

BOSS-BUSTERS & SIN HOUNDS



Kansas City and Its Star

HARRY HASKELL



UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI PRESS
COLUMBIA AND LONDON

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University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri 65201
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5 4 3 2 1 11 10 09 08 07

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Haskell, Harry.

Boss-busters and sin hounds : Kansas City and its Star /
Harry Haskell.

p. cm.

Summary: "Haskell tells the tale of the Kansas City Star's rise and decline, taking readers into the city room and executive offices of one of the most respected American newspapers. This story includes Kansas City notables such as Tom Pendergast, J. C. Nichols, Frank Walsh, William Rockhill Nelson, Henry J. Haskell and Roy A. Roberts"—Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8262-1769-1 (alk. paper)

1. Kansas City Star (Kansas City, Mo. : 1885)—History.

I. Title.

PN4899.K4S74 2007

071.781'39—dc22

2007022277

∞™ This paper meets the requirements of the
American National Standard for Permanence of Paper
for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48, 1984.

Designer: Kristie Lee

Typesetter: The Composing Room of Michigan, Inc.

Printer and binder: The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group

Typefaces: Adobe Caslon, Engravers MT, Copperplate

For my father and mother

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PREFACE



Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans in 2005 elicited outrage over the George W. Bush administration's apparent callousness and the staggering incompetence of the federal and state relief effort. Significantly, however, no hue and cry for fundamental governmental reform was raised in the wake of this largely preventable human tragedy. Yet just over a century earlier, a similarly catastrophic storm that laid waste to Galveston, Texas, sparked a coast-to-coast movement for nonpartisan commission government and helped propel the progressives' ambitious reform agenda to the forefront of the nation's consciousness.

At the time of the great Galveston hurricane, in 1900, Missouri and Kansas ranked among the most progressive states in the Union. Notwithstanding sharp differences in demographic makeup and historical experience, both were prime testing grounds for innovations ranging from the initiative and referendum and public ownership of utilities to laws regulating child and female labor and the country's first municipally funded welfare agency. Today, the Sunflower State is better known as a stronghold of Christian fundamentalism than as a laboratory for social and political experiment, while the Show Me State is linked in the public mind with such high-profile neoconservatives as former United States Attorney General John Ashcroft and Governor Matthew Blunt.

What accounts for this dramatic about-face? Where are the "insurgent" reformers of yesteryear, the intrepid idealists who stormed the citadel of officialdom and instigated a far-reaching reexamination of America's social contract? Not, to judge from recent history, in the statehouses of the once proudly progressive Midwest. Nor are many insurgencies evidently afoot in the board-

rooms of newspapers that in times past crusaded for change, held corrupt officials and malefactors of great wealth accountable to the people, and in the process crucially helped to define not just who Americans were as a nation but who we could and should be.

The pages that follow tell the story of one great newspaper and of the compelling “power of purpose” it exerted during what might be called the long Progressive Era, stretching from the birth pangs of the reform movement in the late 1800s to its death of terminal complacency in the 1950s. For the better part of those six or seven changeful decades, the *Kansas City Star* was among the most respected and influential daily newspapers in the English-speaking world. Its voice, the authentic voice of middle America, resonated far and wide, not just in Kansas City and its immediate environs but the length and breadth of the great Missouri River Valley, from sea to shining sea, and even, to a degree now almost unthinkable, far beyond American shores.

The *Star*'s story is unique and uniquely colorful, as any story must be that features such bigger-than-life personalities as William Rockhill Nelson, Teddy Roosevelt, William Allen White, Frank Walsh, Sinclair Lewis, Tom Pendergast, Harry Truman, and Roy Roberts. At the same time it is a deeply and characteristically American story, equal parts high drama and low farce, a story of rags and riches, God and Mammon, sin and redemption, vaunting ambition and cynical deceit, lofty promises and gutter politics. The parallels with recent American history—disillusionment with liberal reform, the hijacking of the GOP by the far right, the inexorably widening gap between haves and have-nots, the attack on civil liberties, the country's go-it-alone attitude toward the rest of the world—are as alarming as they are instructive.

Whether one views the news media as part of the solution or part of the problem, there is much to be learned from the faith, optimism, and resilience that informed the progressive journalism of the twentieth century. Even in this age of soundbites and blogs, podcasts and satellite TV, the free press remains as fundamental to the American way of life as free-market capitalism, religious toleration, and representative government. The romance of the gumshoe reporter, licensed to go where angels fear to tread and, as my journalist grandfather used to say, cry woe to those who are at ease in Zion, endures even as the public's confidence in the traditional news media sinks to new depths. Irreverent, irrepressible, and oftentimes irresponsible, the news media play a complex role in our democracy, acting as both mentors and monitors, cheerleaders and gadflies, detached observers of the status quo and committed catalysts for reform.

If print newspapers are an endangered species in the twenty-first century,

outmoded by the very electronic media they are belatedly trying to embrace, news junkies have never had it so good. Americans of the future are likelier to suffer from a surfeit than from a dearth of information. Yet today's ethereal Internet "communities" have little in common with the real-life bricks-and-mortar communities that newspapers, big and small, have served since time immemorial. Nor is it clear that so-called grassroots journalism, modeled on the consumer-generated content of the Wikipedia, can provide the critical judgment exercised by experienced editors trained to sift through the news of the day and help readers make sense of the world's daunting incoherence. The digital age has given us the ability to customize our daily intake of information and commentary, but the long-term social cost of screening out news that individuals consider irrelevant or distasteful remains to be reckoned.

Few, I suspect, would rush to turn back the clock to a time when it was said that "the *Star* is Kansas City and Kansas City is the *Star*." But we may yet think again. If there is a more powerful engine for community building and civic renewal than a strong local newspaper, it has yet to be invented. For news, like politics, is fundamentally local. News is not only, in Stanley Walker's memorable phrase, the "sinews of history"; it is also the tie that binds our body politic, that makes the many one, that empowers the individual even as it stirs the masses. Whatever forms newspapers may take in the future, it is hard to see how society can continue to progress without them.

PART 1



BARON BILL

CHAPTER 1



The Daily W. R. Nelson

Long before he started publishing newspapers, William Rockhill Nelson was a successful builder of roads, bridges, and houses. So it's not surprising that his conception of journalism was in the most literal sense constructive. "Anybody can print the news," he once told an interviewer, "but the *Star* tries to build things up. That is what a newspaper is for."¹

Nature fitted Nelson superbly for the part he was destined to play. With his short, bandy legs and massive torso tapering to a frosty, tousled peak, he was likened variously to a snow-capped volcano, a venerable Buddha, and an overstuffed baby pig. William Allen White described him in midlife as "a great hulking two-hundred-sixty pounder, six feet tall, smooth-shaven, with a hard, dominating mouth and a mean jaw, high brow, and wonderful eyes, jade in color, which opened with wide frank cordiality or squinted like the lightning of Job." Stand-up collars, which Nelson had permanently sewn to his linen shirts to spare himself the strain of reaching behind his back, encased his bulldog neck. His deep, rumbling voice "rattled like artillery" when he grew agitated—which, White observed, was a frequent occurrence.²

No topic brought out the editor's big guns like the manifest destiny of Kansas City and the Missouri River Valley. Nelson and other potentates of

"I am publishing the Daily W. R. Nelson. If people don't like my paper they can buy another."

