

**‘That loathsome, little [anonymous] column’:
*A case study***

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Abstract

‘That loathsome, little [anonymous] column’: *A case study*

When the editors of a weekly of less than 2,500 circulation abandoned their refusal to publish anonymous letters in 1986, they hoped to enhance their readership and engage more residents of the community. But they set a double standard for their readers. They confused them by running letters that had to be signed with first and last names for their “Box 2020” letters section and “letters” that could be anonymous under a “Sound Off” heading. Writers for “Sound Off” could phone their comments to a recording machine on evenings and weekends. Or they could mail them. The editors cautioned contributors to keep comments “brief and factual.”

Thirteen years after the founding of the newspaper, the editors violated important tenets of journalistic ethics they had established in 1973. By the mid 1980s, they changed their responsible policy to one that was bound to attract name callers. Yet the new column did encourage more community engagement with the newspaper.

Some readers were as misguided as the editors. “I think ‘Sound Off’ is a great idea—we can’t wait to read it every week—and I don’t feel you need to sign your name as a lot of people are shy about being in the limelight,” a reader, Dee Munchiando, wrote. This reader and others overlooked the important link between constructive comments and ideas and taking responsibility.

On the positive side, the editors used “Sound Off” letters as a springboard to spike rumors. They found out what some readers were thinking and went looking for correct information that may have eluded contributors. For example, a “Sound Off” contributor claimed a city councilman was well-known for shooting stray cats on his property and got away with using a firearm within the city limits because he was an elected official. The councilman denied the allegation and suggested that someone else may have fired a gun on his property. The next week, the councilman’s wife wrote a signed letter to the newspaper, saying that the couple was feeding 22 wild cats on their property a year earlier. Finally, the couple arranged with an animal control officer to trap sick cats and transport them to a veterinarian. The couple paid the vet bill. The editors set the record straight.

The shortcomings of “Sound Off” ultimately outweighed its positive aspects, and the editors returned to their policy of publishing only signed letters. With no fanfare and no confession that they had erred, they folded all signed letters into the regular “Vox Pop” column a few months after “Sound Off” began.

INTRODUCTION

After 13 years of refusing to publish anonymous letters to the editors, a Colorado weekly decided to run messages with no names. Contributors could phone in their comments to a special line. The editors wanted to encourage readers who had had little or no interaction with the newspaper to express their views to tap into sentiment of a different segment of the community.

The messages often ranged from attacks on public officials, to appreciation for the organizers of chili dinners and other social or cultural events to dismay at the treatment of animals. Sometimes the editors suggested a topic for contributors to rally around in the next week’s edition.

The paper, founded in 1973 by a husband-and-wife team, both of whom had worked as writers at *The Denver Post*, covered Georgetown, Idaho Springs, Dumont, Evergreen, Empire, Silver Plume and Clear Creek County, as well as the local school district. Here are some samples of the editors’ four-month experiment with anonymity

CONVERSATION WITH A DIFFERENT POOL OF READERS

Shooting cats . . .

I’D LIKE TO KNOW what gives Bruce O’Neal, our [Idaho Springs] city councilman, the right to shoot and kill cats by his property.

Aren’t our laws made for everybody, or are council members exempt?

You can sign this. . .

A CAT LOVER

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 3 September 1986, 5)

EDITORS' NOTE: Asked to comment, Bruce O'Neal, in a phone interview, said: "Well, it's against the law, and whoever is doing it should be picked up." When The Courant explained to O'Neal that it was he callers suspected, he responded: "They're saying I'M doing this? Well, they're out of their ever-loving minds!"

O'Neal's wife, Orra, called The Courant shortly afterwards to report: "We heard a gun shot . . . it had to be a shotgun . . . go off between our house and the one next door at midnight several days ago, and our own house cat disappeared. She was out in the yard at the time, and we haven't seen her since.

"Whoever is doing this has a sick mind, and I wish someone would get to the bottom of it. They even take the body.

"The person who called the paper is probably the one who's doing it, and they're just trying to get at us."

