding contributed to a decline in the number of jobs. New factories continued to open, but not at the rate members of the city’s business class preferred, and none developed a market for their goods outside of the Upper Midwest. Efforts to advertise Superior and attract new investments floundered in part because of the number of disparate groups trying to accomplish the same outcomes. Increasingly, frustrated citizens took to the Public Forum in the *Telegram* to articulate just how Superior was squandering its opportunities. “We have five or six business clubs more or less overlapping in their work, none of them really amounting to a darn as far as any real consistent constructive results are to be see,” read one letter to the *Telegram*. Another letter observed: “Let us all admit that Superior lacked a well-defined sense of direction in its natural growth up until now.” Its author hoped the city’s lackluster performance would rid residents of their complacency. Other letters advocated a number of building projects designed to boost the city’s commercial prospects and generate positive national publicity; they included a potato and vegetable warehouse, public market, civic auditorium, beet sugar factory, cannery, and several skating and curling rinks. “In order to expect the outside to take notice of us, we must first accomplish something ourselves, that the local people take pride in,” read one letter published in 1923. “The slogan in Superior has been to get industries, and it is a worthy one, but would not the purpose be easier and more quickly attained by getting people to come here first, if only as a visitor to start with ...” Of all these proposals, only a hotel—the “million-dollar” Hotel Androy—won the necessary support of residents,

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politicians, and the business class, and was completed. This sense of inaction, and failure to move beyond preliminary architectural renderings and site evaluations, did little to quell the notion that despite its ambitions, Superior was closer to its provincial roots than its urban future.

The *Telegram* served as the primary community platform to mediate these debates. The conflict over these investments lay in the allocation of resources, and what expenditures would deliver an immediate economic impact. Often, community conversations portrayed these proposals as a zero-sum game. Superior could not afford to invest in myriad projects, letters to the *Telegram* argued, and it needed to be selective in what it would pursue. “That a great shipping port without a modern merchandise dock or any merchandise dock at all, absolutely necessary for her development, should have an auditorium first is ridiculous beyond words to express and illustrates over and over again our incapacity to govern and to develop a commercial city here,” wrote the self-professed local economist William Gill, a frequent Forum contributor. “It is discouraging to live in a place where common sense has no part in shaping public affairs.”\(^\text{11}\) But why invest in new docks—or a new auditorium—when what Superior really needed was a more effective national advertising campaign? “I saw an article in the Telegram a few days ago from a writer that instead of building an auditorium, that some money out to be expended on advertising the city so as to get more industries here. I am of the opinion that the writer is a right thinking man,” wrote one reader, signing his letter “Yours for the good of the city.”\(^\text{12}\)

For others, advertising or publicity would be ineffective, due to incompetent city leadership. So rather than building or advertising, exhaustive studies would prove to be the key


to Superior’s success. But this idea resulted in far more letters published in opposition to any type of industrial surveys than those in favor, and reminded Telegram readers that the city needed to act quickly. Time-intensive studies would only delay the immediate action Superior had to take. “About the craziest thing any community can do is to hire a non-resident, so-called expert, at a fancy salary,” wrote Ernest Arnold when news broke the city had engaged an outside firm to conduct an industrial survey.\(^\text{13}\) Another reader joined him in questioning the efficacy of the effort: “I am not in favor of expending it or any part of it for an industrial survey under present conditions. We are too dead and indifferent to our own interests.”\(^\text{14}\)

While the city’s propensity for studies and proposals over action frustrated members of the business community, education advocates faced greater obstacles in their attempt to secure greater funding for schools and higher teacher salaries. They attempted to connect strong public schools to Superior’s future success, echoing the arguments of the city’s early settlers and mimicking the approach supporters of building projects used to win community support. But schools were somewhat different than a civic auditorium or a beet sugar factory. Unlike those proposals, the public school system was already a reality and demonstrated continual growth, in terms of enrollments and graduates, throughout the 1920s. It had decades of experience training thousands of children that assumed prominent positions within the community, which demonstrated the value of the schools. The education of the next generation was “the best investment” the city could make in its future.\(^\text{15}\) Referencing the city’s budget, another reader noted that Superior’s two largest expenditures were roads and schools: “A good deal of road work can likely wait; schools, in the nature of things, neither can nor ought to wait. Efficient

\(^\text{13}\) Ernest A. Arnold, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, May 24, 1927.
\(^\text{14}\) J.R. Hathaway, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, May 24, 1927.
\(^\text{15}\) Letter to the Editor, Superior Telegram, November 12, 1920.
schools as a safeguard and means of financial return are morally due to the country.”¹⁶ But as educational costs increased during the decade, public support for the schools wavered. After several austerity measures, Superior’s school budget decreased from $718,583 in 1921 to $514,000 in 1923. But the costs soon began to climb again; in 1924 the school budget was $627,387, and within two years it rose to $710,681.¹⁷ Detractors described the school system as “extravagant,” and indicative of larger problems with the city’s management.¹⁸ In order for the public schools to achieve its potential, and drive Superior forward, it needed to embrace a modern management system rooted in efficiency, which meant reducing operation costs, and changing the school to accommodate increased enrollments and the diverse occupations students pursued after graduation. More so than a robust building and infrastructure program, or an aggressive advertising and publicity campaign, modern and efficient public schools would be key to Superior finally realizing its destiny.

**Modern High Schools and a City’s Destiny**

High school enrollments soared in the 1920s and the student body diversified. In Superior alone, the number of high school students increased more than 90 percent between 1915 and 1925, rising to a total enrollment of 1,804 students. Throughout Wisconsin, high school enrollment increases far outpaced the growth in population, and the state’s Department of Public Instruction observed the trend with trepidation and awe. According to its 1926 *Biennial Report*, the middle of the 1920s represented a “critical stage” for Wisconsin’s high schools. Strong

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¹⁷ “1921 School Budget is $718,583; 68 Percent More Than This Year,” *Superior Telegram*, Sept. 21, 1920; “Gross School Budget Fixed at $514,000 for Next Year,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, Sept. 18, 1923; “Cost $627,387 to Run Schools,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, Sept. 9, 1924; and “$500 Increase Granted to School Head,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, June 15, 1926.
growth in enrollments, the expectation of greater course offerings, and decreasing financial resources placed the state’s high schools in a precarious position. The questions surrounding high schools no longer centered on whether the high school should exist and to what extent a community should embrace it, but instead on how best to fund them and how to ensure access to all students, not just those continuing their education at a university, college, or state normal school.

The debate in Superior and throughout Wisconsin over what the changing makeup of high school enrollment meant fit into a larger national conversation about the shape the curriculum should take, due to these more diverse student demographics. Similar to most of the United States’ public high schools, Wisconsin’s schools traced their roots back to private academies, which existed primarily as preparatory schools for the college-bound and largely attracted children of the upper class (and, in some cases, the middle class). When a greater percentage of the school-age population began extending their education, the state’s educators began to re-assess the purpose of the high school. For more than two decades, a set of recommendations produced in 1892 by the Committee of Ten, a group of educators organized by the National Education Association to provide standards for the high school curriculum, dictated the courses high schools should offer. The Committee argued the high school should not differentiate between students applying for college and those preparing for life, and advocated a one-size-fits-all approach to high school studies. But increases in enrollments of children of the urban and rural working class, farmers, and the self-employed, who in previous decades would not have seen the need nor had the opportunity to extend their education beyond the eighth grade, made these recommendations increasingly controversial and seemingly out-of-step with present-day educational needs. Beginning in 1915, the National Education Associations’
Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education began developing a new set of curriculum guidelines and objectives. Released three years later, the committee’s resulting report, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, became the era’s “most-cited statement on the nature of the high school.”

According to the report, changes in American life necessitated changes in education. Public secondary education should serve society as well as the individual, and its revised goal was to develop in the student “the knowledge, interests, ideals, habits, and powers whereby he will find his place and use that place to shape both himself and society toward even nobler ends,” according to Clarence Kingsley, the guiding force behind the *Cardinal Principles*. The report listed seven main student objectives: health; their “command of fundamental processes” (or basic literacy); “worthy home membership”; vocational training; civic education; “worthy use of leisure time”; and moral training. The high schools’ responsibility was, per Kingsley, to teach “common ideas, common ideals, and common modes of thought, feeling, and action, whereby America, through a rich, unified, common life, may render her truest service to a world seeing for democracy among men and nations.” The *Cardinal Principles* advocated the comprehensive high school, a significant change from the previous structure of the high school curriculum and extracurriculum. In addition to expanding the number of clubs, associations, sports teams, and other student activities, as discussed in the previous chapter, it also meant expanding the types of courses and programs available to students.

During the Progressive Era, the educators who sought to introduce new curriculum

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22 Clarence Kingsley, quoted in Reese, 192.
standards wanted high schools more closely aligned with real life and to be able to deliver value to all students. This included integrating industrial arts programs and vocational coursework as an answer to what the educational historian Edward Krug identified as increasing calls for the practical in education. Krug noted that “social efficiency called upon the school subjects to prove their right to exist,” which meant a gradual move away from the theoretical. This included adjusting the focus of traditional courses such as history, English, and classic languages. History needed to “answer the test of good citizenship,” and English had to demonstrate its ability to fit within a framework of social efficiency (although what exactly that constituted was a constant source of debate). The number of languages offered decreased, with the focus shifting to modern languages such as French and Spanish over classical languages such as Latin.