—William Rockhill Nelson

the Fourth Estate took it for granted that what was good for them was good for their fellow citizens, and vice versa. An early-day *Star* editorial writer was simply stating the obvious when he commented that “the *Star*’s prosperity is so closely allied with the growth and progress of Kansas City that its principal aim is to promote the welfare of this community in all its material and municipal relations.” So closely identified were the city and its leading paper, Oswald Garrison Villard wrote, that it was virtually impossible to determine “whether the *Star* made Kansas City famous or Kansas City the *Star*, or even to try to figure out just how much each has contributed to the development of the other.”³

In journalism’s hall of fame, Nelson occupies a niche beside such legendary figures as Horace Greeley, Charles Dana, Henry Watterson, and Joseph Pulitzer. Yet he discounted his own genius, attributing the *Star*’s phenomenal success to the fact that it was published in what he called, with unabashed hyperbole, “the greatest newspaper field of its population on the globe.”⁴ As a staging point for the overland trails leading to Santa Fe, California, and Oregon, the Kansas City area had been a magnet for traders, pioneers, adventurers, and entrepreneurs since the days of Lewis and Clark. Over the thirty-five years of Nelson’s residency, from 1880 to 1915, the city’s population grew more than fivefold, making it the largest metropolis between St. Louis and San Francisco. The *Star*’s field was great indeed, extending from Missouri to Colorado and from Iowa to Texas. Kansas, where the “Daily W. R. Nelson” reigned supreme, was a breeding ground for agitators, radicals, cranks, and other troublemakers—the kind of misfits who kept things perpetually stirred up and whom Nelson, by his own account a natural insurgent, admired and emulated.

Gilded Age Kansas City was awash in money, much of it eastern capital attracted by the town’s strategic location, abundant natural resources, and wide-open business culture. William Gilpin of Independence, a charter member of the local booster club, went so far as to predict that the next great “world city” would arise somewhere in the vicinity of the Kawsmouth. “Centropolis,” as he optimistically christened his prairie utopia, was still a pipe-dream when it appeared on a map drawn in 1859, nestled between the nine-year-old City of Kansas, the county seat of Independence to the east, and the bustling hamlet of Westport to the south.⁵ Two decades later a group of developers, bankrolled by British investors, laid out a real-life Centropolis in the valley of the Blue River, hard by the brand-new factory towns of Manchester, Sheffield, and Leeds. These anglicized industrial suburbs, no less than the sooty smokestacks

standing sentinel above the Missouri River bottoms, attested the city's irrepressible urge to rise above its cow-town origins.

By the mid-1880s Kansas City was riding the crest of a giddy real estate boom that exceeded even Gilpin's wildest dreams. Properties rose exponentially in value, sometimes changing hands two or three times in a single day. Fortunes were made and squandered overnight. At the crest of the bubble, in 1887, sales of local real estate totaled a jaw-dropping \$88 million. Sharks, speculators, and "dollar swappers" with money to burn swarmed into the city. A newcomer from the East marveled to see armies of workmen "cutting down hills, filling up gorges, erecting buildings worthy of Wall Street next door to a pasture, carrying the cable lines out into forests where wild game still wandered."⁶ The upstart metropolis soon found itself vying with St. Louis and Chicago as the hub of a sprawling commercial empire. Hard-headed businessmen drew up plans for a railway from Kansas City to the Gulf of Mexico that would link America's breadbasket with the Pacific coast of South America.

The great era of city building was at hand. That it was also the golden age of American journalism was no coincidence. Newspapers and cities across the land sprang up side by side, flourishing and floundering together amid the social upheavals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rampant urbanization hastened the demise of the old-style "personal" journalism associated with the generation of Greeley and Dana, as newspapers transformed themselves from organs of proprietary opinion and political propaganda into more or less faithful mirrors of the melting-pot communities they served. The so-called New Journalism, as practiced by the likes of Pulitzer and Nelson, was predicated on the assumption that the public, given the necessary information, would naturally act in its own interests. As Nelson put it, "You can always trust the people to do what is best when they know what is best."⁷

To be sure, Nelson and Pulitzer seldom passed up an opportunity to tell readers what was best for them. That, too, was what a newspaper was for. Hard-pressed wage-earners, Nelson reasoned, had little time or energy to look after even their most vital interests. It was the "peculiar privilege, if not obligation" of the "free progressive, vigilant, vigorous newspaper" to "survey the whole field and act for the whole community." Pulitzer evinced a similarly paternalistic attitude when he glorified the humble journalist as "the lookout on the bridge of the ship of state," a far-seeing leader who "brings all classes, all professions together, and teaches them to act in concert on the basis of their common citizenship." In this light, what one admirer described as Nelson's

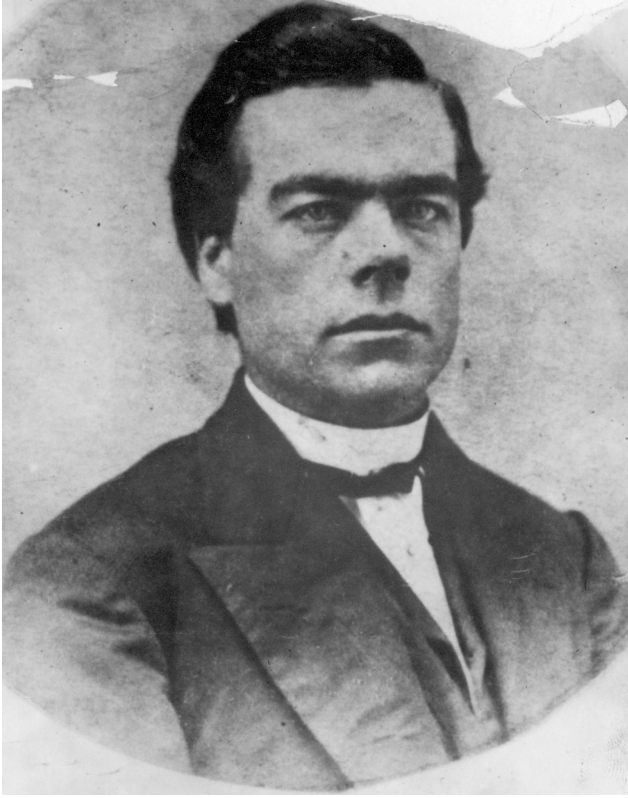
“government by newspaper” was not simply an expression of the hunger for power and prestige that had launched countless press lords on political careers. It was also an unselfish response to the intractable social and political problems brought on by the Industrial Revolution, problems that most municipalities had scarcely begun to address, much less solve.⁸

At its best, the progressive New Journalism served as a counterweight to the *laissez-faire* commercialism that threatened to turn American cities into ungovernable patchworks of special interests and privilege. At its worst, it speeded the breakdown of the polity by trying to be all things to all people, substituting a titillating smorgasbord of news and features for a genuinely communitarian vision of city life. If the new urban marketplaces were coming more and more to resemble private businesses, newspapers had never been anything else. The object of a newspaper, Charles Dudley Warner of the *Hartford Courant* pointed out in 1881, “is to make money for its owner. Whatever motive may be given for starting a newspaper, expectation of profit by it is the real one.” This home truth was hardly news to Nelson, insist as he might that “income and revenue must be an incident rather than a purpose” for a paper’s existence. Nor did it jar with Pulitzer’s dictum that the more profitable a newspaper was, the better it could “stand loss for the sake of principle and conviction.”⁹

In affirming their faith in the profit motive, the reform-minded practitioners of the New Journalism seemed to suggest that public and private interests were, if not consistently harmonious, at least fundamentally compatible. That proposition would be put to the test as American society struggled to reinvent itself in the Progressive Era.

Nelson might have been referring to himself when he declared that the *Star* was “independent but not neutral.” Iron-willed and refractory from boyhood, he remained a free spirit to his dying breath. “I never enjoyed being bossed,” he admitted in a rare moment of introspection. “It was my disposition to feel that nobody had any rights over me.”¹⁰ The University of Notre Dame, where his father had consigned the unruly youngster for disciplining, sent him packing after four semesters of studious hell-raising, and Nelson returned home determined never again to answer to authority higher than his own.

