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THE SUBLIME OLD CHILD

February 21, 2000

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The only thing most Americans know about Horace Greeley is related to going West. And that's a pity. Greeley, to be sure, was a lifelong advocate of westward migration and the extension of the United States to the West Coast. But he was far more - a man of immense complexity, a truly multifaceted man.

One facet reflects his career as the most creative and influential editor of his time - the father, some would say, of modern journalism.

Another reflects his career as an unfulfilled politician - always dabbling in the affairs of his community, his state and his nation but never quite summoning the public confidence he thought he deserved.

Another facet reflects his zeal as the advocate of forlorn causes. Were he alive today many would dismiss him as a psycho-ceramic, which is the genteel term for crackpot.

Perhaps the most remarkable achievement was Horace Greeley's ability to overcome the circumstances in which he was born.

The Greeleys came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony from the English Midlands in the 1600s, and produced several generations of struggling farmers, woodcutters, and artisans.

Horace's great-grandfather, Ezekiel Greeley, managed to amass property near what is now Nashua, N.H. His son lost most of it, and his grandson, Horace's father, lost the rest.

Horace Greeley's father, Zaccheus, was widely regarded as the most ineffective and improvident farmer in the area. He was almost uninterruptedly pursued by the sheriff for tax delinquencies. These were problems he thought he was mitigating through alcohol - a recreation in which he was joined by his wife.

At the time of his marriage in 1807, Zaccheus Greeley bought 40 acres and a new cottage. To pay for it all - and for the animals with which he stocked it - he went heavily into debt and never emerged.

Horace was born in 1811. Two previous children had died, and there was reason to believe he would not survive. He was a blue baby, with unnaturally white hair. His eyes were weak, his head abnormally large. As he made acquaintances in the neighborhood he was known as the Ghost.

Happily, Mrs. Greeley came from sturdier stock than the Greeleys. She commanded a picturesque storehouse of ballads, anecdotes and traditions with which she delighted her young, eager son. Perhaps because she had lost two previous children, she made Horace the focus of her life.

Horace grew, not surprisingly, into the most precocious child in the area. He read the Bible, newspapers whenever they were available, and very nearly everything else he could find - from Byron and Burns to Shakespeare.

When a new family came to the neighborhood with a daughter named Asenath, the elders began speculating on the origins of the name. It was no mystery for Horace: he cited the 41<sup>st</sup> chapter of Genesis, Verse 45.

Eventually some of the Greeleys' neighbors approached Horace's family and offered to finance his attending Philips Exeter Academy. His father felt he could provide Horace with all the education he needed, and his mother was unwilling to be separated from her son.

The family's economic plight, meanwhile, grew worse. A small recession in 1819, when Horace was eight, found them in such desperate straits that Horace's father hid in the woods to avoid arrest for his debts. Eventually he managed to take his family on a three-day trek to Rutland, Vt., where he found a job clearing timber and brush at 50 cents a day.

Small wonder the family began thinking of moving west to the wilderness around Erie, PA. At the same time Horace began dreaming of breaking loose from the scratching existence in which his family was trapped. At the age of 11 he walked eight miles to Whitehall, N.Y., where a newspaper was looking for an apprentice. He was deemed too young. After several years he tried again, at East Poultney, Vt. There his luck changed: he began what was to be his lifelong relationship with newspapers.

That job didn't last long, and Horace began thinking of New York City with its infinitely broader opportunities. But before he moved on he sought out his family in Pennsylvania. He was stunned to discover what several years in the wilderness had done to his mother, and he resolved more than ever to provide her some comfort.

The New York City to which 20-year old Horace Greeley migrated in 1831 was a community just shy of 200,000 people. Manhattan Island was mainly a dense woods with stony hills and small farms.

Greeley stopped first at Broad and Wall Streets, but the proprietress of a boardinghouse there took one

look at his poorly shod, sockless feet, his well-worn cotton trousers, and the strings that held his cuffs in place and suggested he try a lodging house on West Street where rooms were available for \$2.50 a week.

It was there that Greeley heard of a print shop on Chatham Street that was looking for a man. He got the job because no one else wanted it. It involved setting agate type for use in Bibles - the size of type today's newspapers use for their stock-market reports. It was an eye-straining challenge for which the myopic Greeley was poorly equipped; yet he did whatever was expected of him.

