

Looking Back #18

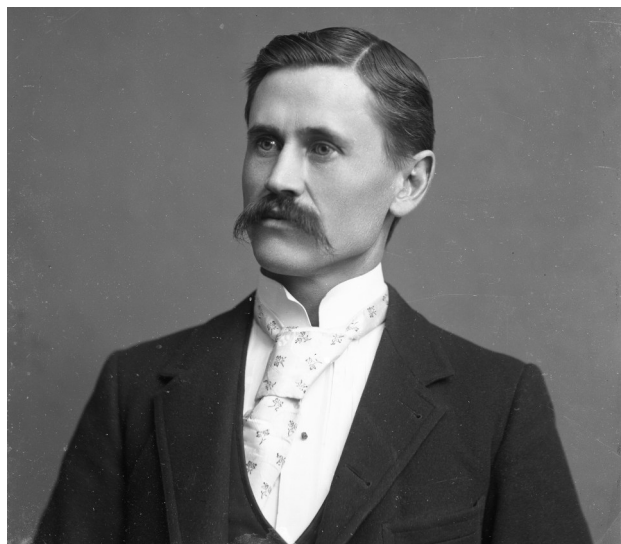
Willard A. Smith, Charlevoix's First Newspaper Publisher

By

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1884 lithograph of Willard A. Smith



Presumed portrait of Willard A. Smith
from an undated glass plate negative

Willard A. Smith was the first newspaper publisher/editor on the mainland between Traverse City and the Straits of Mackinac.* Born August 4, 1851 in Malone, New York, he was orphaned at age six, and at age twelve came to southern Michigan where he served an apprenticeship on the *Marshall Statesman* newspaper. After a short time there, the quick learner moved to Flint and the *Wolverine Citizen* and *Globe* papers. In 1868, Smith migrated north to a position as compositor (typesetter) for the fledgling *Traverse Bay Eagle*, published in Elk Rapids. From there, the paper moved down to Traverse City where it became the *Traverse City Eagle*, today the *Record-Eagle*.

Smith, now up a notch as pressman, brought the very first edition off the press.

So impressed was the *Eagle's* publisher by Smith's capabilities that he tapped the eighteen-year-old to establish a paper in the untapped wilderness to the north, perhaps sensing that this was where future development might be headed. His instinct proved to be correct, and Willard Smith proved to be the man for the job. He set off on foot in March of 1869, carrying a case of type. Separately, two Indigenous men toted the press, slung on poles on their shoulders, through the woods to Charlevoix.

*The first newspaper publisher/editor in the Traverse Region is said to be James Jesse Strang, who established the *Northern Islander* at St. James on Beaver Island. The first issue appeared December 12, 1850.



The Keyes building, one of the *Sentinel's* first homes

In one account of Smith's trip north, he was said to have reached Atwood, from where he detoured east to East Jordan for some reason to look up pioneer settler David Nettleton. This man would have an enormous impact on Charlevoix within a few months as the spearhead of the project that would open up Charlevoix's two channels and two inland lakes to world commerce. It is not known what the two men discussed.

Next came the final trudge up the South Arm of Lake Charlevoix, then called Pine Lake, and his destination. On arrival, the first thing Willard did was look up Civil War veteran Major Edward H. Green, fresh out of the University of Michigan law school, who was to serve as the paper's first editor, as well as northern Michigan's first lawyer. So embarrassed was Willard by the condition of his boots and socks, worn full of holes, that he declined Major Green's offer to take off the wet boots and warm his feet by the stove. He had tucked five dollars into one boot before he left Traverse City, and the next day used the money to purchase new clothing.

Sources vary as to exactly where the office of Charlevoix's first newspaper, to be called the *Charlevoix Sentinel*, was located. One says somewhere on Clinton Street, then perhaps the corner where the North Seas Gallery is now located; another says it moved to the



The *Sentinel's* final home, on Bridge Street, 1876-1936. It directly faced today's My Grandmother's Table cafe on the Park Avenue corner.

second floor of the Keyes building, the first commercial structure in town, on what was called River Street, now Pine River Lane. That building stood atop the north embankment of the lower channel, about where the Weathervane Terrace motel's swimming pool is now.

One of the first things Willard addressed was the pesky dual identity his new home possessed. Originally called Pine River after the Odawa *Zhingwaak Ziibbing*, it had gradually been absorbing the county name that had been enjoyed long before "Charlevoix" county became official in 1869. It was thought, at the time, that there were up to five, if not more, "Pine River" settlements in Michigan, all named because of the lumber boom.

The masthead of the first *Sentinel* edition, April 24, said "Charlevoix [Pine River], Charlevoix County, Michigan," placing "Charlevoix" definitely as the prominent name, with "Pine River" in second place. That lasted through the July 3 edition. On July 10, the masthead read "Charlevoix, Charlevoix County, Michigan." Willard was going with the popular, and logical flow, but it would take another ten years before the state legislature made the village name change official in 1879.