But more important than revising the types of classes already taught was the Cardinal Principles’ insistence that the high school offer industrial, vocational, and academic courses under one roof, available to all students. These included classes such as typewriting, stenography, mechanical arts, woodworking, and printing, as well as the agricultural courses that appeared in some Wisconsin high schools. The state’s Department of Public Instruction took these recommendations in stride. Its 1918 Biennial Report described the high school curriculum

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24 In terms of categorization, there is a difference between industrial arts (or manual arts) and vocational programs. Typically, industrial arts courses were taken piecemeal, although they could form a course of study, depending on the school offered. Vocational training had a much more specific job outcome in mind, and these programs were frequently housed in different wings (or floors) of a high school, or in another building entirely. As the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction used the terms interchangeably in its reports, and the programs in Superior changed frequently throughout the 1920s, the term manual arts will be used throughout this chapter.
25 Krug, 336.
26 Krug, 354.
27 Herbert Kliebard noted that for some, “vocationalism” did not solely refer to a program of study to teach job skills, but also referred to an ideal of education that stemmed from the application of the ideals of business and industry to the curriculum as a whole. He argued that vocationalism in the 1910s transformed the curriculum “in line with the criteria and protocols of the workplace.” Herbert M. Kliebard, Schooled to Work (New York: Teachers College, 1999), 120.
as a constantly evolving entity, reminding school districts that “high school courses of study have always been regarded as subject to more or less modification to meet the needs of changing life.”28

As high school transformed from an elite to an expected experience, the curriculum became more diverse and responsive to the needs of the community. “A curriculum ... should not be some sort of rigid mold by means of which all children in the community may be forced to become the same kind of finished product,” read A Manual for the High Schools of Wisconsin, issued by the State Superintendent of Schools John Callahan in 1924 and sent to all Wisconsin public high schools along with a copy of the Cardinal Principles and other reports from the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education.29 Taking their cues from local businessmen, high schools went to work preparing students for blue-collar and clerical work, providing them with training to be bookkeepers, secretaries, factory foremen, auto repairmen, and streetcar operators.30 The Lake Superior Teachers Association, which counted a number of members in Superior, as well as Duluth, passed a resolution in 1926 recognizing the “new type of student” in high schools. “We believe that courses should be adjusted to meet their capacities and needs,” it read. However, the association warned that high schools should not sacrifice the intellectual development of their college-bound students. “We also believe that children of great intellectual promise have a right to sound training in English, in foreign language, science, mathematics and history, so that these superior children may be prepared for any college they may choose and may later take their places among the scholarly and thoughtful people of our

In Superior, commencement articles in the *Telegram* recognized the importance of this type of education. During commencement, it recognized those students destined for the workforce or nearby stenography and business academies, rather than country’s elite colleges and universities: “For some, however, the education furnished by the city schools will be all that will be needed to enter upon their duties as citizens of the community. Each year a large number, for many reasons, find it necessary to really commence their careers, making of the high school commencement exercises their true introduction to the business world.”

The Department of Public Instruction reported the greatest increase in course offerings in Wisconsin high schools in home economics and commercial courses. Between 1915 and 1925, enrollment in these types of classes increased by 277.3 percent, and the number of commercial courses, which included classes on typing, stenography, and bookkeeping, increased by 81.1 percent. Advocates for the comprehensive high school saw it as “democratic, efficient, practical, and supportive of Americans’ belief in individuality.”

But the move toward the comprehensive high school, and a greater emphasis on practical courses and educational efficiency, was not without controversy in part because the purpose of the high school has never been settled. As Reese observed, ever since the first free high school opened in Boston in 1821, public secondary schools have been a “controversial and contested part” of the American education system due to a lack of definition.

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32 “Pupils Finish Year’s Study,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, June 19, 1924.
33 *Biennial Report 1924-26*, 12.
34 Angus and Mirel, 2.
popularity of extracurricular activities and the presence of vocational classes were indicative of declining academic standards.\textsuperscript{36} Others, including Callahan, worried that despite the greater variety of coursework, the high school still dissuaded students from pursuing vocational work in favor of white-collar jobs.\textsuperscript{37} Callahan voiced concerns that schools were not taking manual training seriously. And in Superior, despite the fact that the majority of its high school students did not pursue higher education, many residents bristled at the devaluing of a rigorous college-preparatory academic program. For them, the increasing emphasis on practical education eliminated possible future opportunities for their children, and the concentration on efficiency could undermine the public school system that the city’s settlers struggled to build. Just because college was not necessarily on the horizon did not mean that they did not want to see their children prepare for it. The school system was a source of community pride and faced a crossroads in the 1920s: how best to modernize and advance a progressive curriculum without eliminating opportunity for its students.

\textbf{Education Reports, the Pursuit of Efficiency, and Controversy in Print}

When Paul Spencer arrived in Superior to head its public school system from St. Cloud, Minnesota, he stepped into a position already somewhat fraught with controversy. The Board of Education had become a frequent target of editorials, letters to the editor, and less-than-positive coverage in the \textit{Telegram}. Its 11 political appointees, selected by the mayor, seemed to act capriciously, without the community’s best interests in mind. Not all Board of Education commissioners were parents, and not all were full-time Superior residents. Additionally, there had been three superintendents in six years. J.G. Moore, who served as superintendent in the

\textsuperscript{36} Reese, \textit{America’s Public Schools}, 182.
early 1920s, resigned in protest of budget cuts. In his resignation letter, which the *Telegram* published, he wrote that “the Superior School System is now generally recognized as one of the best in the country,” and that his tenure witnessed “the steady progress of the Superior schools toward efficiency.” However, economy measures “undermined” the solid foundation of the schools, and he was not up to the task of rebuilding them.\(^{38}\) The Board of Education elected to not renew the contract of Moore’s successor, Grace Geary, despite popular approval of her performance. The Board allowed rumors to build that she was only dismissed because she was a woman, and did not dispel reports that they felt a male superintendent would be better suited to the demands of the position.\(^{39}\) Grumblings of disapproval rippled throughout the community as the *Telegram* covered the contract disputes. Superior’s chapter of the Association of American University Women endorsed Geary’s work, and the *Telegram* reported that the Superior Women’s Club and Grade Teachers Club would defend Geary, although no public proclamations were ever made.\(^{40}\)

Spencer immediately set to work fixing the problems he identified with the Superior public school system. Namely, that it was inefficient, had a startlingly high failure rate, especially at the high school level, and the superintendent’s office lacked the resources necessary to oversee a system the size of Superior’s. He brought extensive experience in smaller school systems and a strong educational background. A graduate from the River Falls Normal School, he completed additional courses at the University of Wisconsin, University of Chicago, as well as school administration coursework at Columbia University and the University of Minnesota.\(^{41}\)

\(^{39}\) The Board elected not to renew Geary’s contract in a 6-5 vote. Two of the 11 board representatives were women, and both voted in favor of dismissing Geary. "Rumbling School Board Storm Breaks in Superior," *Superior Evening Telegram*, Feb. 6, 1925.
\(^{40}\) “Superior University Women Endorse Miss Geary's Record,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, Feb. 9, 1925.
\(^{41}\) “Policy of New School Superintendent Not Yet Decided,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, May 28, 1925.
Spencer presented himself as well-acquainted with the latest trends in public school management, including educational organization and curriculum development. He established several new positions within the school superintendent’s office, including a supervisor of tests, a physical culture supervisor, a dean of boys at Superior Central High School, and a supervisor of occupations. In his first major initiative, he commissioned a study of the schools at a cost of $6,000, conducted by Fred Engelhardt, a professor of educational administration at the University of Minnesota. The resulting 169-page report analyzed the organization and administration of the city’s schools, teaching personnel, the system’s finances, the student population, and the buildings themselves.

In its introduction, the report drew on the language of scientific management, noting that the success of an institution depended on its “plan of organization, the type of management, and the operation of the administrative machinery.” It made comparisons to modern businesses and bureaucratic management practices. Organized to provide an educational service and operating with massive budgets, schools were akin to business enterprises. Consequently, they required “a highly organized and properly trained professional staff operating under the best and most modern principles of management.” Over the course of two months, Engelhardt and his team of graduate students scoured the Superior public schools, looking for examples of waste—in terms of budget, personnel, and physical space—and signs of deterioration. They found evidence that strongly contradicted Superior’s claims to have a progressive, modern school system. Throughout the city, they detailed decrepit school structures with inadequate ventilation,

43 Ibid.
45 Engelhardt, 3.
lighting, and bathroom facilities. They found the lax enforcement of attendance laws and a high number of over-age students throughout the grades. The final report included a variety of controversial recommendations, including the closure of several grade schools, the reorganization of the city’s high schools into one centralized building, and the direct election of the Board of Education.

Superior’s citizens strongly reacted toward the survey and its findings, taking issue with the picture of the school system it presented. More than 1,000 people attended the initial meeting to discuss the report, and for weeks the survey and its findings dominated civic discussions in Superior. “With the entire city agog over the school survey report and pro’s and con’s relative to the situation filling the air, the situation is daily becoming more and more intense,” the Telegram wrote. “Previous to the school survey report, interest in the public school system of Superior did not approach that which has recently been caused.” Mayor Fred Baxter told the Telegram the survey was “bunk,” and part of a politically-motivated effort to change the makeup of the Board of Education. “What can you possibly gain by electing your board of education,” he said. “You do not gain, but you lose. You immediately throw the selection of your board into politics.” Baxter had hoped the survey would focus on economic efficiencies and better school operations; instead, it was a piece of political propaganda that challenged part of his mayoral platform. Parents took issue with its recommendation to close several schools in neighborhoods far from the city’s central business core, which would force their children to take the streetcar and bring a cold lunch to school. Board of Education members blasted its findings as “unethical,” and the

46 “Itascan Scores Spencer for Proposing to Move School,” Superior Evening Telegram, Sept. 18, 1925.
48 Not all Board of Education members reacted so strongly against the report. President A.S. Craik told the Telegram he found the survey “reasonable,” in part because it did not recommend any immediate large building expenditures. “Bunk Says Mayor Baxter, Referring to School Survey,” Superior Evening Telegram, Sept. 10, 1925.
Telegram reported that shouting match broke out between Spencer and the architect of the Lincoln grade school, one of the buildings named as having improper ventilation. Parents launched additional criticisms at Engelhardt and his colleague, Dr. George Strayer of the Teachers College at Columbia University (a well-known and respected education professor), during the several speeches they gave to local clubs and associations. As community outsiders, how were they expected to make recommendations about how the citizens of Superior should handle their schools?

Spencer continued to justify the report in terms of efficiency and by drawing parallels to corporate management in speeches throughout the community and in interviews with the Telegram. By using the Telegram’s position as Superior’s primary print platform and the authority it carried within the city, Spencer sought to advance his viewpoint and win support for the report’s analysis. One of the report’s main findings, according to Spencer, was that the Board of Education was “too greatly hampered” by the management of the schools, which created inefficiencies that resonated throughout the entire school system. Speaking before the League of Women Voters, Spencer remarked that “in business we have the efficiency expert who examines the business and tells how it can be run along better lines; while in school work we have the survey, made by a trained staff of men and women who tell how conditions can be improved. ... The recommendations of the survey committee are an ideal to work toward.” But fights continued to break out among the Board of Education, and action on the report’s recommendations stalled.

A second report, completed one year later, continued to build on Spencer’s theme of

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50 “Recommend Election of Board,” Superior Evening Telegram, Sept. 9, 1925.
51 “Spencer Tells Women Voters of Conditions in Schools,” Superior Telegram, Sept. 17, 1925
efficiency, but this time most of the criticism centered on the high school curriculum. It evaluated the level of service the high school provided, and whether the curriculum matched the expected educational and career outcomes of students. It attracted relatively little attention in the *Telegram*, despite its somewhat controversial recommendations, but that did not mean it went unnoticed in the community. The first issue it found was that Superior Central High School focused too much on college-preparatory coursework. “Central High School, in its point of view, was essentially preparing students for college. A majority of Superior’s students do not go to college,” read the report. It reported that in a senior class of 241 at Superior Central, only 38 percent of students had plans to attend college. At East High School, 10 percent of graduates intended to pursue an advanced degree. “Even if [all students] went to college the high schools would not be justified in offering only college preparatory work,” it said, noting that less than half of Superior’s children finished high school. “These children are entitled to equal curricular consideration with those who do finish.”

