Twenty-one and All Is Well: Arthur Capper in Topeka, 1886

by Homer E. Socolofsky

ARTHUR CAPPER, the publisher of the Topeka Daily Capital and other journals, served as governor of Kansas from 1915 to 1919. Then he had an unprecedented five terms, for a Kansan, as a United States Senator, 1919-49. His major Kansas memorials are a marker at his birthplace in Garnett and a school, his statue in the Capitol rotunda, and the Capper Foundation for Crippled Children, all located in Topeka.

Capper was twenty-one years old on July 14, 1886. He acknowledged his birthday in his diary, "but was too busy to celebrate." There were no clear-cut rites of passage to adulthood in Victorian America. Capper had left his family home in Garnett two years earlier and was earning his own way with greater income than he needed to satisfy his simple wants. Success came quickly to him. He showed a devotion to hard work, a desire for excellence, and the characteristics of humility that can be traced back to his Quaker upbringing. In some respects, however, in the year that he reached his legal majority, he was decidedly different from the way he was in his formative years.

Capper arrived in Topeka in mid-June 1884 several weeks after graduating from Garnett High School. Hoping to find work as a printer, he directed his attention to newspaper firms in the Kansas River Valley, and he landed a job with the Topeka Daily Capital, a paper with an average circulation of between three and four thousand. A career in the newspaper field had long been Capper's goal.

Herbert and Isabella McGrew Capper encouraged Arthur, the eldest of their five children. The Cappers had developed a strong, home-centered family. Herbert had become one of Garnett's leading citizens, first as a tinner, later as the owner of a hardware store. He held a position on Garnett's city council in earlier years. During some periods in Arthur's youth Herbert Capper was ill, possibly from the lead


2. The Herbert Caps first child, Mary, died in infancy, so Arthur was always treated as the eldest.

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After Capper had been in Topeka about four months he took shorthand notes of a speech made by an ardent supporter of prohibition and wrote a story for the Capital. Maj. J. K. Hudson, the editor, was impressed by the piece and encouraged Capper to leave his printing job and become a reporter. Pay as a cub reporter was far less than that received by a printer, but prospects were much better. So Capper changed jobs. Early in 1885 he was made telegraph editor with the responsibility for organizing and editing news from outside Topeka. On June 9, because Hudson saw in him "genuine newspaper ability," he became city editor. He then directed the work of two other reporters. Their routine news gathering beat included city and county courts, other governmental offices, the statehouse, hotels, a drugstore, and sessions of the legislature. As an added bonus Capper began supplying stories to other Kansas dailies and weeklies and to some out-of-state newspapers. His income by late 1885 was


3. American Young Folks, Topeka, July and December, 1878. Herbert Capper also had letters published in newspapers. See Garnett Plaindealer, September 16, 1870, for a long, detailed story about the new town of Longton, and the Kansas Farmer, Lawrence, November 15, 1872, for a description of his orchard killed by rabbits.

4. Several members of Isabella's family had attended college and had careers in the professions.
above that of printers with his experience. Moreover, the arrival of the Linotype in the next few years would alter greatly the trade of printer and the demands for the skills of the compositor.

The best contemporary, personal account of Capper’s activities for the year 1886 is found in a small red leather-bound diary, two and seven-eighths by five inches in size. The entries are in Capper’s handwriting, some in brown ink, some in blue, and others in pencil. The first brief entry was made on January 10, 1886. Almost a hundred dates through December 10 contain a partial sentence or as much as three sentences. In addition, Capper recorded financial transactions for most of 1886 and the first half of 1887. For about twenty of these entries Capper used Pitman shorthand. This diary, used in conjunction with other contemporary materials found in Topeka, provides a more complete description of the life of Arthur Capper when he was twenty-one than is available for most of the young men of his era.  

About three-fourths of the diary entries were made in four months—July through October. Apparently the diary was misplaced for long periods; there are no entries, for instance, from May 21 to July 2. But brief accounts show that Capper had a busy schedule. The Capital published every morning except Monday, and reporters such as Capper worked a six-day, sixty-hour week. With no Monday paper the bulk of their social activity was concentrated on Sunday, a fact confirmed by the diary.