(Clear Creek Courant, 3 September 1986, 5)

Picking a chief . . .

. . . For those who are in charge of picking the chief of police, please don't do it in haste. After all, I'm sure you want to get a good night's sleep for the next few years, without any regrets. With a new, out-of-town chief of police, you might find more honesty, less cover-ups and the entire police force doing the job that they are hired to do. Please print this before the whole town goes down the drain. . . .

(Clear Creek Courant, 3 September 1986, 5)

Another Aspen . . .

YOUR SUMMER INTERN [Eric Thiel] criticizes us up here in Georgetown for trying to make our town appealing to tourists [‘Is this freewheeling Georgetown . . . or another pretty Aspen?’ ‘Opinion,’ Aug. 27]. What's wrong with that? The tourists bring a lot of money to our town.

Without them we might be just another town full of empty stores – like Idaho Springs!

(Clear Creek Courant, 3 September 1986, 5)

Best thing . . .

*THE ‘SOUND OFF’ column is the best thing that's ever happened to *The Courant*.*

(Clear Creek Courant, 3 September 1986, 5)

Here are the editors' guidelines for contributing to "Sound Off":

About ‘Sound Off’

Comments in the ‘Sound Off’ column are from anonymous callers to the ‘Sound Off’ telephone line, and readers are cautioned that information from callers cannot in all cases be verified.

‘Sound Off’ calls may be made after hours or on weekends to 567-4492. Callers are asked to keep comments brief and factual. The Editors may delete material of a controversial or personal nature, and exceptionally lengthy comments may be condensed or not used.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 3 September 1986, 5)

Trapping cats . . .

DOES COUNCILMAN [Bruce] O'Neal also deny that he did in fact pay our dog catcher to trap cats on his property and take them to the pound while he and his wife were on vacation?

Again, one of our officers knows this is true, as does the dog catcher.

When I asked about cats using my kids' sand box for a dump site, I was told there is no ordinance against cats at large in I.S.

Like one writer said last week, it's 'who you are and who you know.'

ANIMAL LOVER

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 10 September 1986, 4)

EDITORS' NOTE: According to Bruce O'Neal's wife, Orra, she and her husband have hired I.S. Ordinance Enforcement Officer Cheryn Breeling to trap stray cats that come onto their property. If the animals are diseased, they are taken to local veterinarians for treatment or euthanization—at the O'Neals' expense. . . .

Police Dept. . . .

. . . I THINK the police department and the new chief are doing a great job.

Hope they continue and keep it up.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 10 September 1986, 4)

Clean sweep . . .

NOW IS THE TIME to get out the old proverbial broom and make a clean sweep of the I.S.P.D.

Signed,

A LIFETIME RESIDENT

AND TAXPAYER

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 10 September 1986, 4)

The editors guided readers to the letter from Orra O'Neal in their regular letters

section, "P.O. Box 2020":

The story behind the

'cat shooting' story

Dear Cary,

I feel compelled to reply to the charges made in the 'Sound Off' column of *The Courant* against my husband related to his 'cat killing.'

Bruce O'Neal has never held the reputation of being a tactful or diplomatic person, but he has always been known for his honesty.

Several years ago, I made the mistake of feeding cats who had been 'dumped' in our neighborhood and were at a point of starvation. . . . Consequently, we have seen the number increase. A year ago, we were feeding 22 wild cats. Some became ill, and others were females who became pregnant. I could not tame or catch any of them. The mothers gave birth to some litters that we found dead on our lawn. There was no way I could treat any of those who were ill.

As a last resort, we made arrangements with the I.S. Ordinance Control Officer, Cheryn Breeling, to trap particular ones of the cats. This was done on her own time! We paid her for this service. The animals were euthanized—a very painless way of death.

We left for Scotland. On our return, we learned some of our neighbors had given her cats who were living on their property. We also paid the fee for them!

The cats we feed receive Tender Vittles, Meow Mix, Cat Chow, and cooked ground turkey mixed with a warm chicken and Cat Vitamins—daily. The monthly tab for this is over \$200. . . .