Further most of the non-college bound attended the local Normal College, which had easier entrance requirements than state universities or more elite institutions. Only about 35 to 40 percent of students went to a university or college outside of Superior.\footnote{Report of the Superintendent of the Public Schools, City of Superior, Wisconsin, 1925 - 1926.} By emphasizing an academically-oriented curriculum, rather than investing in manual arts training and vocational coursework, the high schools—and Superior Central in particular—were neglecting the needs of the majority of students they served, as well as their obligations to the taxpayers. The stated goal of the public schools, according to the report, was to “ensure that every boy and girl gets some training for life; that each child may take his place in society with some sense of the obligation that rests upon him as a member of the Home, Community, and the State. Honesty, industry,
intelligence, and respect for country are the fundamental laws underlying the success of any
social order.”53 The public schools’ should prioritize practical training for the next generation of
citizens, not to ensure that every student was prepared for a college education. This assertion
revealed yet another conflict over what shape the city’s educational institutions should take, and
how that related to realizing Superior’s destiny.

While this second report applauded the extracurricular activities at each high school, it
also expressed concern about the costs these activities had on the school system, their tendency
to create exclusive social groups, and the lessons they taught students. In particular, it took issue
with the proliferation of student publications, which warranted “considerable attention.” While
there was “every reason to be pleased” with the work of the newspaper staffs, the exclusivity of
the Devil’s Pi and East Hi Times—at the time, all populated by journalism students and veterans
of journalism coursework—proved troublesome. “Every student in the school should have an
opportunity if desired to try out for the newspaper staff,” the report observed, and members
should be selected from every class in school. “In general the regular journalism class should not
be the news staff nor should the editing of the school paper be the regular classwork.”54 The
annuals were more problematic. The Echo and the Wa Wa Ta fostered “undesirable attitudes”
among students due to the methods of funding them. The publications did represent what the
report called a “remunerative advertising medium.” Read by “comparatively few people for a
short period of time,” yearbooks offered minimal value as an advertising platform. Businessmen
were “helping to finance the publication without getting the value received. Students cannot sell
this advertising on its merits, but must appeal to sentiment. Thus the students are encouraged to

53 City of Superior, Report of the Superintendent of the Public Schools, 1925 - 1926, 78.
54 Report of the Superintendent of the Public Schools, 129.
practice what is contrary to business ethics.”

The report recommended eliminating the high school annual, and replacing it with an extended edition of the school paper, to be distributed only to the senior class during commencement. The Board of Education took these recommendations to heart, and set about implementing them in the fall of 1926.

Spencer positioned himself as a progressive reformer intent on modernizing the Superior school system, which aligned with Superior’s central narrative. Yet, the city’s residents saw Spencer as a source of conflict. He developed a reputation for being ruthless in his administration for not listening to concerned parents, and for not acting in the best interests of students. Several took to the Telegram’s Public Forum to air their grievances. At a Parent-Teaching Meeting at the Lincoln School, Spencer “railroaded” a vote “a la Mussolini” on whether to adjust the school schedule and relocate students to a centralized junior high. “The parents should rise to the occasion and not permit such a thing to be crammed down their throats.”

To another, the reorganization of schools did “not seem fair to us taxpayers in this district this school was built for the children in this district and ought to be left the way it is.”

A citizen complained that Spencer acted “extremely unfair” in the cancellation of public lecture on the grounds of it being against board policy to provide a hall for the occasion. And while other letters were not directly critical of Spencer, they did express concern about the culture he created within the schools, which was often on display at Parent-Teacher Association meetings. “His suggestion to change the system is in order and should be respected, whether we favor it or not, but ribaldry on the part of these teachers rankles in my breast.”

55 Report of the Superintendent of the Public Schools, 129.
56 V.M.G, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, May 6, 1926.
57 A Tax Payer, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, Feb. 11, 1926.
58 Ivan Lanto, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, Nov. 12, 1926.
59 Good Citizen, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, May 10, 1926.
Grumblings spread through the community over Spencer’s seemingly hypocritical attitude toward austerity matters. He appeared content to cut entirely or reduce the funding for long-standing high school programs, such as the annual, in the name of economic efficiency. However, he was equally ready to add new, highly-paid positions, purchase new furniture for his office, and hire additional secretaries for the school system. An editorial on the conflict within the Superior school system later compared Spencer’s initial year as superintendent to a “cloud burst,” ready to “revolutionize our school system” no matter the public feedback. He arrived prepared to modernize the schools, and offered a new vision of what the high school should be, and how it should function within the community, which reflected larger, national conversations about secondary education. But this view clashed with teachers, community members, and, importantly, the students themselves.

Print Culture as an Arena for Community Conflict

Spencer’s changes to the high school curriculum, proposed elimination of yearbooks, and propensity for selective spending contributed to his reputation as an autocratic superintendent, intent on advancing his scholastic agenda. The seemingly universal belief in a strong public school system and modern high schools began to fracture as parents and teachers criticized Spencer’s dictatorial approach to defining what a progressive public school program should look like. Critics worried that Spencer’s program would “result in the lowering of the standards of education” and would prevent students from matriculating to elite colleges and universities. The new high school curriculum, which would only meet the entrance standards for the state’s normal schools, eliminated future opportunities for students, and pre-determined their

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60 All of the positions Spencer created during his tenure came with a starting salary of more than $2,000, a significant increase over the $1,600 starting salary for teachers.
62 “Committee of 21 Considers Next Moves in Ouster,” Superior Evening Telegram, April 13, 1927.
educational and career trajectory. Noted one resident: “They call Superior a workingman's town and say anything is good enough for the workingman. I tell you that nothing is good enough for the working man. We want to provide every boy and girl in our city with every chance.” Among the teachers, Superior Central High School’s Lulu Dickinson, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, a veteran teacher with 23 years of experience, was the most outspoken. She repeatedly voiced her concerns to students in the classroom and to the faculty of Superior Central. She failed to heed warnings from Spencer and the Board of Education, and in March 1927, was dismissed from her position without warning by a near unanimous 10-1 vote.

As detailed above, the Superior Central student community rallied to support Dickinson. Nicknamed “Dickie,” she enjoyed an immense level of popularity among past and present students, and was seen as a Superior institution in her own right. A student poem published in the 1923 Echo referred to her as the “sweetheart of the school,” and jokes in the Echo and the Devil’s Pi often portrayed her as a stern, yet caring teacher devoted to her students. She was the only teacher to receive a specific mention in the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s inspection report of Superior High School, which described her as “energetic” and “forceful,” indicative of a high teaching standard among the faculty. She never married, and often commented that she viewed her pupils as her children. “I think Miss Dickinson’s single, because she loves us all so well,” read the 1923 Echo poem. “The sweetheart of the high school, and

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63 Under Spencer’s proposed curriculum change, Superior’s two high schools would still offer a college preparatory track. However, the mandatory coursework for all students would only satisfy the entrance requirements for the state normal schools, including Superior Normal, which typically enrolled the most students who pursued an advanced degree.
64 “Committee of 21 Considers Next Moves in Ouster,” Superior Evening Telegram, April 13, 1927.
66 Inspection Reports 1916-1917, Folder 4, Box 1, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction High School Inspect Reports, 1915-1931 (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society).
every happy hopeful’s belle.” A graduate of the University of Michigan, she strongly promoted a classical, humanities-oriented curriculum.

Immediately after her dismissal, Superior Central students, parents, and city residents rebuked the Board of Education and demanded a special meeting to discuss the situation. The next day, a letter to the editor appeared in the Telegram, applauding Dickinson for her bravery in speaking the truth and standing up to Spencer. It ended with two simple demands: “We want justice and action and we want it now.” Through various printed materials, which included yearbooks and student newspapers, a new identity formed around the high school, with the student voice at its center. Dickinson served as a point of connection, uniting the classes of Superior Central, and her dismissal became a signal that youth concerns were secondary to the city. The robust student print culture, which had expanded dramatically, became the platform for those dissatisfied with the Board of Education to raise their voice and circulate their viewpoints within Superior and beyond.

The members of the student committee were, in a sense, model students, which granted them legitimacy in the public discussion surrounding the controversy with the Board of Education, Spencer, and Dickinson. They earned high marks and consistently made the school’s honor roll. Several planned to serve as commencement speakers, selected by their peers. They embodied the ideal of school spirit and a community-first mentality, which reflected the core tenets of the booster ethos that the Telegram and Superior’s community associations promoted. Students named Mary Brown, a “round face, apple cheeked, blue eyed” senior, the “ideal girl student of Central High School.” Dennis McGenty, “an eloquent, dark-eyed little fellow” who

68 High School Student, Letter to the Editor, Superior Evening Telegram, March 15, 1927.
69 “As the Nation Saw the Strike,” Devil’s Pi, May 20, 1927.
wore his hair with a neat middle part, stood out for his ability to speak with “the clarity and precision of a lawyer”\(^{70}\) and for his long list of school activities and accolades. He won first place in the state declamatory contest the same year he served as president of one of the high school’s largest clubs (the Goodfellows) and acted as prom chairman. Chadbourne Whitmore claimed a long list of club activities, and the six-foot-five Conrad Gieson played basketball, in addition to being vice-president of the LNP Science Club and a noted amateur magician. Importantly, they were also all actively involved in Superior Central’s student publications. While Wick amassed the most impressive reporting resume, every strike committee member occupied a leadership role at the *Devil’s Pi* or the *Echo*. McGenty was *Pi* editor-in-chief, Whitmore the newspaper’s humor editor. At the *Echo*, Brown served as editor-in-chief, Gieson associate editor, Wick alumni editor, McGenty literary editor, and Whitmore humor editor.

The student strike committee was well-connected within the high school community and drew on its network to build support for Dickie and set the stage for more aggressive action. When the Board of Education refused to hold an additional hearing regarding the matter, despite demands from the students and their parents, the senior class began considering a strike. When word reached the superintendent’s office, Spencer demanded they back down. When they did not, he suspended three of the five committee members—Brown, McGenty, and Wick. The drama unfolded in print. “I called the students who have been active in this campaign into my office and asked them if they were in favor of a strike,” Spencer told a *Telegram* reporter. “When they told they were I told them they were not wanted at Central High school and they should not appear there before they heard from me.”\(^{71}\) In solidarity with the students, and in anger of the

\(^{70}\) Ibid.