Capper visited Garnett at least four times in 1886. The first trip came even before he began his diary, when he was with the home folks during the Christmas-New Year’s holidays and attended a high school alumni meeting. He went to Garnett again on April 2, according to the Capital, “to spend a few days with his folks, who will shortly remove to California.” When he returned to another alumni meeting on May 20 and “Made [the] address of welcome,” his parents were living in Lawrence. They had been unhappy with their move to California, so they quickly came back to Kansas, settling in

Kansas, 1971). Frank McGrath of the Capper Foundation permitted removal of the diary with eventual deposit at the Kansas State Historical Society. Intrigued by the shorthand entries, I was told very quickly that they were not Gregg. Almost fifty years after she had learned Pitman shorthand in 1911, Mrs. Julia K. Smith of Manhattan translated the shorthand passages for me, but when I was writing Arthur Capper I felt I could not use everything. Thus on page 25 I generalized in one sentence. “His diary contains cryptic shorthand notes showing his acquaintance with the seamy side of life in Topeka.”

8. Topeka Daily Capital, April 3, 1886.
Lawrence where Arthur helped them find a house. His fourth trip to Garnett that year was of longer duration, lasting from August 16 to his return to Topeka on August 29. There were stops in Lawrence both coming and going; the Anderson County friends with whom he spent the most time were Phil and Fred Hicks, who lived on a farm outside Garnett. General socializing is shown in Capper’s diary, but he also helped “make hay” for two days and was with a threshing crew another two days. Other activities included travel “to the western part of [the] county” and a trip “to town in the afternoon,” along with swimming, hunting, and attending the fair. One evening he “went to the opera house with N. P.,” and for the last few days he “Went down to Fort Scott,” Mapleton, and Blue Mound, before returning to his job with the Capital.

Obviously, Capper did not record each of the times he wrote to his parents or other members of his family, or when he had seen them. His folks were mentioned on May 20 when he went through Lawrence, but there was no visit noted when he was back in Lawrence for a convention on July 5, or on October 31 when he visited Sam Lindsay, or when he attended a wedding there on November 11, or at the time of the dedication of a new building at the University of Kansas on November 16. He received pictures of sisters Bessie and Edith on July 26, and he “Sent Edith a book” on July 6 and for brother Bennie a “picture of reporters” on October 11. Capper’s diary contains nothing on Mary May, the sister closest to him in age. He mentions receiving letters from home on July 16 and August 9, and it seems likely that messages passed back and forth once or twice a month. On September 4 he “Sent slippers to mother for [her] birthday gift,” and two days later he wrote, “This is mother’s birthday—she was 45.” Late in November he wrote “Shipped groceries to the amount of $15 to father.”10 These came from John P. Cole, wholesale and retail grocer, at a cost of $15.14. Freight for sending them to Lawrence was $2.25. There was no explanation. No doubt Capper’s father refused financial assistance but was willing to accept other help because he no longer had a regular income. Another family connection was reported on October 28, when Capper “Went over to [the] depot to meet Uncle Abner” McGrew. Capper’s uncle did not arrive until the next day, so he “met him at [the] hotel and showed him over the city.”11

Six times in his diary Capper mentions Jen or J. S., but there are no clues to her identity nor where she lived. On July 23 he “Received a [32-page letter from Jen] to which he responded on August 8. He wrote her again on August 29 and on September 10 he “Sent Ware’s poems to J. S.” A cost of $1.50 was shown. On October 24 he wrote her another letter. The final entry came on March 1, 1887, when Capper was recording only financial data, so it was shown as “Book for Jen $3.”12

Arthur Capper recorded much social activity in the year he became twenty-one. He took dinner with friends from Garnett days and with new acquaintances in Topeka.13 He recorded attendance in church or Sunday school eight times, in addition to going to a sacrificial concert. In shorthand he listed a “Miss Risener” as one of his companions in going to church, and on another occasion he “Took Mrs. Ableno home from church.” After attending a “temperance concert in the [Music] Hall,” he “Took Miss Johnson and Miss Sperry home,” again recorded in shorthand.