I feel if the anonymous writers had told the ‘whole story,’ the reading of their letters would not have been as spectacular! . . .

To the person in our neighborhood who *is* shooting and killing cats, I have one word of advice: Stop it! My ‘furry friends’ – Mama, Little Love, Bug, Pooh, Chessie, Cubby, Tuffy, Bobbin, The Big Fellow, etc. – second my request!

Sincerely,

ORRA O’NEAL

I.S.

P.S. Oh, yes! – many of our neighbors’ cats join the dinner table. They seem to prefer the cuisine at the O’Neals!

(Clear Creek Courant, 10 September 1986, 5)

Occasionally the editors did the unthinkable and took sides in a controversy, as in the one described here:

Safeway praised . . .

I can’t imagine who the anonymous caller is who Sounded Off about the Safeway managers last week! When this person referred to the managers who ‘aren’t people oriented’ . . . it can’t be the people who take time to get a little child a new cookie when he is in tears because he dropped the old one!

. . . one of the many reasons that I continue to shop there instead of the big warehouse stores in Denver is the friendly ‘small town’ atmosphere and courteous service that we’ve received at the I.S. Safeway.

BERNADETTE DEVITT

Empire

EDITORS’ NOTE: We agree! That caller was way off base.

(Clear Creek Courant, 17 September 1986, 5)

Sometimes contributor comments were silly, but entertaining.

Ghostly question . . .

WHO WAS Casper the Ghost before he died?

JUST CURIOUS

(Clear Creek Courant, 17 September 1986, 5)

Fair trade . . .

TO PET RABBIT OWNER who said stray dogs run Georgetown:

Well, Councilman O'Neal runs I.S.
We'll trade you straight across.

(Clear Creek Courant, 17 September 1986, 5)

The best . . .

OF ALL the dumb ideas Gary (*sic*) [Co-editor Cary Stiff] has come up with, 'Sound Off' is the best.

RICHARD FENN

(Clear Creek Courant, 17 September 1986, 5)

Joggers . . .

SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE DONE about the joggers on Alvarado Road [between Empire and Georgetown]. I know they have the right to use the road, but does this give them the right to irritate our pets, to stand there and throw sticks and stones at them, and kick at them?

We had to take our dog to the pound because we were afraid she might bite someone. I don't think this is right at all!

(Clear Creek Courant, 17 September 1986, 5)

Cat trappings . . .

COUNCILMAN O'NEAL and his wife can write all the articles they want about the cat trappings. I heard it straight from the horse's mouth, and there was no mention of diseased or sick cats. The cop knows, we knows [*sic*], Councilman O'Neal knows and the dogcatcher knows – she almost lost her job over it.

(Clear Creek Courant, 24 September 1986, 5)

Enough!!!

More than enough has been said on issues regarding Councilman O'Neal and I.S.P.D. On occasion Councilman O'Neal could be described as "cantankerous" (I like this description), but I see him as 'doing' and don't know when he finds time to kill cats that he's been feeding for so long.

The person who anonymously wants to trade him 'straight across' should spend time trying to be as productive as Mr. O'Neal.

As for the I.S.P.D., they are entitled by law to break during their shift. Where they choose to take it remains their privilege.

DARLENE ROSEAN

I.S.

(Clear Creek Courant, 24 September 1986, 5)

Cooperative . . .

WITH ALL THE FLAK the I.S. Police Department has been taking lately, I think it's time for a positive comment or two.

I have found both Larry Akers and Chris Wills to be cooperative and, for the most part, helpful to me as a reporter with a job to do.

And it's probably worth pointing out that this cooperation with the press is in marked contrast to the other municipal police departments in the county.

So thanks, guys.

PENNY ROUND

*EDITORS' NOTE: Round writes the Police Gazette column for The Courant.
(Clear Creek Courant, 24 September 1986, 5)*

Cat busters . . .

Dear Sound Off:

How do I get cats out from underneath my basement?
I called 'Cat Busters,' but they were busy.
Is Bruce O'Neal in town?