\(^{71}\) “Spencer Says He Will Oust Leaders in Central Strike,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, March 31, 1927.
treatment of Dickinson, the senior class at Superior Central High School walked out the next
day. Within one day nearly all the students at Central were on strike. Eight days later the strike
spread to three schools in the city. More than 1,300 students were truant.

The Telegram emerged as a key arena in the Board of Education conflict due to its
position as a community institution (carefully cultivated through decades of coverage decisions)
as well as its power as Superior’s only daily newspaper. Both the student strike committee and
the Board of Education sought to control the narrative of the strike via the Telegram. Early
coverage reflected the conscious effort on the part of the student committee to control the
strikers’ image and publicize their key messages via the city’s most important communication
platform. Wick, McGenty, Brown, and the others understood the importance of representation to
their cause; any negative action attributed to the students would undermine their community
support and invalidate their claims. The student committee used their access to an in-school
printing press to produce instructional fliers. This enabled them to rally support for their cause,
articulate key messages, and set parameters on student behavior to sustain goodwill in the
community. Three days after the strike began, the committee circulated 2,000 printed handbills
to students and posted handwritten ones on telephone poles citywide. “Strike — stand your
ground,” they blared in all capital letters. “We must get Dickie back! ... Caution — the purpose
of this strike will be more quickly attained if order is kept.”72 The next day, the student
committee printed thousands more, and distributed them among Central High students and their
peers at East High. It addition to circulating a rallying cry — “Are you with us? Now is the
time!” — the fliers also continued to remind students about their behavior, repeating the earlier

72 “East High Students Refuse to Join 900 Strikers,” Superior Evening Telegram, April 4, 1927.
“Caution — the purpose of this strike will be more quickly accomplished if order is kept.”73 In recognizing the importance of cultivating positive coverage within the city’s main newspaper, the student strike committee acknowledged the power the *Telegram* had to shape public opinion within Superior.

Initially these tactics worked, and the *Telegram* characterized the striking students as civic-minded citizens intent on exercising their freedom of expression in support of a worthwhile cause. These types of articles marked a key victory for the student committee; as Superior’s only daily newspaper, and one that frequently played up its ties to the community, the *Telegram* strove to provide an official record of sorts. While the *Telegram* did not necessarily endorse the students’ actions, it did not express a strong disapproval. Part of its positive coverage rested on the fact that the *Telegram*—and likely many of its readers—believed the strike would be a short-lived event, and blow over quickly. In that sense, the *Telegram* could portray it as a safe challenge by the high school students to institutional power structures, and also position it as yet another demonstration of the ability of its next generation to embrace the rhetoric of progress essential to Superior’s identity as a modern city. In its reports on the strike, the *Telegram* advanced familiar descriptions of the city’s high schools. It emphasized the behavior of the students as a positive reflection of how the high school trained the next generation of Superior citizens, and reinforced respect for democratic principles and political engagement. A *Telegram* editorial published early in the strike (the paper would print 10 opinion pieces on the matter) “commended” the students for their “orderliness” and described the strike as primarily “gentlemanly and ladylike.”74 The newspaper noted the general support students had from their

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73  “96 of 1100 Students Attend First Hour Classes,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, April 5, 1927.
parents, who encouraged them to join the walk-out so long as they minded their behavior. “My
dad said ‘Go to it, strike and parade all you want to, but don’t break any windows or destroy any
property,’” one student told the *Telegram* on the strike’s first day. Early photos in the *Telegram*
of the student strikers reflected these themes of organized action and order. Students carefully
assembled in groups on the steps of Central High and along Tower Avenue in the downtown
business district, carrying banners and “flaunting” their school colors. It noted when they were
not marching, they kept on top of their studies, helped out their parents, and some even took
extra jobs.

As the strike wore on, the *Telegram* changed its tone, and became more dismissive in its
characterization of the student strikers. By using different terminology to describe the strikers—
notably switching from “students” to the heavy use of “children”—the *Telegram* began to
portray the protesters not as a group of civic-minded high schoolers but as petulant, immature
juveniles playing at being adults. As the students agitated for Dickinson’s reinstatement and the
direct election of the Board of Education, the *Telegram*’s editorial team argued that the protest
action was “fundamentally and totally wrong,” for it took educational and political matters out of
the hands of adults and put them into the hands of “school children.” While divisions grew
within the community on how best to remedy the situation, one position was clear, according to
the *Telegram*’s editorial writers: “The school children should not be in the controversy.” At a
meeting of parents nearly two weeks into the strike, the *Telegram* observed that the longevity of
the strike was slowly eroding community support. The newspaper noted how frustrated parents

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75 “Over Half of Students Quit; Others Remain,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, April 1, 1927.
76 “Striking Students Continue Demonstrations,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, April 7, 1927.
overwhelmingly passed a resolution stating that the “plastic and immature minds” of Superior’s high school students had become “inflamed” to a point where they misunderstood not only the objectives of their strike, but the consequences of their actions. By “insubordination and revolt,” they sought to address a situation “of which they are not informed and which is entirely without their province to dispute or negotiate.”

The *Telegram* also began carrying reports of the activities of students that further undermined their civic position. It reported on female students “killing time” in Tower Avenue’s clothing stores trying on dresses, rather than standing on the picket lines. It printed news briefs mentioning how some students lounged in Duluth. In each of these items, the *Telegram’s* focus on the frivolity of the students and their lackadaisical approach to the strike helped undermine the messages the student strike committee aimed to advance. After the initial week of protest, the actions of the strikers no longer attracted applause from the *Telegram*, and the rhetoric it had used to describe high school students—noting their potential and their community contributions—largely disappeared from the newspaper. Instead, in published interviews and editorial content, the *Telegram* presented an updated image of the strikers as ill-informed, non-committal, and easily influenced by their peers. The circulation of these characterizations could serve as a major impediment to the student’s cause, as the *Telegram’s* role as a community institution granted it a high level of authority within Superior. As the paper of record for the city, its descriptions in print served as an interpreter of reality for its readers.

In granting more space to the student’s critics, *Telegram* perpetuated a view of the student strikers that questioned their mental fortitude and portrayed them as unwitting pawns in a

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79 “Student Strike Deplored By A Parental Vote,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, April 12, 1927.
81 “Sidelights from the Strike,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, April 8, 1927.
larger political scheme. Reverend W.F. Hood, a member of the Board of Education, characterized the student strike as a “gross insubordination.” He told the *Telegram* that so long as the students defied authority, no compromise in the matter could be reached.\(^8^2\) Reverend A.T. Ekblad, another Board of Education member and a frequent source in *Telegram* articles, often critiqued the students using references to community feedback. In one piece he quoted a letter received from a “Wisconsin society woman,” who characterized the present state of public morals “the worst in the history of civilization” and dismissed the strike as “outrageous” and “contemptible.” Quoting the letter, Ekblad asked the *Telegram* if “these scholars respect or even obey their parents,” and noted he received much correspondence echoing these themes.\(^8^3\) The *Telegram* also granted space to outside experts who provided their assessment of the situation. Dr. Frank B. Knight, a psychologist and professor at the University of Iowa, spoke on the strike to an audience at Superior Normal, and hypothetically compared “these children” to Leopold and Loeb, the University of Chicago students who kidnapped and killed a 14 year-old boy and whose trial captured national attention.\(^8^4\) “They are experiencing the greatest thrill that can be known. ... The boy and girl who successfully defies the authority of the school will defy the authority of his parents,” he warned. Knight predicted the consequences for the community would be “injurious.”\(^8^5\) Through a variety of coverage choices, including story angles, interview subjects, headlines, photographs, and editorials, the *Telegram* presented a judgment of the student strikers that largely dismissed their claims as illegitimate, the result of too many high school students

\(^8^2\) “Mayor Refused to Act, Insubordination Charged,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, April 7, 1927.
\(^8^3\) “Committee Will Renew Demands, Phone Wire Cut,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, April 8. 1927.
\(^8^4\) The Leopold and Loeb trial attracted substantial national attention, in party because of the stated motive of the two (they claimed to kidnap and murder 14-year-old Bobby Franks as a demonstration of their intellectual superiority) and for the celebrity of their main defense lawyer, Clarence Darrow. For some observers, the Leopold and Loeb trial was yet another indicator that the new youth culture was not equipped to handle the demands of the modern era.
\(^8^5\) “Noted Educator Warns of After Effects of Strike,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, April 21, 1927.
playing civics rather than studying it. The adjustment in the Telegram’s coverage of Superior’s striking students revealed a discomfort with the position the student were demanding within the community.

The Telegram failed to print challenges to these criticisms, which further minimized the voice of the students. While the newspaper routinely carried interviews with the Committee of 21, it restricted space to the student strike committee members, who had to battle rumors and gossip about their position as students and weather attacks on their families. The Committee commanded attention in part because of its makeup; members included the secretary of the city’s Public Affairs Committee—one of its main commercial associations—and the president of the Rotary Club. Often, the Committee of 21 stepped in to defend students. Judge William Steele, a committee member, accused Spencer in the Telegram, of singling out three members of the committee—Wick, Brown, and McGenty—in “personal comments to the newspaper and other circles.” These three students lacked influential parents. Wick’s father worked as an electrician on a coal dock; McGenty’s father, a postman, had died suddenly at work; and Brown lived with her grandparents, Swedish immigrants. The other committee members (whom Spencer did not suspend) hailed from prominent families and from Superior’s established business class. The only occasions where the students defended themselves and their actions in print occurred in the context of coverage of community meetings. At one meeting of more than 900 citizens who supported the students, Wick returned to her role as spokesperson to launch criticisms of the Board of Education, offer a defense of her peers, and correct the public record. “Members of the

87 Ernest Newton’s father was a manager in a real estate company; Chadbourne Whitmore’s father was the secretary/treasurer for a real estate insurance company; and Conrad Gieson’s father was a local physician. U.S. Census, 1930.
board are classed as public servants,” Wick said. “The refusal of the board to listen to the demands of the people ... makes them in my opinion worth to be classed as insubordinates far more than we strikers.” She admonished those perpetuating the idea that the students lacked parental support: “This strike is not entirely engineered by the students. The parents are in it as well.”

Throughout its extensive coverage of the strike, which often generated several articles and photos per day, the *Telegram* attempted to maintain its status as a mediator and an authoritative voice in the city. The newspaper continued to promote what it saw as the best interests of the city. That meant quieting the voices of those it decided did not have as much right to speak—the students—and granting more space to the committees, associations, and political groups that did have a right to speak. That isn’t to say the newspaper supported the actions of the Board of Education and Spencer entirely. Editorials stressed that both sides shouldered blame for the controversy. In a break with form, one of the newspaper’s editorial writers mentioned how, as a product of the Superior public school system, the situation “depressed” him. When it embraced the calls for an elected Board of Education and reinstatement of Dickinson, it did so because they originated from prominent citizens on the Committee of 21. Ultimately, the *Telegram* supported the actions and opinions of those in power, and not the students on the front lines, due to its position as a community institution, its ties to the business elite, and its investment in promoting Superior’s success.