9. Capper diary, May 20, 1886. It was here in the house at 1228 Ohio Street that Benjamin, Arthur’s only brother, died of typhoid fever late in the summer of 1887. See Lawrence Daily Journal, August 30, 1887, and Garnett Journal, September 3, 1887.

10. Capper diary, November 29, 1886.

11. Abner G. McGrew, one of Isabella Capper’s brothers, had lived on a claim in Linn County for a few years. He attended Rush Medical College in Chicago and became a surgeon for the Chicago and Northwestern Railway Company. See William Ansel Mitchell, Linn County, Kansas: A History (N.p.: 1978), 333-54.


13. Capper’s dinner hosts included Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Longshore, his landlords; Oscar Swayne, his predecessor as city editor of the Capital; Maj. J. K. Hudson, publisher of the Capital; and Dr. W. S. Lindsay, former Garnett resident and prominent physician in Topeka. Sam Radges, Directory of the City of Topeka for 1887-8 (Topeka: Topeka Lithographing Co., n.d.). Capper took his meals at the Windsor Hotel early in the year, later at a boarding-house.
In November he attended two weddings involving friends. Twice Sam Lindsay, then living in Lawrence, came to visit. Capper also "went out riding with Dick Colver." Journeys to College Hill were taken with Dick Thomas and with Ben Curtis. With unnamed companions he went "to Turner garden in evening—at Garfield park in afternoon." During the hot summer days of July and August he visited Turner Garden and Garfield Park at least five times, and on two occasions he "went swimming in the river." That fall P. T. Barnum's circus came to town and Capper attended the afternoon performance on September 27. He also went to at least one press club meeting and to the club's show, "Money," given on February 17. Late in the year Capper became a member of the Young Men's Christian Association. Dues were $5, and he paid an additional fee of $2 for use of the gymnasium. Capper also joined the Knights of Labor on October 3. The Knights as a national labor union had its biggest year in 1886, but it was never strong in Kansas.

Capper's wages as 1886 began were $15 per week.

H. Sam Lindsay was a longtime acquaintance from Garnett; it is not known if he was related to Dr. Lindsay. R. J. Colver was editor of the Kansas Newspaper Union, Topeka, and subsequently a correspondent for the Kansas City Times. Radig, Eighth Biennial Directory of the City of Topeka for 1883 and 6 (Topeka: Topeka Lithographing Co., n.d.) and Directory of the City of Topeka for 1887-8. Later stories say that Capper got around Topeka on a bicycle.

15. Richard Thomas was a correspondent for the Capital and Benjamin M. Curtis was clerk of the court, having been first elected in 1880. Radig, Eighth Biennial Directory of the City of Topeka for 1883 and 6. College Hill was south of Fifteenth Street and west of Mulvane.

16. Garfield Park is in north Topeka, bordered on the west by Kansas Avenue and on the north by Soldier Creek. In the 1880s a street railway ran from Tenth Street and Kansas Avenue to the park, replacing a bus service and better accommodating the many Topekans who often enjoyed the popular ride. The Topeka Turn Verein, an organization of Topeka German-Americans, had its headquarters at Turner Hall, located at First and Harrison Streets. The hall contained a gymnasium and an outdoor beer garden which was once known as Turner Garden. Shawnee County Historical Society, Bulletin 24 (December 1955): 55 and 58 (November 1981): 87-98; Topeka Daily Capital, February 28, 1906, June 22, 1975.

17. Mechem, ed., Annals of Kansas, 1:14; estimated attendance at the circus in Topeka was twenty thousand.

18. Knights of Labor dues were $1.25. Twenty couples attended a Topeka Knights of Labor party on November 20, 1885, according to the Daily Commonwealth on the following day. The Knights of Labor was the largest national labor union of this period. The American Federation of Labor came into existence a short time later.