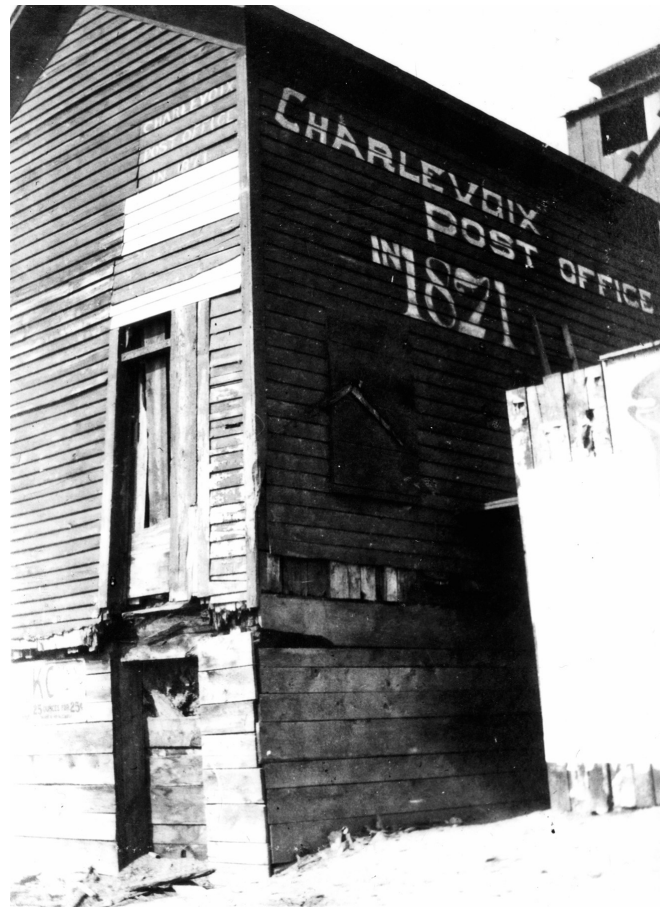
The initial arrangement with Major Green as editor and Willard Smith as publisher lasted only a short while. Green's legal career began to gain momentum. It had started from virtually nothing, so he had to supplement his income with a parttime job teaching school at four dollars a week, partially paid with flour and potatoes. As Willard gained experience and knowledge, plus having an almost preternaturally skilled way with and love for words, he took over the local news column, then the entire paper. It wasn't long before he owned the *Sentinel*, and was on his way to becoming one of the most influential voices of reason, encouragement, regional boosterism, and just plain excellent, sometimes scathing (when need be) journalism this town has ever known.

From the beginning, a strong-willed Willard A. Smith dove into reporting all the activities that would come to make Charlevoix one of the leading ports and resort destinations on the Great Lakes. He kept his eyes and ears open to everything that was not only happening here, but all over northern Michigan that would affect us. The arrival of the railroad in Petoskey in 1873 turned him into a champion of a like cause for Charlevoix. It took nineteen years to do it, but Willard was in the vanguard all the way, especially the competitive wars with neighboring towns who wanted to wrest the railroad away from us. His wrath boiled over into a white-hot fury. Once we won right of way, he excitedly reported on construction from the south over every creek, gulley, field, hill, farmstead, and gravel pit until the first engine pulled into town in late June of 1892.

During his almost half century of service as the sparkplug for growth in Charlevoix, Willard Smith also had time to be postmaster from 1871 to 1884, both city/township and county clerk, county treasurer, several times a city alderman (councilman), thirty-five-year manager of the local Western Union telegraph office, and twenty years as deputy collector of customs for the port. (It is still not known exactly what duties this local position entailed.)



A chain breaks, logs are dumped in front of the *Sentinel* office, early 1900s



An addition to the Bridge Street building to make room for an expanded post office, in Willard Smith's hands as postmaster from 1871 to 1884. Postal customers walked through the newspaper business, presses and all, to get to it.

Willard Smith was an ardent Republican, and never missed a chance to let the world know it. A story: Charles Strang, son of the assassinated dictatorial King James Strang of the onetime Mormon colony on Beaver Island, established a rival paper here in 1883, called the *Charlevoix Journal*. That was purchased by Charles Hampton, owner of the *Petoskey Record*, in 1890 after Strang decided to become a minister. Hampton, of a strong Democratic persuasion, sent his equally partisan brother Will to Charlevoix to run the paper. That was all Willard needed. The two men became archenemies, and the war of words was on. To rub salt in the wound, Will ended up buying the *Journal* and renaming his charge the *Charlevoix Democrat* in 1894. That paper was sold in 1908 and renamed the *Charlevoix Courier*, when a truce was called.