The *Telegram* began advocating for a compromise as the ideal outcome for the situation was due to a desire to end the controversy as quickly as possible with as little disruption to the

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88 “Stand Against Board’s Action is Affirmed,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, April 28, 1927.
order of business in Superior. As the strike wore on, the *Telegram* was becoming more and more aware of how much the issue challenged the modern, progressive image of the city it sought to promote. As national coverage spread, the *Telegram* feared that Superior had begun “to mean disorder,” and the city need to “save its municipal face and promote amity among her citizens.”

The strike, as a news story, attracted interest from newspapers and magazines beyond the head of the lakes region. And in an age when information traveled cheaper and faster than before, and wire service subscriptions increasingly common in newsrooms nationwide, it was easier for other communities to follow the conflict in the City of Destiny. The *Telegram* participated in a national news market, and Superior finally had attracted the national attention it had long desired—just not for the story about itself it wanted to promote.

The student agitation hindered Superior’s efforts to advertise the city as progressive, modern, and business-friendly, especially as more nationally and regionally-oriented outlets covered the conflict. These stories presented a narrative that ran counter to the ones proudly promoted in the city’s newspapers, pamphlets, and advertising brochures that circulated in the decades after its revival. The Associated Press and *Milwaukee Journal* sent journalists to the city to interview students and observe the picket lines first hand. The *Journal* published a flattering piece on the student leaders that was ultimately critical of the actions of local politicians and the city’s elite. The Associated Press’ more straightforward reporting extended the geographical footprint of the strike beyond Wisconsin, and its articles appeared in newspapers throughout the Midwest and also in the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. Both *Time* and *The Nation* covered the controversy. *Time* viewed Superior’s strike as part of a potentially growing national trend of high school students, and cited the example of a 700-student strike in New Albany,

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Indiana, where students protested the reappointment of a principal and a botany teacher, and a
300-student strike in Jacksonville, Indiana, over the firing of an athletic coach and two teachers.
Time’s article granted the most space to Superior, where the contrast between its image as a
“progressive town with shiny buildings, civic pride, and a school board” and the reality of its
deep divisions sharply revealed tensions over education. The conflict illuminated the rift between
a “school board [that] intends to prepare Superior children for ‘life’ (i.e., business)” and
Dickinson, “who preaches the humanities and tries to steer her pupils toward college.”91

For the Nation, the issue was “whether a school board can defy the aroused public
opinion of a community, and whether it can dismiss competent and faithful teachers for having
opinions of their own.”92 And the newspapers in Duluth, which observed the situation with
tempered glee, cast the issue as a provincial squabble, indicative of Superior’s destiny as a small
city—not an urban metropolis. “Superior seems to have gotten itself into a mess, and doesn’t
seem to know how to get itself out again,” read one editorial. “If Superior could bring itself to
stop floundering and do a little cooler thinking, possibly somebody could bring in calm judgment
and clear vision.”93 The student strike had exposed the limitations of Superior’s booster rhetoric.
In writing about the controversy as an outsider, these publications produced an image of a city so
preoccupied with its future that it had hindered its ability to act in its best interest in the present.

The Emergence of an Alternative Record

As the Telegram established itself as the newspaper of record for the Superior school
controversy by adhering to institutional sources and information, the student strike committee at
Superior Central realized they needed to actively correct the record and present an alternative

91 “Education: Strikes,” Time, May 9, 1927.
92 “A City’s Schools on Strike,” The Nation, May 25, 1927, 573.
93 Quoted in “The Schools and the Public,” Superior Evening Telegram, May 11, 1927.
narrative. When the *Telegram*’s expressed support of the students quickly faded after the strike’s first week, and the newspaper chose to amplify the voices of the students’ critics over their own, the committee began producing more print materials that created and circulated an alternative news narrative. Early in the controversy, the *Devil’s Pi* noted growing frustration within the Superior Central community over the depiction of students in the *Telegram*. “There may have been a slight disorder because of the excitement which prevailed, but there was no riot,” read a letter to the editor that noted a pattern of the misrepresentation of student conduct at community meetings. “These newspapers circulate throughout Wisconsin and Minnesota and give outsiders a wrong impression of our school.”

These concerns signaled the interconnectedness of print publications between Superior and other communities. The *Telegram* circulated throughout the region and the state, and impacted public perception of the students. In order to combat the false narratives in circulation, the students needed to develop a rival platform. It addressed the controversy primarily via its humor columns, and kept coverage to a minimum. However, when the amount of attention on the students intensified in the wake of the walk out, the student committee began producing more materials in an effort to shape public discourse on the issue and insert themselves into the institutional narrative the *Telegram* was promoting.

Handbills and fliers made up the majority of the print products they created. In addition to those circulated on the streets during protest parades, these fliers were pinned to light poles throughout the city, distributed to their peers at Superior East, and appeared in the windows of sympathetic businesses. While earlier handbills cautioned students on the importance of orderly action, later iterations criticized the *Telegram*’s reporting for being inaccurate. Read one: “Strikers Attention! Spencer representatives are trying to break our strike. Beware False

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Another dismissed articles on a possible strike settlement as “more propaganda” and told students to continue to “stand by your ground.” These fliers also indicated growing support for the students beyond the city of Superior; they circulated reprints and excerpts from positive coverage of the strike, especially those that appeared in other high school and junior high school newspapers.

When fliers and handbills alone did little to stem the tide of inaccurate reporting, the student strike committee produced a special protest newspaper, the *Spirit of ‘76*. The newspaper demonstrated a growing appreciation that mass-circulation publications could influence public opinion, and that a media outlet was necessary for a protest movement to gain community supporters. At four pages, it promised to “sift from the mass of propaganda now in circulation those truths which most clearly justify our position” and deliver the facts of the situation the “local dailies can not disclose.” It featured a multiple-page piece on local school history, which detailed the controversies surrounding the Board of Education since the dismissal of Grace Geary and outlined the argument against Spencer, his vision for the high school curriculum, and his spending habits. It published the platform of the student strike committee, as endorsed by the senior class, and included letters purportedly sent from Spencer to the student committee members, threatening suspension. In addition to sharing it with *Spirit of ‘76* readers, the student strike committee also provided the piece to interested journalists, which they claimed included a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune*. The newspaper closed with a full-page poster that blared “STRIKE!” in capital letters, meant to be carried to protest events and displayed throughout Superior. It succinctly encapsulated the students’ priorities: “STRIKE FOR DICKIE. STRIKE

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95 "Committee Will Renew Demands Phone Wire Cut," Superior Telegram, April 8, 1927.
96 "Committee Will Renew Demands Phone Wire Cut," Superior Telegram, April 8, 1927
AGAINST SPENCER. Superior Is Behind Us. STAND YOUR GROUND.” While statistics on the newspaper’s circulation are ultimately unclear, anecdotal evidence indicates communities throughout the head of the lakes region received copies of the newspaper, either through their personal connections or as part of the exchange system high school newspapers operated. Whenever the students won support in another print publication, the strike committee gratefully acknowledged it.

Throughout these materials, the students played on the very themes mentioned when school administrators promoted their more official publications (the Devil’s Pi and the Echo) as the hallmark of a progressive education system. The students put into action lessons learned in civics and history in their production of protest newspapers and protest literature and positioned themselves as future political participants. Strong believers in democratic action, the strike committee saw the students’ action as an extension of the freedom of expression and freedom of assembly granted to others, so long as they pursued their protest honorably and orderly. “We have shown control in putting the thing over,” Viola Wick told a Milwaukee Journal reporter in a piece reprinted in the Spirit of ’76. “And if we return to school after a fair settlement of our demands, no one needs to fear that we will be lawless and disrespectful. If we have not shown ourselves lawless in ‘wartime,’ we will not be lawless in ‘peacetime,’” she concluded. She thus directly addressed critics including parents, community members, and Dr. Knight, who had gone on record to the Telegram to link the strike to an overall revolt against authority and institutional practices. The Journal piece further emphasized their dedication and organization by noting that students kept up with their classwork and met to their other obligations. They took issue with the perception they were out “for gallivanting and a lark,” rather than driven by conviction. The Journal article also offered one more opportunity for the students to correct the dominant
narrative in Superior’s publications. With a substantial circulation within Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin as a whole, the *Journal* represented a more significant print platform than the *Telegram* could.

Further, these outlets portrayed the support of Dickinson and of the suspended strike leaders as an extension of school spirit, that more juvenile form of civic boosterism, community unity, and pride that the *Telegram* and Superior’s clubs and associations viewed as critical to the city’s success. In particular, the student strike committee bristled against the negative image of Superior Central in press coverage, and those pieces that included a “tone of ridicule” for the city’s high school students and its citizens as a whole. They frequently applauded the actions and character of their principal, Clifford Wade, and remarked on the legacies and traditions they tried to uphold. The strike committee openly admitted that the proposed cancellation of the *Echo* served as an important turning point. Spencer’s antagonism toward the “time-honored” publication indicated little reverence for the traditions that defined Superior Central and helped solidify its place within Superior. It revealed a willingness to abandon the school’s legacy that factored so heavily into the idea of school spirit that the senior class upheld and integrated into their activities. Additionally, the threatened elimination of the *Echo* demonstrated an effort to further divide the school along social, economic class, and grade lines by removing a universal record of the high school experience. When the senior class informed the student body Spencer had threatened to discontinue publication of the *Echo*, there was a unanimous vote from all classes to keep it.

The students openly resisted these efforts by translating high school spirit into a type of

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community spirit that drew a boundary that separated their peers and supporters from detractors and critics. They rallied behind Wick, McGenty, and Brown, and challenged Spencer’s claims the students were unpopular and unable to influence their peers. Students dismissed one attempt to coerce them to return to class—which stated the school’s athletes had returned so as not to forfeit upcoming games—as an effort to fracture the community. They fought against criticisms from those outside the community, especially those not associated with Superior, using a tried-and-true method of adult criticism: mocking certain individuals and lines of argumentation in the humor sections of the *Devil’s Pi*. One issue referred to a “Professor Darkness, noted psychologist” and an outsider who offered commentary declaring students “Leopolds and Loebs,” and carried a “letter” from Mr. I Noital, of “Wayback, a metropolis of five farms and great educators.” The letter scolded Superior for permitting 1,100 to run amok. “Surely, if anyone could understand this situation, he could,” the *Pi* wryly concluded.