One of his homes during this period was a tiny hotel on Greenwich Street operated by "Dr." Sylvester Graham, who was the subject of an authoritative budget paper back in September, 1982. Dr. Graham, among other things, was an ardent vegetarian and the advocate of unseasoned puddings and water. He also preached cold baths, sleeping with an open window, and abstinence from excessive copulation. Greeley became a fervent Grahamite, and years later when he took such friends as P.T. Barnum to lunch it was invariably vegetables and Graham crackers.

An even more faithful convert to the Graham way was another boarder on Greenwich Street, Miss Mary Cheney of Cornwall, Conn. She had come to New York to teach school. Greeley and Miss Cheney became enamored of each other and eventually married.

In 1834, two years before his marriage, Greeley left the printshop trade to establish a literary magazine he named the New Yorker. His magazine, he told readers, "will show that it is not and never will be a servile copyist of any of its contemporaries, nor shall we venture our barque among the whirlpools and quick-sands of politics."

The New Yorker was the first American publication to print an early story by Charles Dickens. It was also the first to recognize Edgar Allen Poe - "a brilliant writer," explained Greeley, "when neither too drunk nor too sober."

All the editing and most of the writing in the New Yorker were Greeley's handiwork. He also set the type and laid out the pages. He had a partner who looked after the business aspects - handling subscriptions and advertising and hiring apprentices. The New Yorker began with 50 subscribers; after a year it had 4,500.

The magazine might have remained Greeley's principal work had not the undisputed leader of the Whig Party in New York State come to his humble office. Thurlow Weed, who was also owner of the Albany Evening Journal, had been impressed by what he had heard and read of Greeley, and wanted him to come to Albany to establish a weekly campaign newspaper. For the first time Greeley found himself in politics.

Once the paper was under way, Greeley divided his time between Albany and New York City. He took the night boat to Albany on Saturday and worked three days in behalf of the Whigs. On Wednesday night he was back in New York to put out the week's New Yorker.

Greeley's work contributed to the election of Thurlow Weed's partner, William H. Seward, as governor of New York, and established Greeley as a member of the Weed-Seward-Greeley triumvirate to run New York Whigdom.

In two years Greeley was organizing another weekly to advance the presidential campaign of William Henry Harrison. When Harrison became the first Whig president there was speculation that Greeley, still in his late 20's, might become the nation's postmaster general, or, at the very least, postmaster of New York City. It was the kind of speculation Greeley relished. But within a few weeks of his inauguration, Harrison was dead, and John Tyler, a Virginia Democrat, sat in the White House. Greeley, Seward, and Weed, knew that lean years lay ahead.

Greeley, as a result, resolved to get out of strictly political journalism - out of editing newspapers that existed solely to advance a partisan agenda - and to establish his own daily newspaper. This he did by launching the New York Tribune on April 10, 1841, the very day on which the Enquirer was

established in Cincinnati. Greeley promised to spare his readers "the immoral and degrading" crime news and advertisements that sustained the rest of the New York press.

Greeley wanted the Tribune to be a true newspaper. Its editorial columns were political enough, but its news columns, he hoped, would not be. The Tribune hired book reviewers, an agriculture columnist, business writers. It eventually opened a bureau in London and published letters from correspondents in other important outposts in Europe. Karl Marx was, for a time, a paid reporter on the political ferment that was sweeping Europe in the middle of the century.

Greeley's Tribune was not only a daily newspaper in New York, but also a weekly newspaper with readers across America. At their peak, the daily and the weekly Tribune had a combined circulation of 250,000. Considering the population of the United States in 1850, that would correspond to half again the circulation of today's Wall Street Journal. Ralph Waldo Emerson once remarked that "Greeley does the thinking for the whole West at \$2 per year for his paper."

When Greeley founded the Tribune, he owned 50 of the newspaper's 100 shares. The other 50 were owned by the business manager he hired to keep the paper profitable, which it invariably was. Gradually, as he endeavored to enlist promising young journalists through the sale or gift of shares, he was left with only six shares for himself. That engendered an abiding fear the other shareholders were conspiring to deprive him of control.