A view of Garfield Park in the late 1880s.
On July 26, he confided in shorthand in his diary that “F. B. Baker offered me $20 per week to work for him.” However, he stayed with the Capital and in shorthand he was able to report on August 31, “Salary raised to $20 per week.” Stories he sold to out-of-town newspapers produced additional income. Capper’s fixed expenses, board and room, came to no more than $30 per month, so half or more of his income was available for other things. His out-of-town trips, either on business or for visiting friends or relatives, cost him little. He had a pass on the railroad, so traveling by railroad was free. He enumerated expenses going to and from Garnett for his high school alumni meeting as $8, and other such trips were less costly.

Capper’s major expenditures in 1886 involved speculation in Topeka town lots. Twenty years earlier Herbert Capper had been involved in the same activity in Garnett. Fourteen entries in his diary show Arthur Capper’s excitement with boom times in Topeka and his deep entanglement in real estate speculation. Topeka had almost doubled in population since 1880. As the state capital since 1861, it claimed ten times more visitors than any other city in Kansas. Substantial growth was shown in the many improvements and in the long list of new buildings. Early in 1886 Capper finished paying for “lots in College Hill addition,” and two months later he sold them “for $1600, $600 cash, $500 in three months, $500 in six months.” Real estate taxes on undeveloped lots were meager and entered little into speculative calculations. Capper even borrowed money to purchase two lots on Jackson Street for $7,500. On March 19 he bought a North Topeka lot for $2,000, $100 down and the rest to be

19. Floyd P. Baker came to Topeka in 1860 where he founded the Kansas State Record. When it was consolidated with the Commonwealth in 1871, he left for Texas, only to return in 1875 when he purchased the Commonwealth, which he published until it was sold to the Capital in 1888. A. T. Andreas and Charles G. Cutler, History of the State of Kansas (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), 555.


22. The loan came from John R. Foster. Although Capper includes no additional identification of Foster in his diary, he very possibly was John R. Foster, president of the First National Bank in Garnett, who also served as president, director, and stockholder of several other banks in Anderson County and in Kansas City, Kansas. Portrait and Biographical Record of Southeastern Kansas (Chicago: Biographical Publishing Co., 1894), 295-84.
The Daily Capital Building
in Topeka.

paid later, and sold it two days later for $2,500. On April 8, he sold the Jackson Street property to J. S. Collins, real estate and loan agent, for $7,700, with $1,700 paid immediately and $500 due. Capper's real estate interests showed no activity through the summer, then on September 16 he bought a lot number four in block two of the College Hill addition for $1,000. Early the next year, a Garnett newspaper reported that "Politics seemed wholly [sic] lost sight of in the boom excitement" in Topeka and asserted that former Garnett residents Dr. W. S. Lindsay, Arthur Capper, and Harry Sparks had profited by the speculation.²³ Available records and Capper's subsequent attitude toward real estate speculation show a far more pessimistic view. It is likely that he lost money overall in these transactions. Capper assumed the mortgage on the Jackson Street property, for instance, and it was not released for thirteen and one-half years.²⁴ His experiences in speculation laid the basis for his refusal to buy real estate other than his business and his home after he had gained great wealth in the twentieth century. Moreover, he did not seek loans from banks or other lending agencies as his newspaper business grew, on the assumption that such borrowing would reduce his independence. Another expenditure in 1886, the purchase of a share in an investment company, provided the resource whereby he was able to acquire his first newspaper in 1893.²⁵

The year 1886 opened with one of the worst blizzards ever experienced in Kansas. Newspapers carried long accounts of the blizzard's tragic consequences, but Capper made no mention of it in his diary. That January the state legislature was convened in a thirty-day special session at the call of Gov. John A. Martin to reapportion congressional districts. Capper reported on the legislative session, and on February 3 he recorded in his diary that "House and Senate reporters including myself were presented a valise by Senator Rush and Rep. Edwards."²⁶ The state of Kansas celebrated its twenty-fifth birthday on January 29 that year with an outpouring of material about the state's history.²⁷

Forty-two entries in Capper's diary provide direct reference to his work as a reporter for the Capital. Some show his activity for the day, others provide information on articles written for the paper by the young city editor. Five out-of-town trips were part of his newspaper duties. The first, in February, was to Wichita, Hutchinson, and McPherson. The next was to report on Gen. John A. Logan's speech to an estimated crowd of forty thousand at Bismarck Grove.²⁸ In late July Capper was sent to Clay Center to report on the Fifth District Republican Convention.