For the students—both the members of the strike committee and the community of Superior Central—their protest was ultimately about who had a right to dictate the future shape of the city’s education system. As they observed, the problem the strike revealed was not about impetuous or frivolous youth, nor was it just a political fight over elections and appointments. Rather, it was about a hypocritical older generation unwilling to loosen its control of social institutions and listen to the voice of the next generation. To some, the students demonstrated their maturity through their conduct, which further highlighted the potential young people offered to progressive, modern communities. The “self-control” exhibited by the students, attracted commendation in the *Pi*. “That you were aroused by what appeared to you as a great injustice is to your credit,” read one letter to the editor. “When our youth fail to catch fire at
injustice, we as a nation are doomed.”¹⁰¹ The students had gained a “good training in citizenship,” wrote the Pi editors. “Why be seated in the background just because we are students?”¹⁰² For the editors of the Pi, the propensity to blame “modern youth” for the Board of Education “mess” revealed a disturbing series of contradictions: “It is modern youth who resorts to slander to get an obstacle out of the way? Is it modern youth who is denying the right of the people to be heard? Is it modern youth who is playing politics in serious situations and endangering Democracy? ... Is it modern youth or is it some of the older ones?”¹⁰³

The Strike’s Resolution and Legacy

The strike ended more than one month after it began, when the Board of Education agreed to a special hearing on Dickinson’s firing and the city council agreed to a special election on the question of whether board commissioners should be popularly elected or appointed. The students returned to class, and the Telegram resumed largely positive coverage of high school activities. The summer after the strike, Dickinson was reinstated as a high school English teacher at Superior Central, and Spencer dismissed as school superintendent, and replaced with a woman, Lulu Pickett. But several of the strike’s legacies had a longer, more complex resolution. While many of the Board of Education commissioners resigned, Superior Mayor Fred Baxter took his fight against the direct election of the Board of Education to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, and claimed that the city’s commission form of government agencies was valid. It took almost a one year to resolve, when the state supreme court ruled that Superior had to elect its Board of Education. A later history of education in Superior, compiled by Norris C. Dickey, a local minister, characterized the strike as an “outward expression of a democratic principle so

¹⁰¹ Helen I. Burhans, Letter to the Editor, Devil’s Pi, May 20, 1927.
¹⁰² “Get Out The Vote?” Devil’s Pi, May 20, 1927.
¹⁰³ “As Others See Us,” Devil’s Pi, May 20, 1927.
basic in American life,” the students’ actions justified by the nature of the Board of Education’s transgressions. “The issue involved really seems to have been democracy versus autocracy,” Dickey wrote, and the suppression of truth by political action.104

Yet, in the present, the city never quite resolved the question at the heart of its community conflict—what shape the high school should take. Superior Central continued to add manual training courses to its curriculum as the majority of its students elected not to pursue additional education after commencement. But it also sent graduates to colleges and universities throughout the Midwest and to the East Coast. The Telegram proudly provided updates on Superior graduates pursuing advanced degrees at Columbia, Harvard, and Yale, and published short pieces on its Women’s Page when students returned home on holiday breaks. The city still struggled to define what it meant to be a progressive, modern city with a public school system to match. Part of the conflict rested in Superior’s preoccupation with its past and its fixation on the future. As the strike revealed, these two cornerstones of the city’s identity—a belief that it had grown out of the wilderness and was destined to be a great metropolis—stymied action in the present.

While the city of Superior tried to put the strike behind it, Superior Central students decided to memorialize their action. Determined to make up for lost time, the high school students pledged to “build finer and higher traditions on the present remarkable record of Central High.”105 In addition to studying for exams, competing in end-of-the-school-year debates, and preparing for commencement, Mary Brown and her staff set to work finalizing the 1927 edition

104 Dickey went so far as to identify the motivations behind the Superior student strike as similar in the Stokes case in Tennessee, and compared the Board of Education to the anti-evolution movement. Norris C. Dickey, History of Education in Superior and at the Head of the Lakes, 1665 - 1941. Box 3, Superior, Wisconsin Papers, 1831 - 1942 (Superior: Area Research Collection, University of Wisconsin Superior).
105 “Get Out The Vote?” Devil’s Pt, May 20, 1927.
of the *Echo*, which promised to be “bigger and better than ever.” When students received their copies in mid-June, they found a two-page section detailing the activities of the student strike committee, included alongside short description of school dances, club parties, and the homecoming football game. The Senior Class message, which accompanied photos of class officers, detailed its class accomplishments, which included its role in the strike. And in the short biographies that accompanied the senior portraits, Mary Brown, Conrad Gieson, Dennis McGenty, Ernest Newton, Chadbourne Whitmore, and Viola Wick listed the student strike committee among their various other high school activities. In Harold Mahnke’s yearbook, a senior scribbled, “Well, there certainly will never be a class as striking as the 1927 one, eh?”

The 1927 student strike granted Superior the national attention it had long craved. Yet, the month-long controversy revealed that the cohesive narrative developed in the city’s early publications, promoted and maintained in the *Telegram*, and circulated through a variety of pamphlets and brochures, obscured very real tensions and divisions within the community over its destiny. By the late 1920s, Superior appeared at a crossroads. Still desperate to leave its provincial past behind, the promise of its urban future—a destiny that had long defined life within the city—seemed to be slipping away. The *Telegram*’s position as a community institution positioned it as the primary platform to facilitate discussions about the city’s future. As residents turned their attention toward public schools, and the modernizing of education as one way to achieve Superior’s promise, the *Telegram* became a central platform to debate proposed changes to the structure and position of the high school.

However, an increasingly complex and interconnected print culture began to define life in the United States, and that trend extended to Superior. In addition to the *Telegram*, Superior’s
residents read national magazines, political and labor journals, as well as a variety of other print forms. In particular, high school newspapers emerged as a new form of publication designed to serve a part of the community the Telegram once exclusively covered. Throughout the 1920s, student newspapers fulfilled many of the same roles as the institutional publications they mimicked: They created a sense of community; they established norms and boundaries; they kept readers informed. But in Superior, with a strong history of student control over publication content, they also emboldened the city’s young population and provided them with a platform to articulate their own worldview. When the students at Superior Central realized that their voices were not heeded in local public discourse, they used their print publications to present narratives otherwise absent.

The 1927 student strike represented the culmination of a series of frustrations over Superior’s future, and it played out in the city’s diverse print publications. The strike’s longevity and its success can be attributed in part to the knowledge its student leaders had of the Telegram and their recognition of the importance of print platforms in publicizing their cause. The strike revealed the competing definitions and narratives surrounding the concepts of modernity and progress within one city, and raised further questions about what exactly it meant to be modern, how to achieve that vision, and who had the power to construct and perpetuate that narrative.
Conclusion

Superior, Wisconsin, tied its destiny to networks. Its future as a commercial center depended on the expansion of railroad lines across the western United States, and access to water routes. It also relied on communication networks, designed to circulate information throughout the country and attract settlers and businesses to the small city on the southern shore of the world’s largest freshwater lake. Since its founding, Superior’s promoters invested in newspapers, promotional brochures, and advertising pamphlets that publicized the natural advantages granted the city of Superior and the opportunities that existed in the City of Destiny. As Superior’s prospects declined in the 1860s and 1870s, print materials continued to demonstrate their centrality to life in Superior. Its revival in the late 19th century brought with it a flurry of new newspapers, but one, the *Telegram*, emerged as the city’s leading newspaper and took on an outsized role in shaping and maintaining a community narrative that explained Superior’s past and present, and offered prescriptions for its future.

The *Telegram* promoted the idea that Superior’s success would result from the hard work of its citizens, their support of the community, and the establishment of institutions intended to boost Superior’s prospects, including robust public schools well-equipped to train the future generation. While the *Telegram* rose to prominence due to its community-first coverage strategy, it was never a newspaper intended solely for a Superior audience. Building on the legacy of its predecessors and early competitors, the *Telegram* was also conscious of its external audience. Articles designed to boost Superior’s prospects, attract new businesses and investments, and grow the city’s population appeared alongside those with a narrow focus on the seemingly mundane daily existence of life in Superior. The *Telegram* published features on Superior businesses and touted the productivity of its harbor. It highlighted the city’s infrastructure
improvements in anticipation of proposed major national projects, such as a waterway linking the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes (referred to as the “Deep Waterway”). But it also covered the activities of Superior’s bridge clubs, women’s associations, and lodge societies. It published photos of babies born in Superior, and wrote about the city’s oldest residents. It fit the model of community newspapers as described by the historian Sally Griffith, in that it expressed an appreciation for the simple pleasures of life, celebrated the common man and woman, and demonstrated an understanding of the need for belonging.

Consequently, the *Telegram* demonstrated a different approach to the modern newspaper. John T. Murphy, *Telegram* publisher, and his editorial team claimed to model the newspaper after its counterparts in much larger cities by engaging in accurate, objective reporting. But they also routinely published overly optimistic booster pieces designed to advertise Superior’s prospects to a wider audience. Since its beginning, the *Telegram* boasted of its ties to the city, and claimed that its growth would be reflective of Superior’s own success. Therefore, it took on an active role in ensure that the city’s promise would be realized. The *Telegram* aspired to be a regional newspaper—the “home newspaper” for all of Northern Wisconsin—just as Superior hoped to be an important commercial center. It promoted a cohesive community narrative that downplayed divisions and dissension, and marginalized the voices of citizens that did not embrace Superior’s triumphant rhetoric.

One of the legacies of the 1920s was the revelation of the fractures within American society, and the realization that a seemingly universal belief in progress was rife with conflict. For some, the modern age sparked a nostalgic yearning for the past. The drive toward an “inevitable future,” one that lay in an increasingly industrialized, mechanized, and
bureaucratized economy, came with an a “longing for the irretrievable past,”¹ according to the
historian Lawrence Levine. For others, the increasing diversity of the United States, and
changing racial and ethnic makeup of its cities, threatened a formerly cohesive notion of
community, one that elevated the voices and experiences of primarily white, Americanized
citizens of European descent. And while the increasing interconnectedness of the United States,
through transportation, communication, economic, and cultural networks, promised to make
members of the nation seem closer than ever before, it marked a threat to the sense of location-
based community that had long defined life in the United States. Places like Superior,
increasingly tethered to national networks, found themselves losing control over their own
destiny.

For small cities in the United States, the 1920s represented a critical turning point.
Hundreds of cities that stood somewhere between the small town and the metropolis seized the
opportunities an industrialized, urban society offered, and embraced the rhetoric of modernity.
Eager to leave behind their provincial pasts, they pursued a number of civic, economic, and
political initiatives in the hope that they would grow to become major commercial centers. They
courted outside capital and investment. They claimed connections to their more urban
counterparts through their embrace of a national, mass culture, and the development of products
that reflected city life.