Isaac DeGroff Nelson, a man of means and influence in Fort Wayne, Indiana, welcomed his prodigal son back to the fold and secured for him a respectable position as deputy clerk in the county circuit court. Nelson settled down to read law, passed the bar, and for a time seemed content to pursue a legal career. But restlessness soon got the better of him. When his grandfa-



Nelson as an up-and-coming contractor in Indiana: the bad boy makes good.

ther and namesake, William Rockhill, gained control of twelve hundred acres of prime suburban real estate, he invited young William to help plan and construct a new subdivision known as Rockhill Additions. The experience instilled an enthusiasm for the building trade that marked Nelson for good. In later years he would say that although newspapering had been his life, he had always considered building houses to be “the greatest fun in the world.”¹¹

At an age when most of his contemporaries were apprenticing in a profession, Nelson was running his own construction firm. He already had a practical knowledge of building materials, engineering, architecture, contracting, and real estate; soon his father taught him the rudiments of agriculture and livestock breeding as well. Having profitably sat out the Civil War in Indiana, Nelson felt the itch to branch out and took to speculating in commodities. In the late 1860s, when land in the South was cheap and cotton prices were high, he and a friend bought a plantation off the coast of Georgia and a general store in Savannah. For once his luck failed him. Cotton prices plummeted, Nelson

retreated to Indiana, and his partner defaulted, saddling him with a mountain of debt. Paying it off ate up most of the fortune (variously estimated at between \$100,000 and \$200,000) that he had amassed in the construction business. Nelson shrugged this calamity off as a trifling setback. "Lack of self-confidence was never one of my failings," he remarked to a colleague. "I don't suppose I ever lost a minute's sleep over the affair. I knew I was going to win in the end."¹²

Nelson's education in both newspapers and politics began at home. Isaac Nelson, a lifelong Democrat, had owned the *Fort Wayne Sentinel* for a brief period around the time his second son was born in 1841. Upon returning to Indiana, William struck up a friendship with the local Democratic chieftain who had lately taken control of the paper. Nelson *filed* scraped together enough money to acquire a small joint interest in the *Sentinel*, and together the two men used it to boom Samuel Tilden for president in 1876. The reformist governor of New York recognized Nelson as a kindred soul and recruited him to help manage his campaign, observing that he appeared to be "the only Democrat in Indiana" who was "not a candidate for the presidency."¹³ Like Dana and Watterson, Tilden's foremost journalistic allies, Nelson was bitterly disillusioned when conservative southern Democrats "stole" the nomination for Rutherford B. Hayes. In 1880, the Democrats having failed to renominate Tilden, he bolted the party, becoming a lifelong mugwump and scourge of reactionary "Bourbonism."

In a lesser mortal, such inconstancy might have been mistaken for opportunism. Nelson, characteristically, made a virtue of his political irregularity. It freed him to make common cause, as whim and circumstance dictated, with men of all stripes and convictions, from venal party bosses to boss-busting reformers, without forsaking his progressive principles. A born pragmatist, Nelson was leery of ideologies and platforms. He reserved the right to change his mind on any issue without prior notice, the better to keep opponents off balance—and also, it sometimes seemed, employees in their places. "This is the way I feel now," he liked to taunt his editors. "To-morrow I may look at it differently, and if I do I don't know that any of you fellows need remind me of it."¹⁴ Come election time, the *Star* more often than not found itself crossing party lines or straddling fences, although the latter was not a posture that Nelson could maintain for any considerable length of time. The rebel in him coexisted with an almost adolescent propensity for hero worship. Once he made up his mind about a man, he brooked no carping or second-guesses.

In 1879 Nelson still harbored hopes of inducing Tilden to throw his hat into the presidential ring again. Political calculations may have played a part

in his decision to purchase his father's old paper that February in partnership with a veteran Fort Wayne newsman named Samuel Morss. Or perhaps, as Morss told the story, Nelson was simply "in the right mood" to take up "a different line of business" after a bridge he had built in Iowa was washed away in a storm and the owners reneged on their contract.¹⁵ Over the next eighteen months, the avowedly "independent Democratic" *Sentinel* fought the good fight for political reform, well-built roads, modern waterworks, and other municipal improvements. But the editors' exhortations fell on deaf ears. Fort Wayne, they concluded, was hopelessly hidebound and parochial. Casting about for a field worthier of their talents, they investigated such up-and-coming localities as St. Louis, Brooklyn, and Seattle before fixing their sights on Kansas City. That neither Nelson nor Morss had ever set foot in Missouri was of no account. Like thousands of other young men who heeded Greeley's call to go west, they were spurred on by a sense of manifest destiny, a starry-eyed, almost mystical faith in the future, and a very down-to-earth desire to get rich quick.

Arriving at Kansas City's new Union Depot in early August 1880, the thirty-nine-year-old Nelson was a picture of health and confidence: portly, baby-faced, clean-shaven, his hair already thinning and gray as iron. Morss, his junior by nearly a dozen years, was slight of build and, as would shortly become apparent, constitutionally far from robust. With his bushy side-whiskers and pince-nez spectacles, he looked more like a mild-mannered bank clerk than a hard-boiled newsman. The partners took rooms in the Pacific House Hotel at Fourth and Delaware, in what passed for the central business district. With the three thousand dollars realized from the sale of the *Sentinel*, they rented a second-floor office next door, rounded up a skeleton staff, and set out to canvas the town. By the time the first edition rolled off the hand-fed flatbed press a month or so later, the *Evening Star* boasted some three thousand subscribers, proof positive, the editors proclaimed, that Kansas City had "a better demand for a good cheap evening paper than any other city in the country."¹⁶

Evening newspapers were still a novelty in the 1880s and prosperous morning dailies saw no reason to take them too seriously. "Twinkle, twinkle, little Star, bright and gossipy you are," patronized the *Kansas City Times* in a saucy jingle penned by its versifying managing editor, Eugene Field. Flattered by the attention, the Hoosiers rolled up their shirtsleeves and got down to work, Morss supervising the news-gathering operation while Nelson tended the paper's business affairs. (Inability to fathom the mysteries of a balance sheet never impeded his God-given talent for making money.) Bachelors both, the

Star's proprietors put in long hours that left little time for socializing or recreation. Nelson, in particular, seemed to be suffering from something akin to culture shock. "Temperamentally he did not belong with the hell-roaring crowd that was dominant in the town," wrote Henry Haskell. "While he occasionally played poker with his fellow citizens, those associated with him noticed a certain aloofness. He did not quite know where he did belong. He was still trying to find himself."¹⁷

Nelson was content to let his partner establish the paper's "bright and gossipy" voice. He set no store by his literary ability and wrote little or nothing for publication, employing professional wordsmiths to flesh out the bare-bones ideas he was forever scribbling on scraps of paper and discarded envelopes. In the journalistic fashion of the day, only a favored few were accorded the privilege of bylines in the *Star*. Nelson, for his part, cultivated what White termed "a sort of elaborate anonymity." Long after he had become rich and famous, the editor could walk the city streets without fear of being recognized, like a monarch venturing incognito among his subjects. That was the way he liked it. If Nelson didn't fit into his new surroundings, they would have to be made to fit him. Kansas City was still young and malleable enough to be molded into the kind of community he visualized, a city built in his own expansive self-image. "I was going to live here, wasn't I?" he demanded. "Well, if I ever expected to get anywhere with my paper Kansas City had to be made into a place that somebody besides a few dollar swappers would want to live in."¹⁸

The prospect that greeted Nelson and Morss was unpromising, to say the least. "In wet weather the town-site was a sea of mud and in dry weather a desert of dust," a contemporary recalled. Hogs roamed freely through the streets, which were mostly unpaved, and rough wooden planks served as sidewalks. The gas supply was feeble and erratic; the era of electric light was still a year away. Rickety, mule-drawn streetcars provided the only public transport and the foul taste of the city water, piped all but untreated from the Kaw River, "made whiskey-drinking a virtue." Simmering beneath the thin upper crust of frontier gentility was a motley stew of "renegade Indians, demoralized soldiers, unreformed bushwhackers, and border ruffians, thieves, and thugs imported from anywhere, professional train-robbers of home growth, and all kinds of wrecks of the Civil War." Haskell characterized the city as "a community of go-getters with a houn' dawg background. The go-getter spirit kept it on its toes fighting for railroads, fighting for trade. The houn' dawg tradition left it satisfied to be stuck in the mud."¹⁹

Extricating Kansas City from the mire would have to wait. The editors' first order of business was to articulate a bold, forward-looking agenda that would

set the *Star* apart from the city's four established English-language dailies. In their maiden issue, which hit the streets on September 18, 1880, Morss and Nelson pledged to provide "a cheap afternoon newspaper, of the highest class," one that was "absolutely independent in politics, entirely disconnected from the rings and cliques of all descriptions, and wholly free to labor for the interests of the people, and to wage warfare upon corrupt and extravagant tax

eaters, of all parties.” The *Star* would be entertaining, spicy, readable, and, above all, cheap and concise, enabling “intelligent” readers to keep abreast of current events “with the minimum expenditure of time and money.” Its four tightly packed pages would digest the news of the day without forcing readers to slog through “long speeches and sermons, ponderous editorials, and prosy, tedious dissertations upon dry subjects.” In sum, the *Star* would “devote its best energies to aiding the work of building up the material and moral interests of Kansas City, and developing the great Missouri Valley, of which this is the metropolis.”

