Postscript: Be Prepared

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Several cases of near hysteria were reported in McCook and this territory last night. Contrary to rumors, no fatalities resulted," said the McCook Daily Gazette on November 19, 1953, one day after the edition shown here landed on subscribers' front porches. The fake headline quickly became a national news story.

Though it might seem like a twisted joke, the Gazette was in earnest about its "Civil Defense Edition." A line above the nameplate and a front page editorial (below the fold, not shown here) advised readers that "The events described on this page of the McCook Daily Gazette did not happen. But every event described here could happen!...Could we carry on, if the Enemy struck, as well as the simulated news reports on this page say we carried on? We should ascertain the facts about that!"

After two years of national appeals for the public to get involved in civil defense, the Gazette editors apparently saw the need for some extra motivation. Consulting with experts, they wrote up a nuclear war scenario in which more than fifty U.S. cities were destroyed, and smaller communities like McCook were left to pick up the pieces.

And then—just as they imagined the Soviets doing—the Gazette struck without warning with its special edition. And to ensure that officials didn’t miss the point about McCook’s commitment to preparedness, a stack of Gazettes was delivered to a Denver hotel where a five-state conference of civil defense administrators was underway. For some, this seemed like a rational response to an existential threat; if the Gazette terrified its neighbors, it did so with the most neighborly of intentions.

Not everyone appreciated the new national culture of fear, and some chose to ridicule it. In an attention-seeking broadcast stunt earlier that year, Omaha radio station KOWH briefly caused a panic by rebroadcasting Missouri River flood warnings from 1952. As Chris Rasmussen explains in the Spring 2012 issue of Nebraska History (pp. 40-41), "Like the impudent class clown, the station defended its trickery as a necessary measure in the atomic age; 'the program was not designed to scare anyone, but to keep people awake to the ever-present threat of emergency.'" The station thus gave "its young listeners the thrill of vicarious rebellion."

Because sometimes, apparently, you have to be prepared to laugh.

David L. Bristow, Editor