The newspaper in particular became a signal of a more urban, modern age. It acted as a
guide to city life, and served as a platform to foster a sense of community and connected its
readers in an increasingly impersonal age. It shed its former associations with biased, partisan
content in an effort to pursue a mass audience, and the advertising revenue that came with it. It

¹ Lawrence W. Levine, The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History (Oxford: Oxford
metropolitan areas like New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and others, reporters and
publishers embraced a professional standard of objectivity in order to signal a differentiation
between newspapers of the present and those of the past. But in places like Superior, which stood
at a crossroads between urban and rural, the newspaper also occupied a similarly contradictory
position. Recognizing its association with the city, newspapers like the *Telegram* claimed to play
similar roles to their much larger counterparts; yet, they also continued to boost the prospects of
their home town. The *Telegram* exhibited characteristics associated with both modern, urban
newspapers, namely through its stated commitment to accurate reporting, but also to the more
provincial papers that presented overwhelmingly positive and optimistic coverage of their city or
town’s future prospects.

The *Telegram* was read alongside other material, and its articles not consumed in
isolation. As the 1920s wore on, the number of other print items in circulation increased in
Superior. The city’s residents read foreign-language newspapers and political and labor journals.
They subscribed to national magazines, and purchased mass-market books. Superior’s high
school students developed their own print outlets, including newspapers and yearbooks, and used
them to articulate their own vision of the future, and establish a sense of community rooted in the
high school experience. These pieces of student print culture signaled the prominence of a new
educational institutional, as well as the promise secondary education offered. In Superior, the
high school emerged as one avenue to pursue the modern future it imagined, and, initially, the
print products its students produced received a largely positive reception. But Superior’s print
products exposed fractures within the community, and as the number of outlets increased, so did
competing interpretations of what it meant to live in a modern, progressive community. They had
a final opportunity to promote the narrative its print products had carefully cultivated since the
city’s founding in 1928, when President Calvin Coolidge announced he would establish his Summer White House on the Bois Brule River.

The announcement took Superior by surprise. Rumors had circulated that the Coolidge was considering Wisconsin as a possible summer destination as early at March 1926, and intensified in spring 1927. While the student strike preoccupied the Telegram’s front page, the newspaper attempted to counteract the negative publicity with daily positive pieces describing the “lavish” cabins, cottages, and estates of the wealthy who retreated to Superior in the summer, as well as the quality of fishing in the region’s lakes and rivers. The Telegram noted that Wisconsin ranked highest in a survey of preferred Summer White House locations among presidential correspondents,² and an editorial read more like an advertisement as it described the region’s fishing, the “cool, refreshing, invigorating air and climate”—perfect for a president with respiratory issues, and its relative proximity to Washington, D.C.³

While the Telegram initially advertised Superior as a vacation destination fit for a president, it also revealed that business motivations were behind its publicity push. The advantages to Superior were obvious. The newspaper reported that the advertising value of the Summer White House was in the millions of dollars. “Should the President come to Upper Wisconsin, it will result in the attention of the entire country being focused here,” a local businessman told the Telegram. “The benefits to be derived from the location of the summer home here would be incalculable.”⁴ The Telegram salivated over the “vast group of tourists” that would travel to northern Wisconsin to see the president and the place he selection for his

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³ “You Are Welcome, Mr. Coolidge,” Superior Evening Telegram, March 20, 1927.
⁴ “Summer Homes on Brule Offered President Coolidge,” Superior Evening Telegram, March 16, 1927.
vacation, and the profits that it would bring to Superior and the surrounding towns.\(^5\)

Wisconsin’s loud bid for the Summer White House ultimately fell on deaf ears (and, as the newspaper’s student strike editorials indicated, the conflict had created a potentially negative representation of the city in the regional and national press). Coolidge and his administration did not retreat to Superior in 1927—the president went to the Black Hills in South Dakota instead. But Coolidge did not lose sight of Superior, especially as the president sought to remove himself from national politics in the wake of his decision not to pursue re-election. His friendship with Irvine Lenroot, a Superior native and former U.S. senator, further solidified Coolidge’s plans. In spring 1928, the president quietly informed Lenroot and others that he, his wife, and their son would spend summer in the City of Destiny, and set up the Summer White House on the second floor of Superior Central High School.

The Summer White House represented a phenomenal publicity opportunity for Superior, and a final chance to attract positive national attention to the City of Destiny. Cars of reporters and news reel men from Paramount and Kinogram arrived weeks in advance of the president, filming “miles” of footage for national and international distribution. Airplanes flew over the estate at Cedar Island, about 30 miles outside of Superior, to take footage of the lodge where the Coolidges would stay during the summer. One film man, associated with International Newsreel, a Hearst Company, arrived via canoe.\(^6\) So many journalists inundated the town of Brule and Superior that it became something of a local joke. “You see that cage over there,” a man involved in the preparations told the *Telegram*, and pointed to a iron-barred enclosure. “That’s where we put newspaper men when they get to be nuisance.”\(^7\) The *Telegram* invited more than

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\(^7\) Ibid.
100 presidential correspondents to Superior over the course of the summer, while highlighting the modern features of its newsroom, and offering to provide content to the newspapers and publications unable to make the trip to the Summer White House.\(^8\)

Community leaders acknowledged the importance of the national attention directed at Superior, and the pivotal role print culture could play in broadcasting the advantages of the city. Mayor Fred Baxter—previously a central player in the Board of Education conflict—took out a nearly half-page ad in the *Telegram* that clearly articulated the opportunity. The presence of President Coolidge was only the beginning for Superior; as the Summer White House, Superior would enjoy an unprecedented level of media coverage in the national and international press. And not just in print—new media technologies, including the radio and motion picture, would further broadcast the advantages of the city far and wide. “Impressions of Superior, her people, her point of view, how we react to the national honor so suddenly confered [sic] upon us, will be broadcast by these writers from coast to coast,” read the ad. It continued: “Now, that we have achieved a place in the sun, far greater than we ever hoped for, let us show the world how really big we are. ... The eyes of the entire country will be focused upon Superior. People will be talking, thinking, seeing, hearing Superior — let us make the most of the opportunity that is ours to make a favorable impression on the country at large.”\(^9\)

In its coverage of the Summer White House, the *Telegram* deployed metrics-focused reporting to signify Superior’s advances, material progress, and status as a modern city. It highlighted recent improvements to the local airstrip and improved roads throughout the region. Each article reflected positively on Superior and the spirit of its citizens. The *Telegram* described

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\(^8\) “Telegram to Provide Space,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, June 8, 1928.

\(^9\) “To the People of Superior,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, June 2, 1928.
the miles of copper wire laid in the city to support national telegraph and radio connections. It detailed the number of hotel rooms available to the hundreds of secretaries, aides, and other support staff destined for Superior. Throughout, the *Telegram* emphasized the importance of its circulation beyond Superior; while it remained a community-focused newspaper, its coverage of Coolidge, its laudatory articles on Superior businesses, and glowing description of life at the head of the lakes was clearly intended for an audience outside of northwestern Wisconsin.

The *Telegram* reported an increase in out-of-state subscriptions, and proudly boasted of circulation in 30 states across the country, including California, Tennessee, Florida, and New York.\(^\text{10}\) The newspaper implored readers to contact out-of-state relatives and offer a special summer subscription on the basis that the *Telegram* “virtually [became] the home paper for the Summer White House and the Capital.” In addition to keeping readers up-to-date on the president’s activities, the *Telegram* would also provide important publicity for Superior.\(^\text{11}\) To further capitalize on the promotional opportunity, the *Telegram* produced a 132-page paper that boosted the city’s businesses, described its natural advantages, and advocated for further investment in the region, primarily through the approval and completion of the proposed Deep Waterway that would connect the Great Lakes with the Atlantic Ocean. It contained the recently completed Pace Industrial Survey of the city, which further described its future economic prospects. An advertisement promoting the special edition touted its 10,000 square inches of pictures, and implored Superior residents to send it to their personal networks: “Friends out of the city would appreciate getting this paper and you will be proud to mail it.”\(^\text{12}\)

The city’s Public Affairs Committee also produced a handbook as a “special courtesy”

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\(^{10}\) “Persons in 30 States Read the Telegram for News of Coolidge,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, June 19, 1928.

\(^{11}\) “Publicity for Superior,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, June 9, 1928.

\(^{12}\) Advertisement, “Mail Today’s Telegram to Your Friends,” *Superior Evening Telegram*, June 26, 1928.
for visiting reporters and correspondents, meant to educate them on the city’s benefits and produce positive coverage of their time in Superior. It echoed the messages of Superior’s other promotional pamphlets and brochures, and advanced the narrative of the city’s progress the *Telegram* cultivated. It began with a description of Superior’s strategic position on the shore of a “vast inland sea” and on the “threshold of tremendous growth.” It reminded readers that the city had seen the “rapid development of extraordinary of activities of every kind” in just the past three decades, and required no “artificial stimulus.” As with other promotional literature, the handbook emphasized the importance of Superior’s natural advantages. Its proximity to resources, access to railroad lines, and harbor justified its existence and ensured its rise as a commercial center. The handbook reiterated the claim that had defined Superior since its beginnings: It was destined to become a great metropolis, would be of particular advantage to the United States as a transportation hub. The “commerce of the world” would pass through Superior.

Yet, one of the more interesting records of the Coolidge’s visit was the 1929 *Echo*. Emblazoned with an embossed image of the capitol dome, the cover immediately signaled a departure from the themes of previous years, which often drew on images associated with antiquity. Instead of the typical dedication and photo to a teacher or school administrator, the issue was instead dedicated to Mrs. Calvin Coolidge for “representing the highest type of American womanhood,” accompanied by a photo of the President seated in Superior Central High School. Scattered among the usual yearbook features—senior photos, club membership,

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16 *The Echo*, 1929.
participation in school activities, athletic season recaps—were reminisces about the Coolidges’
time in Superior that often deviated from the official public record. A short feature on John
Coolidge, the president’s son, described him as a “quite like any other boy his age,” quick to take
shortcuts (in this case, using a safety pin to fix a shirt) and avoid unnecessarily pleasant tasks,
despite the appearance of “sophistication and properness”.¹⁷ Throughout, students offered their
own stories of encounters with the president and his administration. They talked about going to
church with the Coolidges and interviewing the president for the Devil’s Pi. They described their
observations of his character and commented on the “atmosphere of friendliness and
cooperation” that he cultivated.¹⁸ They noted their chance encounters with the Coolidges
throughout Superior, and spoke of the family as model American citizens. These student
publications created an informal, alternative record of the Summer White House, which
complemented the more official account from the Telegram. They demonstrated the interplay
between print publications that existed in Superior, and the different positions, the different
content, and the different voices each outlet elevated.