Such highfalutin promises were boilerplate, snake oil being no scarcer in journalism than in politics. But Nelson and Morss soon proved that they were sincere in their desire to promote the city’s “material and moral interests” as well as their own. The formula they had worked out in Fort Wayne would serve them well: a price of two cents an issue (the competing Kansas City dailies sold for five), political independence coupled with a commitment to popular reform, and an unswerving focus on local news (Morss’s specialty) and civic boosterism. In league with the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, which Pulitzer had picked up at a fire sale a couple of years earlier, the *Star* soon sallied forth on a crusade against government corruption, election fraud, illicit lotteries, saloon keepers, tax dodgers, and robber barons. Readers on both sides of the state welcomed the newspapers’ campaign for clean air and water, safe and well-maintained streets and bridges, and modern sanitation. In what White described as the perpetual conflict between “property and men,” Nelson and Pulitzer instinctively sided with their fellows.²⁰

Nevertheless, in billing itself as “a paper for the people,” the *Star* begged an essential question. Although Nelson prided himself on being a Jeffersonian democrat, at heart he remained an elitist, a bootstrap social climber who accepted nature’s aristocracy as a fact of life. (There is some evidence that Morss, whose origins were humbler than Nelson’s, held more plebeian views. But his influence on the paper effectively ended when he left Kansas City under mysterious circumstances about eighteen months after the *Star*’s founding.) Nelson’s journalistic model would be the high-class *Boston Transcript*, whose prestige rested on a slender base of some thirty thousand “serious-minded” subscribers. “I do not want the *Star* to be a *Transcript*,” Nelson would tell his staff in later years, “for the latter does not seek any circulation that is not of its kind, and I want all kinds, but I for sure want the *Star* to have the necessary 30,000. We can get along without the baseball extras, the wasted papers in the street cars, the Board of Trade and Stock Yards circulation but the loss of those 30,000 serious-minded readers would mean the *Star*’s finish and so

long as those readers are held, so long will the *Star* be Kansas City's leading paper."²¹

Nelson's broad-gauged appeal produced results. By 1891 the *Star* counted people of "all classes and conditions"—"Republicans, Democrats, Prohibitionists, [Farmers'] Alliance men, white men and black men, Catholics, Protestants and free thinkers, native Americans and naturalized foreigners, business men and professional men"—among its forty-four thousand subscribers. But Nelson valued respectability more than demographic diversity. Nothing illustrated the contrast between him and Pulitzer more clearly than their attitude toward circulation. While the *Post-Dispatch* and the *New York World* courted readers with ever more luridly sensational fare, Nelson steadfastly refused to move down market. In one of his more Pollyannaish precepts, no doubt polished for posterity, he admonished his employees that "the great newspaper should be the welcome visitor in every house because of its cheer. It should be a family friend and adviser, and the carrier's coming should always be eagerly looked for by every member." A more characteristic aphorism attributed to Nelson captures the authentic voice of the burly bon vivant who partook of food and drink in liberal measure: "God's great gift to man is appetite. Put nothing in the paper that will destroy it."²²

The quest for appetizing reading matter inspired one of Nelson's most successful innovations. The early *Star* could ill afford a large reporting staff or costly telegraph tolls. Searching for a substitute for hard news, Nelson hit on the not-so-new idea of reprinting feature material from other newspapers, magazines, and books. Most publishers, however, used reprint as filler; Nelson made the "exchange desk" the pride of the *Star*. "That reprint idea just fitted the picture for me, hard up as I was, and I hoped it would fit for our readers, and it did," he explained. In time, the exchange department staff would rival that of the city desk and reprint, much of it painstakingly condensed and rewritten, would account for as much as a third of the *Star's* editorial content. On a given day, readers might open their newspapers to find a serialized novel by Balzac or Thackeray, a timely background piece on a franchise dispute in Cleveland, and an essay on daily life in medieval England. Nelson, who was widely read despite his truncated education, liked to remind his editors that "Plato and Carlyle and Emerson might be just as good correspondents as the fellows who are sending the other papers reports of dog fights in San Francisco."²³ It was all part and parcel of his grand strategy of catering to the masses while cultivating the "best people."

From its inception, the *Star* was part schoolmaster and part court jester, part civic cheerleader and part crusader for good government and wholesome

living. If it spoke for no identifiable political party or school of thought, that was largely because Nelson himself subscribed to no recognized philosophy of politics, journalism, or indeed life. In his outsized passions and prejudices, he exemplified “the attitudes, tastes, and manners of the country squire of an older America.” Self-interest, fortified by Jeffersonian individualism, was the prevailing strain in his character. “A man of high ideals, honest, courageous, independent, devoted to the advancement of great causes, he was at the same time intensely selfish and ruthless in having his own way.” More altruistic in principle than in practice, Nelson extended a helping hand to the needy but resented demands on his generosity. Sympathetic to the workingman’s plight, he disdained anyone who put himself out for hire, observing that “any man worth more than \$5,000 a year” should be in business for himself.²⁴ The better world he sought was one in which virtue and industry were their own reward, and equality of opportunity translated naturally into social and economic justice. Only later in life, as experience tempered his libertarian instincts, would he come to believe that individual initiative and free-market capitalism were insufficient to safeguard the “material and moral interests” of the common people who looked to the *Star* for leadership.

In staking out its dual role as “mentor and monitor” of the boisterous, ill-mannered boomtown, the *Star* incurred a special obligation to practice what it preached.²⁵ Its pronouncements carried the more weight in that they emanated from the paper’s own manifest decorum, decency, and good taste. Like Pulitzer, Nelson understood that the acquisition of power and influence in the newspaper business was largely a numbers game. But whereas Pulitzer counted his mass readership in the hundreds of thousands, Nelson honed in on a relatively small group of movers, shakers, and taste makers. Kansas City in the late 1800s was rapidly approaching maturity. It needed what every growing city needed—population, investment, and clean, progressive government. Above all, it needed respectability. The *Star* would teach White’s “country jake” to think, look, and behave like a gentleman.

Nelson’s refusal to duck a fight was as much part of the gentleman’s code as it was of the frontiersman’s. Contrarian to the core, he acknowledged that he was “inclined to believe in raising the devil on principle.” This cantankerous streak precipitated a confrontation with the local traction monopoly soon after his arrival in Kansas City. The streetcar company’s president, an Irishman “of strong will and powerful physique,” had friends high up in the business world.²⁶ Among them were the directors of the Armour bank, the city’s leading commercial lender. Nelson offended these men at his peril; as the

Star's circulation shot up, he would soon be forced to apply to the bank for a loan to increase his press capacity. But such practical concerns didn't deter him from arguing that Kansas Citians deserved far better service and equipment than "Boss" Thomas Corrigan had seen fit to provide. In due course, a majority on the City Council came around to Nelson's view that extending the company's exclusive franchise was contrary to the public interest and opened the door to competitors.