For eight years after their marriage and for three years after the establishment of the Tribune, Horace and Mary Greeley lived very much as Horace alone had lived during his early years in New York - in small hotels and boardinghouses in the oldest, dirtiest, most congested areas of the city.

By 1844 they decided to establish a real home, and they found a place at Turtle Bay, about two miles from the Tribune's office. Their house, situated on several

acres, had belonged to one of New York's Dutch governors, and very little had been done to it since the departure of its last owner.

Mrs. Greeley turned out to be less than a model homemaker. The Greeleys' home had no carpets, no curtains, and only a few pieces of crude, inexpensive furniture. It was all but impossible to keep household help more than a few weeks. And Mrs. Greeley held fast to Dr. Sylvester Graham's dietetic rules. On one occasion, Horace made the mistake of bringing a colleague home for the weekend. On the first evening the dinner table was lighted by a single candle. Horace suggested the need for more light. Mrs. Greeley asserted that one candle was enough. Dinner consisted of bread and butter, apple sauce, pudding and cocoa. When the evening ended, Horace suggested that their guest might be more comfortable at a nearby inn. Mrs. Greeley injected, "Well, he's not staying here!"

Not surprisingly the Turtle Bay house - which Greeley referred to as Castle Doleful - became for him a weekend home. Work, he said, required him to take a room close to the office.

After a few years Mrs. Greeley persuaded him to buy a home with 75 infertile acres outside the village of Chappaqua in Westchester County, an hour's train ride outside New York. The farm at Chappaqua was not an easy life. Greeley had to rise early, do the milking and other chores, then board the train for work. It was often near midnight before he returned for another round of chores.

When he was neither farming nor editing, Greeley strengthened his ties to Thurlow Weed and William H. Seward - always hoping that in addition to strengthening the Whig position in New York he might win significant political influence - including public office - for himself. Weed evidently figured that he could discharge whatever debt he owed Greeley by giving him a 90-day unexpired term in the U.S. House of Representatives. Greeley saw the appointment as an opportunity to reform not only Congress but the nation itself.

He sought to distribute a 160-acre tract on the frontier to any settler who wanted one - without cost. He also proposed to change the country's name to Columbia. And with particular zeal he publicized the extent to which members of Congress were collecting more in travel expenses than they deserved. Congressmen were entitled to travel expense from their homes to Washington by the most direct route. But some, Greeley discovered to his horror, chose circuitous routes. The notorious scoundrel Abraham Lincoln, as an illustration, received from the federal treasury some \$676.80 more than the direct route would have entitled him.

Such exposes Greeley used not only in his frequent speeches on the House floor but across the pages of the Tribune.

By 1844 Greeley had become an enthusiastic, deeply committed supporter of Henry Clay. Like Clay, he believed in a government-business partnership for the purpose of internal improvements-communications, transportation, westward settlement, the protective tariff. He had also become by the 1840's a fervent, even an extreme, opponent of slavery.

When Clay was defeated for the presidency in 1844 by James Knox Polk of Tennessee, Greeley took it as a personal defeat as well. By 1848 he again wanted Clay to be the Whig nominee for president, although his Whig partners in New York did not agree. Greeley dismissed Zachary Taylor, the Weed-Seward choice, as "an illiterate frontier colonel" and an alternative candidate, Gen. Winfield Scott, as "an aristocratic, bombastic fuss and feathers." As for the Democratic prospect, Lewis Cass, Greeley proclaimed that "the country doesn't deserve to have as president that pot-bellied, mutton-headed cucumber."

The presidential elections of 1852 and 1856 widened the rift between Greeley on the one hand and Weed and Seward on the other. In 1856 John C. Fremont was the Republican Party's nominee - a new coalition to which Greeley gave his energetic support. It was Greeley who suggested the new party's name.



The stage thus was set for the coming of Lincoln in 1860.

To look at Horace Greeley and Abraham Lincoln from our perspective is to imagine that they would have been inevitable allies. In fact, they were not.

