

# Community newspapers surviving – and thriving

Twenty-nine years ago the Woodstock Sentinel, the daily newspaper in Woodstock, Illinois, merged with another daily, leaving the city of 25,000 an hour north of Chicago without its own newspaper.

At the time, Cheryl Wormley and a friend worked for the local school district. Neither had any journalism experience.

Still, they quit their jobs, took second mortgages on their homes and launched a weekly newspaper, the Woodstock Independent, in April 1987.

“We were accidental journalists,” said Wormley, the paper’s publisher and co-owner. “We had had a daily here for 100-plus years and felt we needed our own newspaper. The door opened and we walked through it.”

For its coverage of the community in 2014, the Independent won the David Kramer Memorial Trophy from the Illinois Press Association this year after receiving the most top awards in its category. For the past several years, the IPA’s winners have contained numerous entries from the Independent

Where a daily failed, a weekly succeeded. And across the country, the story of the Independent follows a pattern repeated by community weekly newspapers: They not only survive but thrive.

While the constant retreat of large daily newspapers in coverage, content and circulation creates a belief that newspapers no longer matter and journalism is dying, community papers continue to be a solid presence in their communities.

“Community papers are healthier than metro papers,” said Al

Cross, director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky. "They have a narrower mission, to provide local news and in most markets no one is challenging that franchise. A greater share of them (38 percent) are independently owned (compared to 20 percent of dailies.) In most cases their staffs have networks that reach broadly and deeply into the communities they serve."

Cross said the problems with large newspapers tarnish the image of the industry overall. "Many in the general public and even in the media business believe newspapers are in worse shape than they are. That has probably made more difficult community papers' selling job."

In a 2010 study, the National Newspaper Association found that the 7,000-plus non-daily newspapers in the United States have a combined circulation of 65.5 million compared to 45.5 million for the then-1,408 daily newspapers. About 70 percent of those non-dailies have a circulation under 15,000.

Wormley's paper has 3,000 subscribers. Combining that with 5,000 connections through Facebook and a monthly newspaper published for a nearby town, total market penetration is close to 16,000, she said. In 2005 she and her son bought out the other original co-owner.

Most of her staff lives in the community, she said. "We're a variety of ages," Wormley said, noting that a longtime columnist, Don Peasley, known as Mr. Woodstock, had written and photographed his community for newspapers since 1947. He worked for the Independent up to his death last year at the age of 90.

Wormley credits the Independent's first hire, a journalism graduate with two years' experience at a weekly, as guiding the neophytes through the early years. "She was our first reporter/editor," Wormley said. "She held our toes to the fire. She was strict about attribution and accuracy."

Also, the timing of the enterprise helped, she said. "We started this just when computers were starting. We were ahead of the curve because we didn't have to transition from any other system or retrain people."

She joined NNA, the Illinois Press Association and the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors. "I've found newspaper people, at least at this level, to be very sharing. We learned a lot from others." Over the years, the Independent's editorial voice has grown stronger, she said. "I think if you ask readers, they would say we've established ourselves as a paper for the people."

Tonda Rush, executive director of NNA, said daily newspapers sometimes falsely sound the death knell for all of journalism. "It's so frustrating to have readers believe we've died or are dying, particularly when they read it in newspapers," Rush said.

"Community newspapers are not as visible on the national scene," Rush said. "But come on, guys, don't take us down with you."

Rush outlined why community papers have not felt the same financial woes as have dailies, especially after the recession that began eight years ago:

- Large group-owned newspapers faced a credit crunch for significant debt. For the most part, community family-owned or independent papers do not get that heavily into debt, she said. "Right off the bat the recession was different for our guys."
- Revenue streams that large papers relied on dried up, but did not have the same effect on small papers. "They tend not to have a lot of department-store advertising. Their retail is all local or mom-and-pop inserts."
- Classified advertising, which found a new and free home on such Internet sites as craigslist, does not

contribute as much to the revenue picture for small papers, Rush said. "Weeklies tend to run garage sale ads," she said. "The digital disruption was not as devastating a blow as it was to larger papers."

- The federal bailout for the big-three auto makers caused car dealerships to close or consolidate. "That had a big effect on large papers," she said. "Not so much for small ones."
- Consolidation of national banks also cut advertising from large papers. "In small communities the bank is often locally owned."