(Clear Creek Courant, 24 September 1986, 5)

Sweep, sweep . . .

. . . I like Sound Off better than watching the Broncos.

(Clear Creek Courant, 24 September 1986, 5)

Smoking at school . . .

I THINK ALL smoking on campus should be eliminated. I feel it encourages hair bags and druggies.

The smoking area on the hill outside of the school looks bad, downright disgusting.
There are some schools who don't even allow *teachers* to smoke on campus.

(Clear Creek Courant, 24 September 1986, 5)

Police Chief . . .

I'D LIKE TO KNOW what Mayor [Jim] Reed and our city council members have in their heads for brains. It must be sawdust.

What we don't need is a police chief who lives in Conifer. We already have an acting chief with an unlisted number.

This [new Chief Roy] Finch must be a personal friend of one or all of the above mentioned. If he wants to be police chief of our city, let him buy a house here. There's certainly enough of them for sale.

(Clear Creek Courant, 24 September 1986, 5)

Tribute to the miners . . .

For the Sound Off:

I'd like to pay tribute to the miners of I.S. and the USA in general.
Without this basic industry, where would we be today?

With the likes and help of people such as Ron Cole, a miner, and Doug Watrous, an engineer in I.S., we will survive the boom-and-bust cycle of the industry and see the promotion and viability of an occupation in which so few men and women can provide so much for so many, with great risk to their personal safety.

SIGNED 'S.F.'

(Clear Creek Courant, 1 October 1986, 6)

Penny Round . . .

PENNY ROUND doesn't seem to have much intelligence if she thinks [Police Officer] Chris Wills is cooperative.

I know of at least one instance, or maybe three, where Chris Wills has deliberately baited people and got them involved over crimes they didn't commit.
He should be fired.

(Clear Creek Courant, 1 October 1986, 6)

PENNY ROUND, the so-called writer (question mark, question mark), since she does work for *The Courant*, should keep her stupid opinions to herself.

(Clear Creek Courant, 1 October 1986, 6)

HAS PENNY ROUND got a journalism degree? Obviously not, if she thinks Chris Wills is so great.

Also, I'd look into [Police Officer] Ted Schaudt if I was a new police chief.

(Clear Creek Courant, 1 October 1986, 6)

PENNY ROUND REPLIES: I didn't say that I think Chris Wills is 'great,' nor did I say that he is cooperative overall.

What I DID saw is that he and [Police Officer] Larry Akers have cooperated with ME to the extent that they have made available certain police information pertaining to reports on file at the I.S. Police Department.

This is not a "stupid opinion"; it's a fact.

(Clear Creek Courant, 1 October 1986, 6)

More on cats . . .

TIME TO draw the line on cats and hypocritical council members.

I see Council is playing God again – I don't care what people want to believe. Perhaps some records should be checked (my personal work file . . . would be a great start). . . .

If Bruce O'Neal wishes to take care of his cat problem, fine, but why should the taxpayers have to support his doing so? If he (or anyone else) catches cats, then he can transport them to the shelter and take full responsibility for them, not put the burden on the 'ordinance control officers' or the City of I.S.'s shoulders.

Has anyone checked where the bill goes to euthanize these animals if need be? Are you as a citizen of I.S. taking a portion of your paycheck to help destroy Bruce O'Neal's catch of the day and paying for the gas to have the *dog truck* transport the cat to the shelter? Is your child being bitten by an uncaught dog because the dog catcher is out of town taking care of a cat problem?

I was informed when employed as the ordinance control officer that the City of I.S. does not handle cat cases, but once again a council member is involved, so that changes everything. I don't recall any Bible that names God as 'Bruce O'Neal'. . . .

All I want is Bruce O'Neal or any council member to toe the line like everyone else and not make them special because of who they are. I turned an awful lot of transports for cats down because the city does not handle cats.

CATHY BOECKEL

Former Ordinance Control Officer

For the City of I.S.

(Clear Creek Courant, 1 October 1986, 7)

A restive native . . .