²³ Garnett Republican-Plaindealer, April 1, 1887.
²⁴ Abstract records at the Columbian Title and Trust Company, Topeka. Real estate speculation caused Maj. J. K. Hudson, Capper's employer, to lose the Capital.
²⁵ Capper diary, on April 4, shows that Capper paid $100 as first payment on one share of Equitable Investment Co. "On June 15, 1887, he listed as an expenditure "Equitable 50.00." ²⁶ Sen. J. W. Rush and Rep. William C. Edwards were both from Larned. Edwards had served Pawnee County as register of deeds. See Andreas and Cutler, History of the State of Kansas, 1854. The Daily Commonwealth, January 19, 1886, shows that both Rush and Edwards stayed at the Windsor Hotel during this session of the legislature.
²⁷ Topeka Daily Capital, January 30, 1886; Daily Commonwealth, January 30, 1886.
congressional convention. The candidate favored by the Capital was the incumbent, John A. Anderson, who failed to receive the nomination. Subsequently, Anderson entered the race as an Independent and won in the fall election, again with the endorsement of the Capital, which favorably reported the “monster meetings wherever he goes.” After the election Capper was sent to Lawrence to cover the “dedication of Snow Hall.” In early December, he went to Wichita to attend and report the activities of a state sanitary convention.30

28. Mechem, ed., Annals of Kansas, 1:11; Topeka Daily Capital, July 6, 1886. This was “Grand Army Day” at the Methodist Episcopal Assembly. Logan died at age sixty before the year ended.


30. Snow Hall of Natural History was built on the University of Kansas campus in 1885 and 1886 and was named for Francis H. Snow, a professor at the university since its founding in 1866. Snow Hall was dedicated in November 1886. Clifford S. Griffin, The University of Kansas: A History (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), 53, 35, 114-15, 143.


Arthur Capper (first row, far left) posed for this picture with other Topeka reporters in 1886. Next to Capper are Richard Colver, James L. Thornton, and L. A. Wright. In the second row (from left) are A. J. McCabe, George Clark, C. E. McIntosh, Charles King Holliday, and George M. Ewing.
recorded that he "Had trouble with Rev. [Louis A.] Banks speech," no doubt because "He spoke extemporâne" in a polished and eloquent style that included much poetry. 32 Capper also reported speeches of or interviewed many other people during the course of the year, including Charles Francis Adams, former governor John P. St. John, Col. Thomas Moonlight, Rep. John A. Anderson, Sen. Preston Plumb, and opera singer Emma Abbott.

Local stories also occupied part of Capper's time as a reporter for the Capital. For example, he wrote an "article about [the] corner stone of [the] Quincy Church" on September 25. 33 On October 13 he "went down to Santa Fe shops at midnight" after a story. Several days later, with another reporter, he had difficulty acquiring a "report of [the] paving committee." Nine reporters, including Capper, had their group picture taken that fall. 34

Capper's career with the Capital was closely related to his personal commitment to prohibition and to the Republican party. He registered to vote for the first time on October 8 at the city clerk's office. On November 2, he cast his "first ballot, which was straight republican." 35 His writing style appealed to Major Hudson and to the general readership of the Capital: His articles were complete, articulate, and accurate with a Republican slant. Some of his longer stories covered three and one-half columns in the Capital, aided no doubt by Capper's ability to record interviews in shorthand. He could also write succinctly.