Admirers would often cite the battle to nullify the "streetcar influence" in municipal affairs as evidence of the editor's incorruptible integrity. By Nelson's own account, his motives were less exemplary. "I have no more courage than the rest of them," he confessed to White. "But I saw those damned scoundrels putting all kinds of pressure on the mayor—from all the so-called respectable and business element—to tie the people up in a knot, and I had faith that the people would not stand it, and then," he laughed, "you know all the other papers were in the scheme, and there was too much competition in that line—so I took the chance."²⁷ The disarming disclaimer was vintage Nelson. Whatever tactical skirmish he happened to be waging at the moment, he never lost sight of his long-term objective: to set himself up as the tribune of the people and supreme arbiter of civic virtue.

The *Star's* war of attrition against the Metropolitan Street Railway would become its longest-running but by no means most successful crusade. A tally Nelson ordered toward the end of his life revealed that since 1880 the paper had published a grand total of some twenty-five hundred columns on the subject of streetcars and cable cars. Yet in 1914 voters approved a franchise concession that Nelson had fought with all the firepower in his editorial arsenal. Even sympathetic observers complained that the *Star's* relentless persecution of the Corrigan interests smacked of overkill. Ed Howe, the celebrated Atchison editor known as the "Sage of Potato Hill," speculated that Nelson's grand obsession was sparked less by public spirit than by the ill will the Met had fomented against him over the years. Charles Gleed, proprietor of the probusiness *Kansas City Journal*, charged that Nelson "made magnificent use of the street car facilities of the town to further his own schemes for land development"; when the Met management "would not or could not do what he wanted done," he let them have it. Corrigan's version of the story was that Nelson tried to blackmail him into advertising in the *Star* and declared war on the company when he refused to play along.²⁸

All of these allegations are plausible and each, as Nelson would have been the first to admit, contained a nugget of truth. His motives were seldom pure. Besides, in his words, "hitting back" was "damned human." From his youth as

a self-styled “bad boy” at Notre Dame, he had cast himself as a scrapper who thumbed his nose at authority and refused to concede defeat. It was his conceit that, in the long haul, the “Daily W. R. Nelson” never lost a fight either. *Star* reporters and editorial writers had standing orders to hammer away at the proprietor’s pet issues day after day, week after week, from every conceivable angle, until, as Nelson put it, the desired results would be attained without anyone remembering who had started the campaign. “The public doesn’t yearn to have its opinion guided and instructed,” he said. “It wants to get the news and to be entertained. Such instruction as we have to impart must be made a secondary matter. If we can sneak up behind a man when he isn’t looking and instruct him, all well and good. But if he gets the idea that our main purpose is to edify him, he runs so fast that we never can catch him.”²⁹

The policy of sneaking up on readers in preference to beating them over the heads occasionally made it necessary for Nelson to rein in some of his more prolix writers, especially on the editorial page. “I don’t want the *Star*’s editorials to be a lot of literary essays,” he insisted. “I want to get things done.” His most succinct statement of editorial practice, written a few months before his death, revealed a decidedly mixed attitude toward editorial writers as a class. “We have felt that the old fashioned sort of editorial writer who sits at his desk and does nothing but grind out opinions can be no factor in affairs, and therefore we have tried to get away from that sort of thing on the *Star*. For instance, a man is assigned to the subject of the Municipal Water Plant for Kansas City, Kansas, and he writes both the news and the editorial comment on the news. In this way he can write with real knowledge of the situation. The same way we wish our City Hall reporter to turn in editorial comment on City Hall news. As you see, the scheme does not permit us to develop professional editorial writers.”³⁰

Successful editorial writers knew their place in Nelson’s scheme of things. Haskell, who directed the *Star*’s editorial page for more than forty years, held that editorials should express the “personality” of the newspaper—meaning, of course, the personality of its autocratic proprietor—rather than promote an activist agenda. He shared Nelson’s view that the editorial page was an extension of the news columns, a forum primarily for news and ideas rather than opinions. The editorial writer “should be the ideal reporter, on the watch constantly to report new ideas of importance to the public that may not come to it in any other way.” This was closer to Nelson’s and Pulitzer’s ideal than the tub-thumping editorial pages of Greeley and Dana, which everyone agreed had seen their day. Anyway, Nelson was never quite comfortable with men on

his payroll expressing independent opinions. Still less did he approve of the editorialist's penchant for splitting hairs, deeming evenhandedness a vice. "People say there are two sides to everything," he announced at an editorial conference one day. "There's only one side and that's our side."³¹

Nelson's ambivalence toward editorial writers was counterbalanced by an extravagant regard for reporters. When a correspondent for *Collier's* interviewed him for a series on American newspapers, he took the opportunity to affirm one of the basic tenets of the New Journalism: "It's the news columns that do the business—mostly. But don't quote me," he added with a twinkle in his eye. "The boys that write our editorials wouldn't like it." In a speech to journalism students at the University of Missouri, he stopped just short of pronouncing editorial writers expendable. "We could get on pretty well without our various sorts of editors. But we should go to smash if we had no reporters," he said. The reporter was the "essential man on the newspaper." In addition to demonstrating initiative, imagination, and a "nose for news," he must be "a good citizen, in all that that term implies. He must be honest; he

must be sincere. He must be against shams and frauds. His heart must be right. Mere smartness will never give permanent success.”³²

“*Star* men”—whether reporters, editors, or editorial writers—were never allowed to forget that they were Nelson’s personal representatives and owed their allegiance to him. “My staff know exactly my ideas and they carry them out fearlessly and fully,” he bragged to a visitor in 1896. Everyone in his employ was charged with a “continuous assignment” to look after “the permanent things, both great and small, with which the *Star* is engaged.” Reporters were dispatched around the country, and sometimes overseas, to write about ideas and programs that Nelson wanted Kansas City to adopt. He was known to turn writers loose for months, or even years, to investigate subjects that had captured his fancy. One cub, assigned to write a series of articles on the social impact of the Industrial Revolution, in desperation invented a fictional old-timer and “put in his mouth a series of more or less naive reflections on how times had changed.” The nebulous project “died of inanition” after a few months, the reporter recalled, but no word of reproach ever reached his ear.³³ Impervious to failure himself, Nelson could overlook almost any shortcoming so long as his employees subscribed to the *Star*’s greater “purposes.” Since those purposes were for the most part uncommonly enlightened and progressive, most of his staff cheerfully marched to his drum, though not without frequent sniggering behind the Old Man’s back.

Much as he detested sharing the limelight, Nelson didn’t hesitate to surround himself with men who were his journalistic and intellectual superiors. Ironically, most of his top editors were dyed-in-the-wool Republicans who gagged at his adulation for Grover Cleveland and slipped heretical editorials in under his nose whenever they could get away with it. The ringleader of this mischievous conspiracy was James Runnion, a glum, sober-sided pal of Nelson’s from Notre Dame who succeeded Morss as second in command. While Nelson was abroad in 1896, Runnion took it upon himself to suggest in print that William McKinley might not be altogether unfit to hold the nation’s highest office. This backhanded endorsement nearly precipitated a breach with Nelson, who abominated the conservative Republican candidate as much as he did the radical William Jennings Bryan. But Runnion was indispensable and knew it. He had had a stellar career in Chicago as a journalist and playwright before coming to Kansas City. When Nelson incorporated the *Star* Company in 1889, he made Runnion his junior partner and paid him fifty dollars a week—higher than any other salary on the books, including Nelson’s own.