DARLEAN ROSEAN doesn't know what she's talking about ['Enough!!!,' 'Sound Off,' Sept. 24]. . . .

I was born and raised in this town and have done more constructive things than she and Bruce O'Neal could do if they lived to be 200 years old.

Sign me 'A Taxpayer.' . . .

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 1 October 1986, 7)

Spying on officers . . .

FOR ALL THOSE who have nothing better to but complain about the police and Sheriff's Department, at the present time I have nothing better to do but compliment them.

Maybe if you ever really needed one, you'd *appreciate* them a little more and stop spying on them when they try to grab a cup of coffee.

Thanks, officers.

(Signed) LAW-ABIDING CITIZEN

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 1 October 1986, 6)

Schools . . .

I'D LIKE TO SOUND OFF about the schools up here.

We moved from a different town and a different city, and my child has had a B average grade, and the schools up here SUCKS [*sic*]!

I think that they ought to do something about the education that they're teaching the children.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 1 October 1986, 6)

Casper . . .

I KNOW who Casper the Ghost was before he was a ghost!

He was Casper the Person!

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 1 October 1986, 6)

Debbie and Terry Lawrence of Georgetown provided three 'Sound Off' messages for the second issue in October. Here are portions of them:

Turning the other cheek . . .

THIS IS to the woman who called our bakery anonymously on Oct. 3:

In spite of the fact that she told me that Debbie and I are unfit parents, that our children are brats, that our bakery stinks, that everyone in town hates us and wants us to leave, that no one will do business with us, that we are losers and that we are failures, we would still like you to know this: Jesus loves you, and so do we. . . .

TERRY AND DEBBIE LAWRENCE

Georgetown

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 8 October 1986, 4)

In the second letter, co-proprietor Debbie Lawrence of Georgetown's Sugar 'n Spice Bakery, contributed more background:

Just want a booth . . .

This message is in response to a letter written by Michael Moore of Shoppe Internationale and the husband of Janice Moore. His letter was published in the Oct. 1 issue of *The Courant*. . . .

We would happily cease any legal action if we were offered a booth in the Christmas Market. This is the only thing we want. We don't want a legal battle, we don't want to settle for damages, we simply want to be entitled to display our business in the Christmas Market.

Most of the people we have talked to on this issue are in agreement with us. The very few who do not agree with us are people whose businesses are already downtown in Georgetown and who do benefit from the Christmas Market, no matter what. We do not. We know of no other business at our end of town that would like to be in the Christmas Market, aside from ourselves. We feel we could benefit greatly from this; we see no reason why we should not be allowed to benefit from this. . . .

(Clear Creek Courant, 8 October 1986, 5)

***Georgetown Society
should be aware . . .***

TERRY AND I would like the Georgetown Historical Society to know that someone is calling us anonymously at the bakery, harassing us, slandering us and threatening ourselves and our children. We want the Society to know this because this woman is using their name to back her threats. . . .

We do not believe this poor, sick woman *is* connected with the Society, but we felt they ought to know that someone out there wants *us* to think so.

. . . we still want these people or this person to know that they are in our prayers. . . .

TERRY AND DEBBIE LAWRENCE
Georgetown

(Clear Creek Courant, 8 October 1986, 5)

Someone else, however, disagreed with the Lawrences' desire to be a part of the Christmas Market.

Christmas Market . . .

I'd like to comment about the Georgetown Society and Terry Lawrence.

I think it's ridiculous for anyone to assume that any Georgetown businesses should be able to get a booth in the Christmas Market.

What would Christmas Market have to offer if the things sold in the booths are also available elsewhere in town? Christmas Market is a wonderful advantage for Georgetown, and The Christmas Market people have done a wonderful job.

Terry is stirring up a lot of problems.

(Clear Creek Courant, 8 October 1986, 4)

**‘Sound Off’ comments
should be signed . . .**

Editors of The Clear Creek Courant:

I feel that your Sound Off column should require a person’s signature with their comment – it’s too much like a ‘bitch’ session without taking the responsibility for the comment.

