

Oregon-Style Journalism

By William G. Robbins

The 1850s and 1860s were tumultuous decades for Oregon politics, with rival newspapers indulging in unrestrained attacks on their competitors and opponents. The most notorious practitioners of what became known as Oregon-style journalism were Asahel Bush of the *Salem Statesman*, Thomas Jefferson Dryer of the *Portland Oregonian*, and William Lysander Adams of the *Oregon Argus* (Oregon City). Bush, the “Ass of Hell” to his enemies, served the interests of the Democratic Party; Dryer spoke for the Whig/Republican Party; and Adams spoke for the fading Whigs.

In the midst of their incessant and noisome editorial invective, the three newspapers battled over many issues, including the location of the territorial and state capitals, political appointments, statehood, and slavery. In an age without libel laws and few restraints on journalist haranguing, Oregon newspapers indulged in a series of “take no prisoners” colloquies, with Bush indicting Dryer for engaging in “the grossest personal abuse, the most foul mouthed slander, grovelling, scurrility, falsehood and ribald blackguardism.” Such exchanges moderated in the 1870s with the adoption of a libel law and the formation of a state press association with a professional code of ethics.

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