

POINTS ON COLLECTING DELINQUENT SUBSCRIPTIONS.

By Lyman Naugle, Wellington Volce.

THE latest compilation places the number of newspapers in Kansas at 698, and out of this entire number there is not one which does not proclaim to the world that it is anywhere from 25c. to \$2 per year—always in advance! We sometimes wonder if this is not the fundamental reason that the general public have changed the lamented Dana's much emphasized term, "If you see it in *The Sun*, you know it is so," to read "If you see it in *The Sun*, you wonder if it is so." I cheerfully admit that there are few Kansas publishers who object to any subscriber, be he ever so humble or pretentious, so poor or so rich, paying in advance, but that they do not all do so is one of the misfortunes that perplexes all the avocations of life.

Gladstone, the great commoner, once replied to a peer in Parliament who was violating veracity, "I will not say that the gentleman falsifies the facts, but I will say that he speaks a good deal as I would speak if I were endeavoring to commit a falsehood." I will not exercise so much dignity with the publisher who says he always gets the cash for his great moral sheet before he enters a subscriber on his list. Show me a man who avers this, and I will show you a man who is somewhat of a liar. A gentleman remarked upon the title of this paper that the best way to collect a delinquent subscription was to get the money before it became delinquent, but, since this practice is not now in vogue, and is not likely to become so until the great dragon is chained, some thoughts along the line of collecting from this omnipresent individual may be of service to the craft now and for the next 1,000 years.

A more or less checkered experience of upwards of 20 years as a blundering promoter of cross-roads journalistic enterprises in four different States has brought the writer in contact with a few "don'ts":

1. Don't dun your subscribers through your paper. It is an infringement upon the rights of your cash subscribers, and avails nothing with the delinquent.
2. Don't advertise to take cordwood or turnips in exchange for subscriptions. It begets the idea that your circulation is waning and you are willing to take pay in "chips and whetstones," if only you can promote your circulation in that way. If you want to make deals of this sort, make them on the side.
3. Don't offer premiums for cash subscribers. That practice was a good one in the 70's, but it is worn out. It is no longer an inducement. People take papers for their worth now, and, if yours lacks this essential quality, your circulation will be limited, and your diet that of cordwood and turnips.
- Don't accept clubbing propositions with metropolitan newspapers and periodicals, except as they will serve your own advantage. Make up a clubbing list of leading publications, adding always to your subscription price the clubbing rate of the foreign publication, with enough to pay exchange.
5. Don't send anything but the rankest delinquents to a collection agency, and those only as a last resort.
6. Don't fail to stop a subscriber's paper at the expiration of the time paid for, if he so orders it when he subscribes, but always drop him a card and solicit his renewal.
7. Don't discontinue a subscriber's paper who does not give you such an order—provided always that he is reliable.

With this basis to begin on, I will relate to you briefly my experience of the past year:

Until last year, I never made a systematic effort to collect delinquent subscriptions. The year previous, I had sent a number of foreign subscription accounts to the Publishers' Collection Agency, but I found that this plan proved far from giving satisfaction. It brought in some money, but always made an enemy of the subscriber, and caused his patronage to cease. The collection agency system may be all right for general publications, where the subscriber is not supposed to be in so close a relationship, but for the country paper it is not practicable.

My paper was established in 1890, and through the unfortunate years which have since passed I had numbers of patrons whom I had carried two, three, four and five years. When Sumner county turned out a wheat crop last fall which equalled one-tenth of the entire product of the State—5,000,000 bushels—which sold at a price that brought something like \$3,000,000 for the crop alone, it occurred to me that my day of salvation was at hand. So I began my campaign.

I first drew off a list of all those who were in debt to me more than \$1, checking them carefully to see that there were no errors. I then had printed a circular letter, worded in conservative yet urgent language. I also had printed an equal number of blank notes. I filled out the note in every detail except the length of time and the signature. The notes were to draw 10 per cent. interest if not paid when due. I enclosed one with each circular letter, and also enclosed a ready-addressed envelope with a 2c. stamp on it. I requested the subscriber to send the cash in return, if possible; if not, please fix in his mind how soon he could pay, then fill in the length of time and sign the note, enclose in the envelope and return. My idea was to leave absolutely nothing for the subscriber to do—to remove every obstacle in the way of getting a reply from him.

From a list of 700 delinquents I heard from about half of them, one-half of these sending cash and the other half sending notes due in from thirty days to one year—most of them short time. I then waited about three months and sent a second letter, a little more emphatic than the first, again enclosing a note and stamped envelope as before. This brought, if anything, a little larger proportion of cash than the first, and a similar number of notes. As fast as the notes came due I notified the parties, and I found that they felt more obligated to pay the notes than an open account. Many came in and paid their notes before they were due. Another advantage of the note was that it was an acknowledgment of the account, which is quite important.

The net result of the effort was that out of about \$1,500 out I collected a little more than \$1,000, and have nearly all the balance in notes. There were a few who were constitutionally opposed to signing notes, as well as a few (though very few) who were constitutionally opposed to paying at all, and there were a few who had gone to parts unknown, and the postmaster had neglected to give us the proper notice.

Taken altogether, as an experiment it was eminently satisfactory. It left a good feeling with my patrons, and cleared the list of all doubts and misgivings. It also convinced me that not one man in a hundred will evade payment if the matter is properly pressed. It was to me a renewal of my faith in humanity.