LINDA CAMPBELL
Idaho Springs

EDITORS’ NOTE: We’re still divided about “Sound Off,” and we still regard the column as being in the trial stage. We’d like to hear the views of other readers.

(Clear Creek Courant, P.O. Box 2020, 8 October 1986, 5)

Not impressed . . .

WHO DO all those callers think they’re impressing when they sign their messages ‘A taxpayer’?

We all pay taxes, in one form or another. Big deal.

I’m not impressed. Sign me:

NOT JUST ANOTHER
PRETTY TAXPAYER

(Clear Creek Courant, 15 October 1986, 5)

Get rid of Kenney . . .

AND HOW ABOUT the county commissioners? Can’t they make a decision without Peter Kenney’s prior approval?

Wake up, Clear Creek County. Get rid of Peter Kenney before he has us so in debt we can’t exist.

ONE OF THE REAL NATIVES

(Clear Creek Courant, 15 October 1986, 5)

School buses . . .

WHY ARE a couple of the school buses being modified for higher speed?

One Clear Creek bus passed me recently going at least 65 miles an hour. Isn’t the limit 55?

EDITORS’ NOTE: Clear Creek School District Transportation Director Wayne Hudson says it is not true that school buses are being modified. He added, chuckling, that the top speed buses can obtain is about 58 miles an hour.

(Clear Creek Courant, 15 October 1986, 5)

To keep discussion on a high plane, sometimes *The Courant* editors would suggest a “Sound Off” question of the week. On October 1, they asked, “What do you think about the new Idaho Springs City Hall? On October 15, they asked readers to predict, “Who do you think will win the U.S. Senate race in Colorado – Ken Kramer or Tim Wirth – and why? Call your ‘vote’ to 567-

4492 after 5 p.m. and on the weekend.”

***In praise of the
Sound Off column***

Editors, The Clear Creek Courant:

I would like to cast three votes in favor of ‘Sound Off,’ *just as it is*.

My wife and I, along with one of our sons, think that ‘Sound Off’ is just great fun.

We enjoy the rest of the paper, too, and we’re glad [columnist] Lou Ann Kelley is back. . . .

CASSIUS COLEMAN

Denver

(Clear Creek Courant, P.O. Box 2020, 22 October 1986, 4)

New Police Chief . . .

JUST WHO in the hell does this new police chief think he is?

He’s only on probation, but he uses the taxpayers’ police car to drive back and forth to his home in Conifer.

Now he wants to change our new city hall. He complains about his officers having to sit on desks and chairs – and two had to stand. Well, that’s a switch! They should all be used to sitting on anything – they’ve sure had enough practice.

Move over, Councilman O’Neal. There’s only room for one God in this city, and it looks like you’re out and Finch is in.

(Clear Creek Courant, 22 October 1986, 6)

If Wirth’s elected . . .

YOU’VE ASKED for comments on the Senate race.

All I have to quote is, I hope and pray Ken Kramer wins.

If Tim Wirth is elected, Central America will go Communist, South Africa will go Communist.

In fact, if we elect a Democratic House and Senate, our grandchildren might as well plan to live under Communism.

(Clear Creek Courant, 22 October 1986, 6)

Volleyball . . .

THE VARSITY Girls Volleyball Team put on a great show Saturday afternoon in the match against Sheridan – once the refs showed up! It was a real cliffhanger. You should have been there.

Congratulations, girls. It’s good to see you having such a good season. And it was good to see so many parents and friends turn out to cheer you on.

(Clear Creek Courant, 22 October 1986, 6)

Special kids . . .

I KNOW FOR A FACT that the police department gives special treatment to some of the town’s teenagers because their parents are respected business owners and influential within the community.

These kids are given slaps on the wrist for offenses ranging from possession of drugs to traffic tickets. I do not believe it is fair for a child to be treated different from others because of who his parent is.

I won't mention names, but the teenagers whose parents own stores, motels and shops better shape up because I won't put up with my child being treated differently just because I'm not as wealthy or as respected in the community.

These kids should watch out.