During the year 1886 as well as in later years, Capper was five feet eight inches tall and weighed about 135 pounds. Personal purchases, recorded in his diary, included a hat, a watch, shoes, underclothing, an overcoat and pants, necktie and collars, and a toilet case. He regularly paid for his laundry, but haircuts were infrequent. He was neat in appearance, but he never had a reputation as a fashion model. Throughout his long life, Capper's health was remarkably good, and the year 1886 was no exception. However, before his departure for his vacation trip to Garnett in August he "Got some medicine from Dr. [J. P.] Lewis." 36 On September 25, he "Went to Dr. [Andrew M.] Callaham, dentist, who said tooth would have to be pulled, but backed out." 37 A week later, he "Went to Dr. [A. H.] Thompson, dentist, and had tooth cured." In July, Capper reported that a burglary was in the "house last night." Was his purchase of a revolver for $1.50 six months later related to this incident? 38

The most surprising entries in Capper's diary were four written in Pitman shorthand. On October 8, he wrote, "Staid all night at Madam Davis." The
expense item for that date said, "Being at Madam 10.00." On January 4, 1887, when he was recording only income and expenses, he again wrote, "Madam Davis 3.00," and the same shorthand turns up for March 1, 1887, except the cost was $5.59. Was this the same Davis identified in a police court account in 1885? That report stated: "Annie Davis, keeper of a house of ill-fame, was fined $25 which she paid, and was allowed to depart. Dora Davis was fined $10 for being an inmate of a house of ill-fame, which she paid. Dora Devin, another erring sister, was fined $10 which she paid and departed."48 In 1886 in Topeka there was less publicity, in police court and elsewhere, for bawdy houses and brothels, which in the nineteenth century were never confined to a special district within the capital city. In a police judge report for December 1885, the Capital enumerated the arrests and fines for the month, including twenty-eight for prostitution.49 Two brief accounts on January 28 and February 3, 1886, listed by name individual prostitutes who had been arrested and fined, but a more usual news account in 1886 generalized without naming persons. The Commonwealth seemed to follow the same procedure. In 1885, Topeka prostitutes were listed by name, whereas in 1886 the substance of the action was noted without names.50

The city directory for Topeka in 1882 listed a number of females with an asterisk in front of each name without providing an explanation.51 A short

The $10 Capper spent on his first visit to a brothel was a large sum; it was half of his weekly salary. The extraordinary size was due, no doubt, to the fact that the occasion was an all-night affair. His two subsequent visits were for lower but different rates; there was no explanation. Neither is there an indication in Capper's later career that he ever again visited Madam Davis or any of her kindred. It is unusual that he recorded these visits in his diary, even in cryptic shorthand. Even in the diary-writing times of the late nineteenth century, few young men kept diaries. Far fewer in that period of Victorian restraint would record in any way a visit to a bawdy house.

In the next few years Capper was moving with a different social group that included by the early 1890s the young woman he was to marry—Florence Crawford. For Capper, the year 1886 in Topeka was the year he could vote for the first time. He had supported himself for two years, but he had become neither a soldier nor an avid sportsman, undertakings generally associated with adulthood. In 1886, however, he had followed another of the traditional "rites of passage" to identify his manhood.52

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57. Andrew M. Callahan, dentist, was born in 1840 in Indiana and had been in Topeka since 1866. "Biographical Circulars," L.C. Library, Kansas State Historical Society.
58. Capper diary, July 11, 1886, and January 21, 1887.
59. There are no listings approximating Madam Davis in the Topeka city directories nearest to the year 1886. Police records as early as 1886 were not retained by the city of Topeka. A search among the 144 persons named Davis in the 1885 state census for Topeka, vols. 251-54, failed to turn up a likely Madam Davis. According to Douglass W. Wallace in a letter to the author, January 29, 1985. "Many of the ladies, of course, stayed for only a short time in town before either moving on or settling down in wedded bliss. Brothels could be found almost everywhere in Topeka, it is surprising to people to find them in relatively respectable neighborhoods." See also Roy D. Bird and Douglass W. Wallace, *Witness of the Times: A History of Shawnee County (Topeka: Shawnee County Historical Society, 1976), 158-60.
60. Daily Commonwealth, October 30, 1885.
61. Topeka Daily Capital, January 6, 1886.
62. During this period, the members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union were initiating missionary work among prostitutes, and the sources of information for persons they might contact were in the newspapers. Newspapersmen also may have believed that they were providing free advertising for prostitutes by including their names in the stories they published.
63. Radges, *Sixth Biennial Directory...1882.*