This is not to say community papers went through the recession untouched. "It was a good time to have local staffers who did not fight cost controls to keep their papers going," she said. In 2013 publishers started to see the upturn, Rush said. Their papers also had to deal with a new form of competition.

The downsizing of large papers caused many unemployed journalists to hit the Internet to provide local news, sometimes competing with community papers. "No one found a model to make digital journalism operations self-sustaining," Rush said. "They tend to last as long as the severance check does."

One looming issue for community papers, whose subscribers for the most part receive their paper through the mail, is the ongoing financial troubles of the U.S. Postal Service. "More and more the postal service is having trouble getting papers delivered on time. Weekly papers are sometimes arriving bundled with three or four issues at once. We've been lobbying Congress to make this a legislative issue to address."

NNA postal consultant Max Heath said community newspapers provide a valuable avenue of commerce for local businesses. "There is still a good bit of auto and real estate still in community newspapers, especially when compared to metros," he said.

Bill Miller Jr., general manager of the Washington Missourian, represents the third generation of his family to run the twice-weekly publication. His grandfather, James Miller Sr., started the paper and his father, Bill Miller Sr., serves as editor and publisher.

The Missourian Publishing Co. includes three other weekly papers, a magazine and a commercial print operation. "We have about 120 employees with part-timers," Miller said.

About an hour outside of St. Louis, the coverage area has seen significant growth, he said. That allowed the company to expand in 2008 and purchase a new press. Still, when it comes to what goes in the paper, the Millers point to their founder. "We run a lot of pictures and cover local events," Miller said. "It's similar to how my grandfather did it. The formula has not changed much. We're still a viable part of the community."

While some chain-owned newspapers define themselves as hyper-local, Miller refuses to use that term. "We just cover the community," he said. "That perception of going local comes from dailies. It's what we've always done."

A few years ago the local school district surveyed people on how they learned news about their schools. "Over 90 percent said it was by reading the Missourian," Miller said.

The Missourian still employs proofreaders and Miller's father, Bill Miller Sr., 85, checks every press run. "We're doing things we used to do 20, 30 years ago because we were doing it right then and it still works," Miller said.

Tim Lyke, publisher of the Ripon Commonwealth Press in Wisconsin, also follows a trusted family formula. He came home in 1990 when his dad called to see if he wanted to join the family business. His parents purchased the Press in 1962.

He takes exception to the gloom and doom stories about

newspapers and journalism. "The large papers forgot what brought us to the dance," Lyke said. "Let's pay attention to the product. They are so focused on cutting costs they do so at the expense of readers by providing less product. That causes them to lose even more readers, who find there is not enough content to make it worth their while. It's a death spiral, but we are not part of it."

His reporters shoot their own photos for stories and his editor writes a weekly column. He and the editor update the paper's Facebook page each day; the Press just launched its first Twitter account. "We are aggressive in providing news as it happens," he said. "The editor and I are each in a service club."

Paid subscribers receive an electronic newsletter the day before publication. "It gives them excerpts of stories before it hits the streets," he said. The paper still prints weddings and engagements free of charge.

"Those are reasons people buy the paper," Lyke said. "It's their keepsake."

Bill Miller Sr., editor and publisher of the Missourian, said that sort of coverage sneered at by large dailies will drive the growth of community papers. "People are starting to realize we are the only ones who cover local news," Miller Sr., said. "Patch and some of the web upstarts are not surviving."

At the Eldon Advertiser in Eldon, Missouri, the Vernon family has owned the weekly since 1948. Publisher Trevor Vernon represents the third generation of his family to run the Advertiser. Vernon Publishing owns five weekly newspapers in Missouri. "We like to say we only print stories with local ties," Vernon said. "We also live by 'everyone has a story'. At times we have randomly sent reporters to sit in restaurants, street corners and had them talk to the next

person who came by.’’

About 10 years ago the Advertiser tried a website where all content was available. “Our subscriptions took a hit and people were telling us, ‘Thank you for putting all your content on the web for free, now I don’t have to buy a newspaper.’ We stopped doing that immediately. We now put the first paragraph for free and subscribers can read the rest,’’ Vernon said.

The Vernons illustrate one of the aspects of family owned community weeklies: working with family. Vernon works with his father, who is president of the company and publisher of three of the weeklies; his grandfather, though retired, goes to the post office and bank every day for the office.

