



Pressing West

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A Page In History



WRITTEN BY

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Time passed slowly for Gabe as he worked odd jobs, longing for the chance to get back to the Roubidoux House. When he did, he was amazed at what he saw. The wooden press was stage center, the star of the show. To the right of the press stood a cabinet filled with type cases. Each type case had a number of small compartments, one for each letter of the alphabet, capitals and small letters.

Robert stood near the type case placing lead type onto a composing stick. With his right hand he selected a piece of type from its compartment in the cabinet. Then he placed it onto the composing stick.

“The lad has to memorize where each piece of type is in the cabinet,” Charless said. “Robert’s doing well, but he’s having trouble with his p’s and q’s. With the type set backward and upside down, it’s a common error.

“Setting type is a tedious, complicated job. Once the composing stick is full, it’s transferred over here, into a tray called a galley. A whole page filled with type can be heavy.”

Gabe pointed to what looked like a brown, leather

ball with a handle sticking out of it, asking Charless about it.

Robert jumped in. “That’s an ink ball. We’ll use it to ink the type.” He knew something about printing, having spent time in his stepfather’s other printing office.

“Back in Ireland, I learned about printing as an apprentice,” Charless said. “That’s the best way, but it’s a seven-year commitment, with a meager wage, if any. It’s my hope Robert here will follow in my footsteps, so I’m teaching him all I can. You’re showing an interest too, Gabe. Maybe there’s ink in your blood as well. I could use another assistant.”

A printer-editor — a newspaper man! Gabe’s mind buzzed, but he couldn’t let on that he was interested. Things at home had taken a turn for the worse.

Josephine’s older sister, Margaret, who lived across the river in Kaskaskia, Illinois, had been injured when a sow knocked her down and pinned her against a fence. Margaret’s young daughter saw it all. She grabbed a pitchfork and drove the sow away. Margaret was able to drag herself to safety, but the accident left her bedfast with a broken leg.

Margaret wasn’t a stranger to hard times. She’d single-handedly raised her daughter, who was now 7. When the girl was still in diapers, Margaret’s husband walked off the family farm and hadn’t been heard from since. Margaret was plucky and did the best she could. To make ends meet, she sold eggs, vegetables and milk.

Josephine was overcome with worry when she got the news. How was her sis-

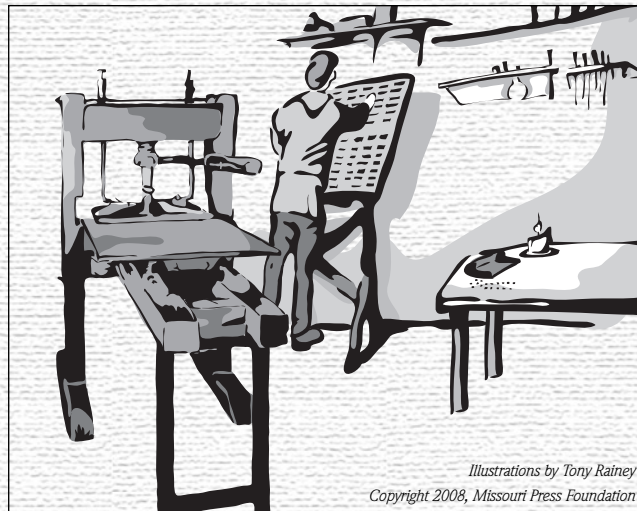
ter going to manage, take care of herself, her daughter and the farm too.

“You know what you’ve got to do,” Andre said. “Fussing isn’t going to do any good, Josephine. Make arrangements to stay with Margaret. You’ve put a few coins aside from the washing you’ve been taking in. Pack a bag for you and Anne. Gabe and I can see to the twins and get a garden in. I’m feeling better. There’s a light at the end of the tunnel.”

For his dad there might be light, but Gabe felt stuck in a tunnel closed in at both ends. Fate had put any designs he had for a future at the *Gazette* on hold.

LEARN MORE

- In the type cases, the capital letters were stored in the upper case and the small letters were stored in the lower case. This is where the newspaper terms we use today “upper case” and “lower case” come from. The story also talks about confusing “p’s” and “q’s.” Research and see if you can find another saying we use today that comes from this.
- Research the evolution of printing. Create a timeline from early Chinese printing to 2008, noting major advancements.



Illustrations by Tony Rainey
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