If Runnion served as a balance wheel to stabilize Nelson’s impulsive gyra-

tions, managing editor Thomas W. Johnston brought to the paper a touch of the poet. A fastidious stylist who “loved writing for its own sake and played with a news page as a sculptor plays with the chisel on his block,” Johnston was instrumental in establishing the *Star*’s literary reputation and imbuing the news columns with what White called “a certain gay cynicism.” As Nelson’s chief talent scout, he nurtured such celebrities as William Allen White and Alfred Henry Lewis, whose fame rested on the short stories they wrote for the *Star* in the early 1890s. White’s exuberantly folksy style packed a deceptive punch; Johnston said he could “conceal more dynamite in three or four innocent lines” than any writer he knew.³⁴ His articles often carried bylines, as did Lewis’s popular “Old Cattleman” tales and muckraking “Kicker” columns—a sure sign of Nelson’s favor. Yet after a few months both men developed wanderlust and quit the *Star*, Lewis to become Washington correspondent for the *Kansas City Times*, White to win celebrity on his own terms as editor of the *Emporia Gazette*.

Enterprising reporters like White and Lewis would always be the big men on the newspaper as far as Nelson was concerned. Yet for all his impatience with “professional editorial writers,” he regarded the editorial page as the heart and soul of the paper. After Runnion died in 1897, he entrusted its direction to Alexander Butts, a kindly, gregarious bachelor well known in Kansas as a newspaper paragrapher. Butts considered himself a “born exhorter” and in later years wrote weekly sermons for the paper. His gift for forming friendships at all echelons of society helped offset Nelson’s aloofness and propensity for making enemies. Another Kansas notable was Noble Lovely Prentis, whose high-flown prose graced the *Star*’s editorial page in the 1890s. The author of numerous books on travel and history, he had served in the Union army in the Civil War and was said to know something about every subject under the sun. White described Prentis and Butts as “self-made newspapermen of the old school, writers by ear rather than by note.”³⁵ Together, the three men helped make the *Star* the most influential paper in the Sunflower State from the 1890s long into the twentieth century.

Man for man, the *Star*’s staff could hold its own by comparison with any newspaper in America. Nelson liked to tell how, on a hunch, he hired a teenage immigrant named August Seested and quickly made him the paper’s business manager, a position he would hold for some four decades. Although Nelson rewarded loyalty, he didn’t believe in enticing people with fat salaries. As a rule, he paid his employees just enough to keep them from getting itchy feet, out of a sincerely held conviction that “the surest way to ruin a good newspaperman is to put some money in his pocket.”³⁶ Reporters were forever grou-

ing about their stingy wages and a few discontents, emboldened by White's example, left in search of greener pastures. Most, however, accepted Nelson's terms because of the *Star's* missionary spirit and the cherished freedom to speak their minds—as long as they didn't stray too far from the Word according to Baron Bill.

Absorbed in his own affairs, Nelson paid little attention to other newspapers and declined to measure himself against his peers. The *Star*, he said, was edited not for his fellow publishers but for the ordinary men and women who subscribed to it for a paltry dime a week. Although he prided himself on being a self-made newspaperman, it would be nearer the truth to call him a journalistic magpie who took whatever he needed from those around him. Samuel Morss unquestionably taught him a good deal during the three years they worked side by side in Fort Wayne and Kansas City. But Nelson could never bring himself to give his more experienced partner due credit. After Morss sold his interest in the business and returned to Indiana in early 1882, ostensibly because of poor health, he was all but blotted out of the *Star's* history. For decades rumors persisted that Nelson had run him out of town, even though the two men remained friends. In all likelihood, Morss had simply come to realize that Nelson was incapable of serving as anything but captain of his own ship.

One of the few pieces of practical advice that Nelson freely acknowledged originated with the editor of the *Indianapolis News*. On the eve of his departure for Kansas City, John Holliday counseled, "Until you get established, blow your own bugle. Don't be modest about telling them what a good paper you are giving them."³⁷ Never one to hide his light under a bushel, Nelson blew his horn both loud and shrill. In its early years, the *Star* experimented with self-promotion disguised as charity (free meals and circus passes for newsboys), as public service (prizes for planting trees in western Kansas), and as entertainment (contests in mystery writing and pigeon shooting). Nelson drew the line at the kind of sensational stunts and advertising gimmicks that Pulitzer and Hearst went in for. But there was no call for them anyway. By the mid-1890s the *Star* boasted more than twice the combined circulation of all the other Kansas City dailies. This claim, backed up by a panel of business and professional men chosen by Seested, was better than any promotion money could buy. More valuable than the bragging rights it earned for the *Star* was the right to raise advertising rates to a level commensurate with its market share.

If Nelson had any journalistic mentor, it was his old friend Henry Watter-

son of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. The two men had been thrown together by Tilden's ill-starred 1876 campaign, in which the Kentuckian had played a key role as adviser and strategist. A white-maned scion of the Old South, Watterson embodied the best in the southern liberal tradition. The twin pillars of his Democratic faith were free trade and reconciliation between North and South. Following his lead, Nelson embraced free trade as his lifelong cause, and it was largely to spread the gospel of tariff reform, as preached by his revered Grover Cleveland, that he launched a weekly farm edition of the *Star* in 1891. It was an inspired move, for the *Weekly Star* proved not only a steady money maker but also an effective vehicle for projecting the *Star's* power throughout the far-flung hinterland that Nelson regarded as his domain by divine right.

In Watterson's vivid phrase, Nelson was the "rural rooster" whose wake-up call generated much of the energy for progressive reform in the sparsely populated but politically consequential states of the Midwest and West. In Washington's corridors of power, however, "Marse Henry's" feisty, folksy voice resonated far more strongly than Nelson's. The son of a U.S. congressman, he was once elected in Tennessee to serve out the term of a deceased Democratic representative. In 1901 Nelson facetiously (or so one presumes) proposed Watterson as a candidate for president, lauding him in the *Star* as "a thorough patriot and as staunch and fine an American as has ever been born on the soil of the Republic." In a letter to Watterson, Nelson described himself as "a Democrat who never votes the Democratic ticket." He depended on Watterson, he wrote, "to keep my Democracy in trim," adding that "when I have been in the Democratic ranks I have followed you devotedly, looking on you as my real guide, philosopher and friend."³⁸

Like Nelson, Watterson believed that the ideal newspaper was not only honest and fearless but "amiable and unpretentious; speaking the language and wearing the habiliments of the people." His contention that the modern journalist had supplanted the novelist and dramatist as an observer of society was reflected in the *Star's* emphasis on human interest stories and serialized literature. To the resolutely forward-looking Nelson, however, Watterson's definition of a successful paper as one that provided a faithful history of yesterday was incomplete. More to his taste was Pulitzer's ringing statement of journalistic principle: "The newspaper that is true to its highest mission will concern itself with the things that *ought to happen tomorrow*, or next month, or next year, and will seek to make what ought to be come to pass. . . . The highest mission of the press is to *render public service*."³⁹

Pulitzer and Nelson shared a passion for journalistic activism and public

service. Near contemporaries, they were both self-made men who surrounded themselves with unusually able staffs and fiercely guarded their independence. Yet in other respects they were polar opposites. Nelson, warm-blooded and down to earth, is unlikely to have taken to the reclusive, highly strung German. Pulitzer's yacht was his only real home, whereas Nelson built one mainly for show. Shuttling from port to port, firing off telegrams to his editors on the *World*, Pulitzer was rarely in town when Nelson visited New York. And he never returned to Missouri after 1888, having turned his back on St. Louis five years earlier with a terse directive to the *Post-Dispatch's* editors to leave him alone and follow their own judgment.⁴⁰ Nelson, by contrast, was distinctly reluctant to delegate authority, and the thought of moving away from Kansas City seems never to have crossed his mind.

Given their differences in style and temperament, and the traditional rivalry between Kansas City and St. Louis, it's not surprising, perhaps, that Nelson and Pulitzer had little or nothing to do with each other. More puzzling is Nelson's relationship—or lack of one—with Victor Lawson, the widely admired proprietor of the *Chicago Daily News*, the paper to which the *Star* was most often compared. Like Nelson, Lawson pursued a successful career in business before taking up journalism in the 1870s. The *Daily News* was one of the original popular penny papers, independent and progressive in politics, strong on local news, saucy but "clean," and immensely profitable. Contemporary observers and historians alike routinely bracketed it with the *Star*. Lawson and his partner, Melville Stone, later general manager of the Associated Press, knew Nelson personally and thought highly of him. Yet no correspondence with the *Star's* editor survives in either man's private papers. Nor is there any evidence that Nelson consciously patterned the *Star* on the older *Daily News*.