When Coolidge left Superior, he gave a final farewell speech from the steps of Superior
Central High School. Thousands attended, and stood for hours in the cold, windy, drenching
September rain. Coolidge’s remarks before this “sea of umbrellas” acted as an endorsement of
Superior’s progressive narrative. He commented on how impressed he was by the city and the
surrounding area, and described it as a “vigorous, enterprising, region” that its residents should
be proud of. Coolidge added that Superior and its residents had “secured a development in 40 or
50 years that others had achieved only after centuries of effort.”¹⁹ At the conclusion of

¹⁸ Elizabeth Turney, “The Soldier’s Opinion,” The Echo, 1929.
¹⁹ “Crowd Sings ‘He’s a Jolly Good Fellow,’” Superior Evening Telegram, Sept. 11, 1928.
Coolidge’s remarks, the crowd broke into a spontaneous rendition of “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow,” and cheered on the president and first lady as they made their way to the train station, and left the City of Destiny.

Within two years of Coolidge’s visit, and Superior’s summer in the spotlight, the city would learn that its population had again declined. According to the 1930 U.S. Census, Superior lost about 9 percent of its population, and a total of 36,133 lived in the city. The Depression further impacted Superior’s economic activity, and made it all too clear that its reliance on outside investment—and its connection to larger national networks—put its destiny in the hands of market forces, rather than in the hands of its citizens. The rhetoric about the ability of Superior’s residents to secure their destiny through hard work, dedication, and commitment to a unified vision of the city’s future, rang false in the face of reality. Superior never became the city its print products imagined, and instead stood as “an odd combination of the grandeur of the ideas upon which it was founded and the mediocrity of the cold facts of reality.”

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This study reconstructed the social and cultural world of a small city that stood at an important historical crossroads. Intent on securing the destiny that its founders promised and that its print publications promoted, the city of Superior faced increasing questions in the 1920s about which path would lead it toward a progressive, modern future. Since its beginning, the city’s print culture fostered an aggressively promotional rhetoric about its natural advantages and its destiny to be an important commercial center. In the 1920s, the limitations of that rhetoric were realized.

In Superior, the city’s robust print culture and a belief in a strong public school system

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20 Shaw, 215.
were two ways to achieve future prosperity. Print culture, through the city’s newspapers, as well as other pamphlets and brochures, promoted Superior’s opportunities to a wider audience. By boosting its prospects, these print channels sought to attract investment and new residents. They also fostered a sense of community among residents, and developed a narrative about Superior’s past, present, and future that emphasized a shared understanding of what it meant to be an urban, progressive city. As the newspaper market contracted, the *Telegram* emerged as the city’s only English-language daily publication. The *Telegram* found success through its community-oriented focus, and the effort of its founder and publisher John T. Murphy to build a publication that would serve the needs of Superior and the surrounding region. It continued to develop the narrative about the city’s identity and extended through to other print materials. These included a form of print culture rooted in the high school. Student newspapers and yearbooks largely mimicked the *Telegram* and adopted its triumphant narrative of life in Superior.

Yet, the city’s student print platforms also elevated and emboldened a new set of voices. They presented conflicting visions over what constituted progress, what made a city (and its high schools) modern, and what influence its next generation should have on articulating the city’s future led to points of conflict. These new forms of media—specifically student-led publications—challenged the *Telegram*’s privileged position in creating and maintaining Superior’s sense of identity. They revealed fractures in the cohesive narrative the *Telegram* promoted, and further demonstrate the complexities of modernity.

Superior never became the great city it imagined. The narrative of Superior’s identity promoted in the *Telegram* told the story of a city constructed out of the wilderness and meant to rise as a great metropolis in the old Northwest Territory. But by tying Superior’s future to national economic, social, and cultural forces, its residents forfeited control over their own
Since its inception, Superior depended on large proposals—the expansion of transcontinental railroads, the construction of a deep waterway linking the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean—that ultimately were at the whim of political and economic trends. The first planned railroads in the 1850s and early 1860s never materialized, due in part to the Civil War, and the Deep Waterway that promised to make Superior a major port became mired in political fights for decades. It was eventually completed in the 1950s, nearly three decades after the *Telegram* began reporting on the proposal. Even the Summer White House, which focused national attention on Superior for one summer, did not deliver revived interest in the city as a site of investment.

There are limitations to the analysis presented in this dissertation. First, this study focuses entirely on the city’s English-language newspapers. Due to the resources available, it does not include analysis of the many foreign-language newspapers produced in Superior in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Expanding the study to include these print platforms would enrich the understanding of the city’s vibrant print culture, and further demonstrate the complex media environment that the *Telegram* sought to dominate. While the *Telegram* sought to solidify its status as a civic institution for Superior as a whole, these newspapers catered to smaller ethnic communities (and, in some cases, specific political affiliations within those communities). They did not enjoy the same level of prominence as the *Telegram*, but they did accomplish many of the same community-oriented objectives. That is, they created a sense of community built around a shared understanding of values, morals, and histories, and sought to connect Superior-based immigrant groups with both their homelands and other immigrant groups scattered throughout the United States. Bringing these publications into this project’s analysis would further enhance its understanding of the nuance of life in the 1920s and the myriad print platforms that operated
alongside one another, as well as the different articulations of future expectations of future—not to mention alternative definitions of modernity—that they offered.

Second, this project limits itself to discussion of the high school as a key avenue on the path to modernity and progress, in part because of its close association with training a potentially troublesome young generation and due to the impressive amount of civic investment made in the institution in the early 20th century. However, the national, mass culture that took hold in the United States also represented a new cultural form that challenged the authority of traditional institutions in their effort to shape the character of young people. Represented by chain stores, the rise of branded goods and national advertising, the proliferation of motion pictures, and, later in the 1920s, the dramatic adoption of radios and an expanded, national broadcasting program, mass culture created a set of shared experiences that fostered community connections across an even greater geographic distance. It also permanently altered the landscape of places like Superior, which found themselves increasingly tied to a national community.

Third, this study focused entirely on Superior, Wisconsin, during the 1920s in an effort to provide a rich, deeply detailed chronicle of life at a moment rife with tensions and conflicts. However, it would benefit from expansion to a second case study city, in order to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the position of small cities within the American historical narrative. Tacoma, Washington, provides a natural point of comparison. As the western terminus for the Northern Pacific Railroad, and itself engaged in an intense competition for resources and investment with the nearby Seattle, Tacoma in the late 19th and early 20th century exhibited many of the same characteristics as Superior, albeit in a different geographic setting. Many of the same cast of characters that were involved in Superior’s revitalization in the 1890s—notably James J. Hill of the Great Northern Railroad—also appear in the story of Tacoma’s development.
Its city’s boosters often stressed its impressive natural advantages when promoting the community, and assigned it a familiar nickname: the City of Destiny.

This study of Superior, Wis., provides a richer, deeper understanding of the rhetoric surrounding the 1920s, that of progress and modernity, and examines how those tensions were manifested at the local level within a city’s print culture. By focusing on a small city in the Midwest, and one with great aspirations, we can see how decisions made in that decade impacted its future trajectory, as well as how small cities grappled with questions about modernity and progress. Print culture provided the forum for these debates about a place’s future; and when that future did turn out as planned, they also become a place to renegotiate narratives about its identity. But focusing solely on newspapers obscures the role other printed materials played in discourses about tensions of the decade. By extending this study to examine the other print materials that circulated in Superior in the 1920s, it develops a more complex picture of print culture at this time, and gives voice to print products otherwise neglected, and voices otherwise quieted. Superior, as was the case in many other small cities in the United States, saw the 1920s as an opportunity to realize its long-held aspirations. Print culture increasingly became a repository for the tensions between different visions of the future, and revealed complex and competing notions of what it meant to be a modern, progressive city.
Afterword

When this project started, the *Telegram* immediately emerged as a key character in the story of a small city coming to terms with the limitations of the booster rhetoric that long defined it. Despite the reality of Superior’s existence, which saw a continued decline in population and the loss of businesses throughout the city, the *Telegram* remained a central community institution and a key part of Superior’s downtown geography. It moved out of the four-story, cream city brick building with a massive radio antenna to a more subdued storefront, but it continued to chronicle the daily activities of life at the head of the lakes. The ore docks and grain silos that defined the city’s harbor front and dominated the skyline were abandoned and torn down as shipping numbers declined. The few left fell into disrepair, a ghostly reminder of the city’s earlier fortune. Superior Central High School, the former Summer White House and a point of community pride, was turned into a junior high school in the 1960s. A new high school, which finally combined Superior Central and Superior East, opened far from the city’s central business district. Superior Central, once one of the city’s most historically significant buildings, was torn down in 2004. A five-foot tall bust of James J. Hill, whose Great Northern Railway revived Superior, which sat atop a granite pillar and graced the high school’s front lawn, was removed. The historical marker which memorialized the Summer White House was removed. But the *Telegram* remained.

Then, in 2008, *Telegram* leadership, now centered across state lines at the *Duluth News Tribune*, stopped publishing daily, and instead put out a newspaper twice a week. Circulation had declined to 5,500, nearly a quarter of what it was at its peak in the 1920s. As I began the research for this dissertation, I met the *Telegram’s* remaining staff members, a reporter and a photographer, on a trip to Superior. They were aware of the *Telegram’s* unique position in the
community and one of the remnants of Superior’s boom. Yet, they admitted they were increasingly being asked to fulfill more roles at the paper with less support—a refrain that echoes in many local newsrooms across the country—and wondered about the newspaper’s future. Just two years after I started this project, I learned that the Telegram shuttered its downtown Superior offices, moving operations entirely across the St. Louis Bay to Duluth. Northern Wisconsin’s Big Daily was no longer published in Wisconsin.

While this dissertation is ultimately historical in nature, it also reveals several implications for the present-day news environment. Newspapers play a role in places like Superior that extends beyond the delivery of information. They create a sense of community, and a shared understanding of what it means to live in a certain place at a certain time. They help create a narrative about a city’s identity through reporting on the seemingly mundane events that define its life. They sponsor community events and activities, and establish themselves as civic institutions invested in a place’s success. They boost a community and cover the stories other outlets would neglect. As the print landscape continues to contract, and news deserts emerge in places like Superior, the loss will extend beyond news coverage.
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Superior Telegram

Superior Chronicle

Superior Gazette
Superior Inter-Ocean

Superior Times

Wisconsin Sunday Times

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The Gleam (Nelson Dewey High School)

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