They had met as early as 1847 when they spoke from the same platform in Chicago. They had renewed their acquaintance during their one term in Congress. But Greeley remembered Lincoln as "a quiet, good-natured man who did not aspire to leadership", and Lincoln remembered Greeley as the perpetrator of the expose of his travel allowance.

Lincoln, moreover, saw Greeley as a strident and uncompromising advocate, while Greeley lost patience with Lincoln for what he regarded as his vacillation and indecisiveness on the slavery question.

Yet both had grown to national prominence from a background of abject poverty and both entertained a certain contempt for the Easterners who had dominated the nation's political life.

As Lincoln emerged as a major contender for the Republican presidential nomination, his principal opponent was William H. Seward, Greeley's one-time partner in the New York Whig triumvirate. Greeley, by now estranged from Weed and Seward, was unimpressed by Lincoln. He chose to back Edward Bates, a 67-year old St. Louis lawyer of conservative dispositions.

Greeley went to Chicago for the 1860 Republican convention, but Thurlow Weed had refused to make him a part of the New York delegation. Greeley managed to become a delegate from Oregon; he even shared a room with two other Oregon delegates because he had forgotten to reserve a room for himself.

Greeley was busy during the days preceding the convention's opening - principally sharing the notion that Seward could not win even if nominated, but his spirits sagged when the convention actually became considering the candidates. Only a round of deal-

making by Lincoln's managers blocked Seward; Bates was a distant third. Lincoln was the nominee.

Despite his lack of enthusiasm for Lincoln, Greeley held nothing in reserve as the campaign unfolded. "There is no rest for me till after the presidential election," he wrote to a friend. "I must write and speak incessantly, though I am so weary that I can hardly stand."

Two years earlier Greeley had concluded that the Republican's best hope in 1860 would come if Sen. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois were the Democratic nominee. Toward that end he urged Illinois Republicans not to oppose Douglas' re-election to the Senate in 1858. An uncontested Senate election, he figured, would make Douglas the inevitable Democrat. As it happened, the Lincoln-Douglas contest for the Senate converted Lincoln into a truly national political figure. But Douglas' nomination, as Greeley had suspected, produced another Democratic presidential nominee - John C. Breckinridge, and a fourth candidate, John Bell of the Constitutional Union Party.

Lincoln polled only a plurality in November, but enough to make him the nation's 16<sup>th</sup> president.

Lincoln's victory was a signal to the most zealous of the Southerners to proceed with their threat to secede. For Greeley it became a dilemma. On the one hand few hated slavery more than he. On the other, none hated war any more. He had been an advocate, in fact, of abolishing the army and the navy.

He resolved his perplexity in a letter to the president-elect. Secession is permissible, he argued, but it must come only after a laborious process of debate and deliberation. But debate and deliberation were not features of the Southern agenda.

Once the South Carolinians and other showed no inclination to deliberate, Greeley began to fear that the counselors gathered about Lincoln would urge a course of compromise. Hence, during a lecture tour in Illinois he stopped off in Springfield and shared his concerns with the president-elect.

Greeley had imagined that the Seward-Weed failure at the Chicago convention would end Thurlow Weed's influence in Republican affairs. So he was startled to find Lincoln and Weed still in close touch and even more startled to know that Seward was to become Lincoln's secretary of State.

The consolation was that Seward's entering the cabinet would mean a vacancy in the U.S. Senate - a vacancy to which Greeley aspired. He had encouragement from even unexpected quarters, but when the New York legislature met to act, the Senate prize went to one of Weed's underlings. Greeley was politically frustrated once more, frustrated all the more by Lincoln's refusal to inject himself into the Senate debate in Greeley's behalf.

If Greeley could not be a senator, perhaps he should assert himself as a volunteer strategic adviser. Day after day, Greeley began using his editorial page to call for more troops, more ships, more action. He urged the prompt occupation of Maryland, the seizure of Richmond, the proclamation of martial law in all the seceded states, large rewards for Jefferson Davis and other Confederate leaders. On the front page, the Tribune printed a daily slogan: Forward to Richmond.

Small wonder that one New York politician was moved to declare, "Imagine Greeley, booted and spurred with epaulets on his shoulders. . .The idea of Greeley turning warrior is too ridiculous to be thought of."