No doubt Nelson's image as a self-starter was tailored to his psychological needs. He had always cast himself as a pioneer and rebel. Such influences as he admitted to having absorbed were largely negative rather than positive. He felt just as strongly about what he wanted his paper *not* to be as about what it should be. In his eyes, William Randolph Hearst was a byword for cheap sensationalism. "Hearst may edit all the other newspapers," he once told a group of publishers, "but he isn't going to edit the *Kansas City Star*." E. W. Scripps's genuinely progressive politics were more compatible with Nelson's than Hearst's pseudo-populism, but Scripps too was suspect on account of his chain-building methods. Although he was proprietor of the *Kansas City World* for a decade, Scripps seems to have avoided all contact with his redoubtable competitor. Late in life, he came to rue his role in ushering in the age of cor-

porate journalism. Nelson may have had Scripps and Hearst in mind when he declared that he was no mere “merchant in newspapers,” but instead had dedicated the *Star* to “advancing the interests of Kansas City.”⁴¹

If Pulitzer, Hearst, and Scripps exerted an incomparably greater influence on the newspaper profession than Nelson, it was partly because they saw their “field” as the whole United States rather than just the territory surrounding the Missouri River Valley. Moreover, the innovative journalistic methods and strategies they adopted were almost universally applicable. What Nelson accomplished, by contrast, was in many respects unique not only to Kansas City but also to the early Progressive Era. Just as the “Daily W. R. Nelson” was an extension of its proprietor, so Kansas City was, in a very real sense, the *Star* writ large. To a degree seldom approached in any other American community, Nelson’s newspaper defined Kansas City’s self-image and physical development, set the public agenda, and created a potent and enduring civic mythology.

Estimates of when the *Star* pulled out in front of the pack vary. By the early 1890s it was recognized as setting the pace in Kansas City journalism, as measured by both circulation and prestige. Patronizing references to the “Twilight Twinkler” had given way to respectful allusions to the “money making evening illuminary.” The *Star* had proved itself a match for all comers. In 1886 a group of Detroit newspapermen led by Willis Abbot, future editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*, purchased the *Kansas City News* and challenged the *Star* head to head in the evening market. Three years later, bruised and chastened, Abbot fled to Chicago, leaving his “journalistic scalp in the possession of Colonel Nelson.”⁴² Ed Howe and others went down to similarly ignominious defeats as Nelson made good on his promise to put the *Star* “beyond competition.” Within a decade of its founding the paper was returning a solid operating profit; by the turn of the century its position was well-nigh unsailable.

Charles Austin Bates, a journalism expert who visited Kansas City in 1897, rated the *Star* “one of America’s four greatest evening newspapers.” It combined, he wrote, the “fearlessness of editorial policy” that characterized the *New York Evening Post*, the “incomparable home circulation” of the *Washington Star*, and the “popular circulation and pulling power” of the *Chicago Daily News*. Everyone Bates interviewed agreed that Nelson’s paper was a gilt-edged advertising medium. A few merchants considered the *Star*’s rates—higher than those charged by some of the Chicago dailies—extortionate and mounted a feeble boycott. But Nelson laughed them off, bragging that he had

been known to “throw out several columns of advertising to make room for reading matter” without giving it a second thought. Business manager Gus Seested had had the foresight not to put too many eggs in the real estate basket in the booming 1880s, as other papers did. Instead, he convinced the managers of the new department stores to sign long-term, self-renewing contracts that obligated them to purchase space in the paper every day. This policy, it would be said, carried the *Star* through the financial storms of the eighties and nineties. By maximizing ad revenue and skimping on salaries, Nelson earned the wherewithal to spend liberally on news. In 1896, Bates reported, the *Star* wired more copy from the Chicago Democratic convention than any other paper in the United States.⁴³

With Seested peering over his shoulder, Nelson devised an unbeatable business strategy compounded of prudence and daring. From the outset, he borrowed heavily and plowed most of his earnings back into the newspaper. He responded to competition by plunging deeper into debt, confident that by improving the efficiency of the operation and the quality of the product he would ultimately come out ahead. As other papers rose and fell by the wayside, the *Star* marched from strength to strength, occupying quarters of ever-increasing grandeur and pretension. In 1889 Nelson erected an ornate neo-classical building at Eighth and Wyandotte, said to be the first in the country designed specifically for a newspaper, at a reported cost of \$125,000. Five years later the *Star* moved into a still more ostentatious Beaux Arts-style office at the northeast corner of Eleventh and Grand, a prime location across from Bullene’s swank department store, thereby ensuring that the “best people” could admire Nelson’s new presses through the street-level plate-glass windows. The editor installed himself and Seested in regally appointed offices on the upper floor. The new *Star* building was meant to impress, and impress it did, both inside and out. Howe likened the calm, cloistered atmosphere to that of a bank:

When a man walks into the office of the *Kansas City Star*, a boy in uniform walks up to him, and asks whom he wants to see. If the visitor gives a name, the boy takes a book from his pocket, glances into it, and, in a dignified manner, tells the person at what hour the person in question can be seen. A boy ushers the visitor into the presence of the person asked for, and waits for the conversation to close, when the boy shows him directly out of the building. If the oldest subscriber should go into the *Star* office to loaf, and “josh” with the editor, he would freeze to death before he got out of the building. The *Star* office is a place to do busi-

ness. The employes [*sic*] are paid to work, and there is no sign of idle talk. This is business as it should be. Many a business house could learn a valuable lesson from the *Star*.⁴⁴

Those who assumed that Seested was the financial wizard behind the *Star*'s phenomenal success were only partly right. It's true that Nelson knew little about accounting, and cared less. But he had Midas's touch when it came to turning goodwill into gold. All the same, his fellow businessmen never seemed to know quite where they stood with Nelson. They were torn between regarding him as one of their own and as a menace to their inalienable right to the unfettered pursuit of wealth. Get-rich-quick types who had come to Kansas City to make their fortunes and push on to the next venture instinctively mistrusted a stay-at-home maverick who let money flow through his fingers and equated his own interests with those of the community. To them, Haskell wrote, Nelson seemed "the incarnation of an alien outlook on life."⁴⁵

One prominent skeptic was Kersey Coates, a respected merchant and city

father who, in the late 1860s, had built a mansard-roofed Opera House at Tenth and Broadway, across from the Coates House hotel. The second-floor auditorium was said to boast the largest stage west of the Mississippi. By the early eighties, however, the stately wood-and-brick structure had deteriorated into a firetrap. The *Star*, eager to establish its crusading credentials, demanded that the Opera House be upgraded as an urgent matter of public safety. Assuming he was being set up for blackmail, Coates sat back and waited for the customary demand for advertising. Instead, the *Star* ramped up its criticism. At length, or so the story goes, Coates understood what manner of man he was dealing with. He apologized to Nelson in person, spent forty-five thousand dollars fixing the theater up, and even stood surety on a loan that Nelson obtained from the Armour bank to purchase a new press.