So acrimonious did the Smith/Hampton relationship become, it was reported that whenever the two men approached each other on a downtown sidewalk, one of them would step off and hasten over to the opposite side of the street so never the twain should meet. At gatherings which both had to attend, the air was said to hum with frosty tension.

Willard Smith's *Sentinel* grew to contain practically everything that happened here, including the comings and goings of many a Charlevoix citizen and resorter in an extensive local news column. His conscientious reportage of the local and area maritime scene is a priceless resource for understanding how Charlevoix rose from a humble beginning to become one of the most important ports on the Great Lakes that has seen hundreds of thousand of mariners and others arrive. Willard Smith was responsible for a lot of that success.



Republican Smith's nemesis, Democrat Will Hampton. They took verbal potshots at each other in their papers for almost two decades.

To read the *Sentinel* is to read one man's deep love affair with his adopted town, from incense at county, state, and federal lollygagging or dismissal when we needed help, to laugh-out-loud takedowns of those he considered imbeciles and wasn't hesitant to say it, to paeans of praise regarding the wonders of northern Michigan to attract those who wanted a place to settle, live, and make a difference. Which is exactly what Willard A. Smith himself did. He died December 24, 1917.



The Smith home at 208 Park Avenue, first from left. The rundown structure was bought by neighbor and resorter Sam Gilbert, who demolished it. Sam's son and future owner of 210, Julius Gilbert, donated the land years later to the Congregational Church.

A selection of quotes from the *Sentinel*, by first editor Major Green, and by or about Willard A. Smith:

Major Green: "Ill Mannered.—We have repeatedly noticed, upon the landing of passengers on the boats touching at this point, a class of ill-mannered snobbs [sic] in our streets, who, in their conversation with our citizens, and their actions during their stop here, incur the contempt of all lovers of decency. We would impress upon the minds of this class of city people that the people of Charlevoix are becoming utterly disgusted with their ungentlemanly and unladylike deportment. A few, at least, if not all, of the citizens of Charlevoix are capable of judging decency and good manners." 1869 (Sound familiar?)

Smith, on the return of students to school after the Easter recess: "Kindergarten opens again next Monday, and the little nuisances will be got rid of." 1887

Smith: "The 'big black devil' automobile, or which we spoke recently, has invaded the country roads south of here, and some of the farmers swear vengeance against the thing. It recently drove a farmer and his team, with his family in the wagon, into a cornfield. The trouble is with the pig-headed idiot who runs the machine." 1903

Smith: "William Hunger got gay [drunk] last week, chased his wife to the barn, knocked her down and kicked her under the cow. On Tuesday Justice Collins sent him to Detroit for ninety days." 1908

Smith: "That Harbor Springs Liar. There is an irresponsible, opium-eating idiot hanging around a Harbor Springs newspaper office who, when in comparatively mental lucidity, occupies his time in inventing the most chimerical fakes for city newspapers, concerning affairs in Northern Michigan. All manner of stories have been invented by this lunatic. The entire Straits region has been his field, and everything written has been the work of a brain befuddled by cocaine." (date unknown)

Smith, regarding the verbal warfare among the area newspapers that desperately wanted the railroad to come through their towns, particularly the *East Jordan Enterprise*: "A column in that paper is devoted to an obtuse but studied insult to Charlevoix, a gross misinterpretation of facts under the guise of satire and contemptuous persiflage. . . Charlevoix heeds not the idle vaporings of envious rivals, or the sneers of her inferiors, and is unvexed." He went on to call the editor, Mr. Dixon, and his East Jordan friends "asses" who wished to "crush Charlevoix." 1890 When Willard was on a tear either positive or negative, he was unstoppable, sometimes to his regret. There were times when he had to eat humble pie.

Ira Adams, an ailing Smith's son-in-law who took over in 1916 until the Great Depression killed the *Sentinel* in 1936, wrote this in Willard's obituary: "As a writer he possessed a style peculiarly his own. With a fine command of the English language, he expressed his thoughts clearly, happily, and forcibly. Willard A. Smith was first, last and all the time in thought, word, and deed a newspaper man."

Fearless, fiercely intelligent, compassionate, insightful, influential in countless ways, a force to be reckoned with, never one to suffer fools gladly, a go-getter, never taking "no" for an answer if he could help it, Willard A. Smith was a one-of-a-kind wonder in this town. It would be interesting to determine what Charlevoix would have eventually looked like had he never come here. It can truthfully be said of this man that Charlevoix is the Charlevoix the world knows now because, as a visionary eighteen-year-old, he walked here through the snow with a heavy pack on his back, took off his soaked, ragged boots, and made himself at home for the rest of his life.