There can be little doubt that the impatience Greeley personified was a factor in the Union's disaster at Bull Run. The federal troops lacked almost everything, including leadership. Yet the pressure was for attack. "If I am needed as a scapegoat for all the military blunders of the last month," Greeley wrote in the Tribune, "so be it."

Greeley's emotions were deeply disturbed by the growing outcry against him and perhaps by pangs of conscience as well. He was physically ill - with what his doctors called brain fever. Eventually, he pulled himself together and resumed his role as a self-appointed presidential counselor.

If Greeley was impatient with Lincoln's conduct of the war, he was even more disgusted with Lincoln's attitude toward emancipation. Greeley was wildly enthusiastic when Gen. John C. Fremont, who commanded Union forces in Missouri, proclaimed the freeing of all slaves within his reach. He was just as excited when Secretary of War Simon Cameron authorized the use of fugitive slaves in the Union army and appealed to slaves in the South to take up arms against their masters. Lincoln quickly annulled Fremont's order and quieted Cameron's musings.

Lincoln eventually responded to what Greeley had been urging in the Tribune. What he was doing about slavery, he said, he was doing to save the Union.

By 1864 these frustrations convinced Greeley and a great many others that Lincoln needed to be replaced on the Republican ticket. Greeley wanted a stronger president than Lincoln, and a president more disposed to heed his unrelenting and unsolicited advice.

Greeley's first choice as Lincoln's successor was Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans, a veteran of the Western campaign who had not yet committed a major battlefield blunder. In due time, though, General Rosecrans blundered at Chickamauga.

So Greeley turned next to our Literary Club colleague Salmon P. Chase, who had been courting Greeley for more than a year, and the presidency from the time he was born. But a lack of support among Chase's fellow Ohioans induced the anti-Lincoln faction to continue the search.

Greeley meanwhile received word that several Confederate agents had come to Niagara Falls in hope of enlisting his help in ending the war. Greeley made the trip to Niagara Falls, crossed the international bridge and met with the emissaries. Their efforts came to naught. But Greeley found himself attacked by his New York competitors for "meddling," "bungling," and "cuddling with traitors."

What none of the activists could have anticipated suddenly unfolded: a dramatic reversal of the fortunes

of war. General Sherman's army won the battle for Atlanta. Sheridan's army swept from victory to victory in the Shenandoah. The North captured the last fort on Mobile Bay. Lincoln overnight was the public hero. The convention that was to replace him was abruptly called off, and Greeley learned that Lincoln, out of "lifelong admiration of Horace Greeley," was considering appointing Greeley postmaster general. It was a position to which Greeley aspired for a quarter of a century. The Tribune suddenly found itself unable to say enough good things about President Lincoln and did all in its power to assure his re-election.

The second Lincoln administration was scarcely a month old before Lincoln was dead. A new chief executive was in the White House - Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, chosen as Lincoln's running mate because he was a Southerner who nonetheless favored preservation of the Union. There were many issues on which Johnson was at odds with the Republicans in Congress, and the stage was set for an era of vituperation and recrimination, even though the war had finally come to an end.

One experienced old Washington hand dispatched a note to President Johnson suggesting his troubles might be ameliorated if he broadened the cabinet by, for example, offering a position to Horace Greeley.

Johnson responded in a letter that wasn't found until 1913. He declared that he "would not have Greeley on any account. . . I always considered him a good enough editor before the war, although I never agreed with him; but in all other matters he seemed to me like a whale ashore. He nearly bothered the life out of Lincoln and it was difficult to tell whether he wanted union or separation, war or peace. Greeley is all heart and no head. He is the most vacillating man in the country. He runs to goodness of heart so much as to produce infirmity of mind. . . Greeley (is) a sublime old child (who) would be of no service to me."

Greeley appeared to believe that Johnson was committed, in his own way, to carrying forward Lincoln's plans for reconstruction. But Johnson could not bring himself to share Greeley's views on black

enfranchisement. Gradually, Greeley found himself drifting toward the Republican Radicals in Congress, bent upon a hard peace. But as the Radicals endorsed carpetbagging as a tactic for reorganizing the South, Greeley found himself vacillating between the two. He finally wound up supporting Johnson's removal from office.