“My father and I have a great relationship,’’ Vernon said. “At times employees say we resemble American Choppers, without throwing things at each other. We never take it personally and normally good ideas come from our conversations. We are both passionate about the communities we serve.’

For community newspapers without a family lineage, a new business model is finding success in eastern Iowa. The Cascade Pioneer, a community fixture since 1876, is owned by the Woodward Company. Pioneer Publisher Mary Unga-Sogaard described Woodward as ‘the anti-Gannett’ – a company that is majority-owned, about 97 percent, by its 500 media employees. “It’s participatory management,’’ she said.

That arrangement allows for a number of efficiencies, such as sharing editors and reporters among her two papers. Unga-Sogaard also serves as publisher of another Woodward-owned weekly paper in nearby Dyersville. Recently the Pioneer took home a number of awards from the Iowa Press Association’s annual contest for 2014 coverage. “Sharing resources makes it doable,’’ Unga-Sogaard said. “The ROI on the place is tremendous and that is not typical.’’

During the recession, the company did not lay anyone off, she said. "We didn't always hire at the full-time level or replace people, but we found other ways to save money."

Employees of a Woodward-owned newspaper – the company has five weekly newspapers along with a print division, six radio stations and the daily newspaper in Dubuque – become vested after five years. They accrue stock; shares have shown a consistent growth rate over the years.

"It's false to say newspapers can't make a profit," Ungs-Sogaard said. "We have open-book management and everybody has a stake in making the business profitable."

Cascade and Dyersville share news and sports editors and aspects of production. Between the two papers 25 people are employed.

Publishers and newspaper association directors repeatedly said the health of community papers reflects that of their community. Doug Crews, executive director of the Missouri Press Association, said he is worried more about the future of Main Street America than he is about weekly newspapers.

"As more everyday purchases are made via the Internet, community brick-and-mortar businesses will come under more pressure," Crews said. "Local communities' tax bases will suffer and city and county services will suffer. Main Street businesses in some towns are being challenged economically today."

If Main Street is doing well in a community, generally so is the local newspaper, he said. "Weeklies have always been able to weather the economic storms better than larger newspapers. The smaller newspapers simply have learned to operate in a smaller universe, so their highs are not as high, their lows are not as low, as larger newspapers." Plus, despite what has been reported, people want to read an ink-on-paper edition, Crews said. "They still want to clip out the photos and local



news items and the cheese cake recipe – refrigerator journalism.’’

Weekly newspapers need to pay better attention to their penetration rates rather than just circulation, Cross said. “This data will be used against them by one of the industry’s main adversaries, local governments that are asking state legislatures to repeal or reduce the requirements for public-notice advertising.” Such advertising, known as legals, accounts for about 8 percent of a community newspaper’s revenue, but can go as high as 20 percent, Cross said.

Another problem for rural newspapers is their inability to pay salaries that attract qualified journalists, Cross said. “When we surveyed rural weeklies eight years ago, the average starting salary for a beginning reporter with a bachelor’s degree was only \$21,000.’’

He also mentioned the connection to a strong business community. “Many rural communities are in economic distress or are losing population to the extent they can no longer support a newspaper focused only on their community.’’

Cannon Falls, Minnesota, population 4,000, has seen its downtown suffer as people choose to take the 35-mile drive north to the Twin Cities to spend their money. Mike Dalton, editor of the Cannon Falls Beacon, said the paper has lost about 1,000 subscribers in the last 10 to 15 years. “I wish I knew why,’’ Dalton said. “We’ve also seen our average weekly page count drop from 22 or 24 down to 18. Part of that happened when we started doing a better job paginating, but at the same time advertising went down so we cut down on our news coverage.’’

Some of the other changes for the Beacon include dropping some coverage of events that have been staples for the past couple of decades and reducing picture sizes. “We don’t cover as many meetings as we used to; we used to hit all the surrounding

townships but we've gone to just the three or four larger ones," Dalton said.

Dalton is also a director with the Minnesota Press Association. "Weekly newspapers statewide are struggling right now. Our Main Streets are drying up, which means we don't always have a strong ad base. But at the same time, I haven't heard too many publishers/editors who are giving up. The consensus seems to be that community newspapers will survive, while some of the mid-size dailies might not make it," he said.

Local coverage that cannot be found elsewhere remains the golden ticket for readership. "There will always be a market for a newspaper like ours, where you can learn about the bake sale and who got arrested in the same issue," Dalton added.