Running an independent newspaper, Nelson was learning, required not only honesty and courage but also diplomacy and willingness to compromise. As the proprietor of a growing business, he couldn't afford to get on the wrong side of too many people in town, particularly the "best people" on whose good opinion the *Star's* prestige and prosperity depended. At same time, he couldn't afford to ignore legitimate news, even if it meant stepping on sensitive toes. In later years, he liked to tell the story of a brawl on a downtown street corner involving a jilted husband and a prominent merchant with whom his wife was having an affair. The businessman sent his lawyer to the *Star* to offer a thousand dollars in advertising for keeping the incident out of the paper. Nelson swallowed hard and showed the emissary the door. "That thousand dollars looked mighty big to me," he admitted. "But of course I knew that a newspaper that suppresses news commits suicide. So I told him I would like the contract, but we were going to print the story, and he hinted I was an unpractical person and went away."⁴⁶

Anecdotes of a similar nature, some almost surely apocryphal or freely embellished, proliferated over the years. Though Nelson never courted publicity, he relished the idolatry that his reputation for fearlessness inspired in his awestruck underlings. It pleased him to be seen as a rugged iconoclast, an outsider who didn't quite fit in, even as he maneuvered himself into position as a consummate insider. Like most of Nelson's performances, it was a brilliant improvisation, for he enjoyed being an enigma to others almost as much as he detested examining his own motives. "It was awful," White commiserated. "To be a gentleman; to be a mugwump; to refuse honest money for a peccadillo about professional ethics; to devote more space to Henry James than to Jesse in Jesse's home town, and still to be a big, laughing, fat, good-natured, rol-

licking, haw-hawing person, who loved a drink, a steak, a story, and a fight—strong men shuddered and turned away from the spectacle. They couldn't be sure whether he was crazy or they were!"⁴⁷

The ideal editor, Nelson theorized, "should own no property, he should have no wife, no child; he should have no home, preferably living in a hotel; he should possess nothing except his newspaper; he should not mingle with people and should make no friends; have absolutely no financial or social interest in his community."⁴⁸ Nelson himself was too practical, or perhaps too self-indulgent, to observe such a monastic regimen. On the road to affluence and power, he violated his idealistic precepts in every particular.

The injunction against marriage was the first to go. A year or so after arriving in Kansas City, Nelson fell in love, apparently for the first time in his life, with the daughter of a well-to-do physician from Champaign, Illinois. Ida Houston was plain, placid, dull, and rich. No one was so tactless as to suggest that Nelson married her for her money, but her sizable dowry—rumored to be as much as fifty thousand dollars—undoubtedly helped keep the *Star* afloat in the early years when it was still subsisting hand to mouth. After the birth of their daughter, Laura, in 1883, the couple began climbing the social ladder, moving from a modest rooming house on the fringe of Quality Hill into the homey but somewhat frowsy Coates House. (Kersey Coates, Nelson affectionately observed, could do anything better than anybody else except run a hotel.) Gingerly emerging from his shell, Nelson joined the downtown Kansas City Club and, a few years later, the suburban Country Club. Although William Allen White praised Nelson as one of the few publishers he had ever known "who did not yield to the lure of the country club," Nelson felt he had earned the right to sit at the high table with the social elite.⁴⁹

Unlike most of his peers, Nelson wasn't a man of property—yet. It was probably lack of liquid capital rather than caution that had dampened his enthusiasm for Kansas City's real estate spree of the mid-1880s. Old-timers recalled that whenever he showed signs of succumbing to the temptation, Seested restrained him by threatening to quit. But the builder in Nelson wouldn't lie still; he hankered after a piece of the action, however small. Soon he found what he was looking for—a dilapidated farmstead on ten gently rolling acres overlooking Brush Creek, a couple of miles south of the city limits. The acquisition of this isolated parcel in 1886 made Nelson both the butt of jokes and a figure of controversy. After he induced the water company to extend a pipeline to his new property, paying a premium for the service, crit-

ics accused him of abusing the power of his newspaper. Nonsense, the editor shot back. No one had any right to criticize him for spending in Kansas City the money he had earned there.

How much money the *Star* was making by the early 1890s was anybody's guess. Enough, evidently, to pay for trips abroad, expensive private schools for Laura, and a country house that Nelson's opponents would one day deride as a "baronial castle." Oak Hall, like the *Star*, was a long-range project. Over the

years, in the course of numerous remodelings, it came to epitomize the editor's ideal of a residence for the best class, combining European-flavored design with indigenous materials such as limestone and pine. (The quarter-sawn oak paneling and timbers that gave the house its name were an afterthought, acquired from friends in Indiana.) Nelson himself apparently drew up the plans and hired a succession of "name" architects to, as he put it, keep him from "going wrong." Monumentally self-assured in every other aspect of his life, he evinced the timid conservatism of a parvenu in matters of taste. "I never would build a house unless I had authority for it at least a century old," he explained. "You never can tell whether some new style is good. But if a house has stood a century and still is good, you can be pretty sure of it."⁵⁰

In late middle age, Nelson was enjoying the creature comforts of the landed gentry to the hilt. "I admit that I am fond of the good things of life and that I propose to provide them for myself and my family to the extent that my income justifies," he declared in an open letter to his critics in the *Star*. People usually addressed him to his face as Colonel Nelson, the honorific title attesting both his social prominence and his undoubted skill as a campaign strategist. (Nelson had never served in the military, White explained, he just "looked coloneliferous.") The development of Oak Hall gave rise to a less flattering sobriquet: the "Baron of Brush Creek." Ensconced in his estate, with its parklike grounds and array of outbuildings, the editor was a sitting target for satirists who accused him of aping Old World customs. Brann, the self-styled Texas "iconoclast," wrote that "all of his servants are English and wear side-wheel whiskers; he docks the tails of his horses to make them resemble English cobs; he turns up his twousahs—paid for by the widow and waterworks—whenever it's raining in Lunnon."⁵¹ Brann's information was faulty—Ida Houston was not a widow and the money Nelson borrowed from the water company in 1882 had long since been repaid with interest—but his irreverent jab nonetheless hit home.

In due course, Baron Bill's real estate interests and social aspirations threw him together with the dean of the local architectural fraternity. Henry Van Brunt, a blue-blooded Bostonian with a weak chin, droopy mustache, and a general "air of impatient arrogance," came to Kansas City in 1887 to design stations for the Union Pacific railroad.⁵² His impressive portfolio of commissions for Harvard and the Brahmins of Beacon Hill inspired Nelson to think big. The two men moved in the same moneyed circles and had similarly eclectic tastes, which in Van Brunt's case ranged from Gothic Revival to Queen Anne classicism. Hired to design the *Star's* new headquarters in 1894, the architect produced an Italianate Renaissance-style *palazzo* crowned by a balus-

traded loggia. (Haskell, who went to work there in 1898, discerned elements of Lorenzo the Magnificent in Nelson's complex personality.) A couple of years earlier, Van Brunt's firm had received the coveted commission for the Electricity Building at the Chicago World's Fair. In an influential essay entitled "The Columbian Exposition and Modern Civilization," he extolled the Beaux Arts style as the answer to the hopes and aspirations of up-and-coming communities like Kansas City.

The Exposition will furnish to our people an object lesson of a magnitude, scope, and significance such as has not been seen elsewhere. They will for the first time be made conscious of the duties, as yet unfulfilled, which they themselves owe to the civilization of the century. They will learn from the lessons of this wonderful pageant that they have not as yet taken their proper place in the world; that there is something far better worth doing than the mere acquiring and spending of wealth; that the works of their hands, their products, their manufactures, are not necessarily the best in the world; that their finer arts are in nearly every respect deficient in finish and in aim . . . Such a realization by such a people will bear fruit, not in the apathy of mortification and defeat, but in that condition of noble discontent which carries with it its own speedy correction. . . . The low routines of life will be broken by a spirit of reform. New shoots will be grafted on the homely but vigorous stock; and the fruitage should have a larger and more vigorous growth, if there is any virtue left in that native force of character which is making a family of commonwealths in the wild prairies of the West.⁵³

Van Brunt's flowery prose might have sent the *Star's* copyeditors reaching for their pruning shears. The sentiment behind it, however, was music to Nelson's ears. Van Brunt's exalted vision of the White City, with its "uniform and ceremonious style," at once emblematic of civic reform and spiritual renewal, neatly dovetailed with the editor's private interests—interests which were, as always, inseparable from his public agenda.⁵⁴ The impetus behind the Chicago fair furnished the vital spark for Nelson's greatest and most enduring campaign: a sprawling system of parks and boulevards that would once and for all transform the mud-bathed frontier metropolis into a world city.