But Johnson's fate ceased for a time to be Greeley's primary focus. He turned to the future of Jefferson Davis. While the war was in its most desperate phase, Greeley advocated the hanging of such Confederate leaders as Davis. But after Appomattox, Davis was captured in Georgia by Union forces and imprisoned at Fortress Monroe, Va. There most Northerners were content to see him languish. In 1867 a federal circuit judge in Virginia ruled that Davis could be released on bail provided a representative group of responsible Americans would post a bond of \$100,000. Greeley didn't hesitate to contribute.

None of the bizarre positions Greeley had previously taken generated a comparable outburst. The Tribune lost hundreds of subscribers and advertisers, critical mail flowed into Greeley's office. The Union League Club, to which Greeley belonged, summoned him to a meeting called to consider his expulsion.

"I shall not attend your meeting," Greeley responded. "I do not recognize you as capable of judging, or even fully apprehending me. You evidently regard me as a weak sentimentalist, misled by a maudlin philosophy. I arraign you as narrow-minded blockheads who would like to be useful to a great and good cause but don't know how."

The Union League club chose not to proceed.

In 1869 the Andrew Johnson saga was at an end, and Ulysses S. Grant was in the White House - elected overwhelmingly with the help of Greeley's reluctant support.

As it happened, the Grant administration became a magnet for all the social, economic and political forces Horace Greeley had been fighting.

After four years of Grant, there was no hope of denying him renomination, and none of denying him re-election.

Hence there came into being a so-called Liberal Republican movement in which Greeley took a prominent place.

In the summer of 1872 the Liberal Republicans came to Cincinnati to frame a platform and nominate a candidate. The favorite for the presidential nomination was Charles Francis Adams, who chose to demonstrate his disdain for public office by sailing off to Europe. There was some talk of Justice David Davis, an early Lincoln strategist now on the Supreme Court. The wrangling and maneuvering ended with Horace Greeley as the nominee. A few weeks later, the shattered Democrats met in Baltimore and endorsed Greeley as well.

So Horace Greeley, at 61, found himself nominated for high office beyond his most sanguine aspirations.

In Greeley's time, a candidate for the presidency stayed home and spoke to small groups that came to solicit his views - farmers, laborers, bankers, manufacturers. Greeley chose another strategy: he traveled, he spoke widely, he actively pursued the presidency. His visibility made him an obvious and tempting target for the administration's partisans, and the campaign became so extraordinarily strident that Greeley at one point lamented that he didn't know whether he was running for the presidency or the penitentiary.

Just when life couldn't be more stressful for him, Mrs. Greeley returned from several years in Europe where she had visited one spa and clinic and specialist after another seeking a cure for whatever it was that ailed her. Since Greeley had last seen her she had lost her teeth and her ability to walk. Five days before the election, with her husband at her bedside, Mrs. Greeley died.

Then came the voting - 3.5 million for Grant, 2.8 million for Greeley. Given the popularity of the

Union's principal war hero and the eccentricity that dogged Greeley throughout his life, it was a very respectable showing.

Yet, deeply grieved by the loss of his wife, shattered by this last in a chain of political defeats, harried by creditors, fearful of the Tribune's future, Horace Greeley went into a sanitarium with a breakdown that was more mental than physical. Before November had ended, he too was dead.

Horace Greeley would have been moved by his funeral and those it attracted - the president and chief justice of the United States, governors, senators, cabinet members, mayors. And scattered among the famous and powerful were representatives of the multitude of causes to which he had devoted his life - the vegetarians, the prohibitionists, the pacifists, the utopians, the spiritualists, the union activists, the homesteaders, the Grahamites, the anti-tobacco crusaders.

To catalogue his causes is to see how thinly he spread his energies, his resources and himself. It is also to wonder how much farther would have been his reach had he dismissed his yearning for public office and lessened his resolve to set the whole universe aright.

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BUDGET

February 28, 2000

- 1 - The Last Prisoner . . . . . Louis M. Prince
  - 2 - Not Until Everything's  
Perfect . . . . . Frederick J. McGavran
  - 3 - Here Comes One With a  
Bridegroom . . . . . J. Donald Waring
-