(Clear Creek Courant, 22 October 1986, 6)

Happy birthday . . .

I'D LIKE TO WISH a happy birthday to Barb, my wife, lover and good friend. May your birthday be the happiest, Honey, and may you always have many more happy returns.

JOHN

(Clear Creek Courant, 29 October 1986, 5)

Go Get 'em!

IN REGARDS TO THE LADY with the special comments for 'Special Kids':
Go get 'em, Honey!

EDITORS' NOTE: That caller was no lady. It was a gentleman.

(Clear Creek Courant, 29 October 1986, 6)

Play a delight . . .

ONCE AGAIN the kids and the adults who put on the Tower Players' production of *Beauty and the Beast* deserve a standing ovation. It was a delight.

[High school drama coach] Cindy Lopez is a marvelous asset for our school. Wouldn't it be a shame to have to cut out her drama program?

(Clear Creek Courant, 29 October 1986, 6)

The editors elaborated on the incomplete information described here:

Lunch with Langdorf . . .

Oct. 27, 1986, the expenditures of Clear Creek County. One item: Mark Langdorf, services . . . '\$3,001.40' Then: Mark Langdorf, lunch . . . \$27.50.'

Now, I'd like to know what service Mark performed for the quoted amount, and I would like to know why in the hell he couldn't buy his own lunch if he got paid that much, or what did he do?

EDITORS' NOTE: Mark Langdorf has the food-service contract with Clear Creek County. As we understand it, the \$3,000 figure was for prisoners' meals in the jail, while the \$27 was for a working lunch provided for the county commissioners. If, however, it were the other way around, we, too, would be alarmed.

(Clear Creek Courant, 5 November 1986, 5)

Rude juveniles . . .

THE PERSON who wrote about the kids of business people in town hit the nail on the head. I know first-hand that this is true.

I was working in my garden last summer when a bunch of juveniles were going by, throwing a ball. They also threw a bottle of beer that burst near me, showering me with glass. When I told them I was going to call the cops, one of them told me, ‘Go ahead. My dad’s a cop. They won’t do anything.’

Needless to say, nothing was ever done.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 5 November 1986, 5)

Once in a while, contributors added a homey touch to the paper, like this message, the recipe below, a response to a reader who had mislaid his or hers:

Carefree students . . .

I think your paper is very informative about Clear Creek County.

I especially like the ‘Sound Off.’ Here is mine:

My main gripe is having to drive past the school on Colorado 103—students are always walking along the highway taking up the walkway plus one-half lane of highway.

They are ‘horse playing,’ pushing and shoving each other with no concern of what drivers are going through, thinking ‘there is no way I can stop if one is pushed a little too hard and in front of my car, even at less than 20 mph.’

Don’t they realize what could happen to them? I guess not, when even the teacher coming off of upper parking lot don’t look before pulling onto Colorado 103, or see you coming and try to ‘beat’ you onto the highway, daring you to hit them. I have had to brake for them a number of times.

CONCERNED ABOUT SAFETY

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 19 November 1986, 6)

Crossing guard . . .

ISN’T IT AMAZING, now that the Empire town board members were considerate enough to assume the responsibility for hiring a school crossing guard because our town marshal and his staff cannot possibly cross our elementary school children, for they are needed elsewhere?

We witnessed for several weeks now the town marshal parked across from the school, police vehicle idling, and guess who was sitting next to him – (great deduction, my fellow citizens!) – *the new school crossing guard!*

No criticism to her, as she does jump out of the town’s police vehicle to cross our approaching children.

Come on, Empire trustees. Crack the whip!

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 19 November 1986, 6)

Penny Round, a *Courant* reporter, took on her critic, “Tom,” in print. In a staff column, she noted that she had decided against a duel because that seemed “pretty drastic.” She had been

accused of not being intelligent and not graduating from a journalism school. She came up with a solution about how to deal with Tom.

“At last, in a flash of inspiration, the solution came to me. So I hereby formally challenge ‘Hacksaw Tom’ to a competition IQ test, to be administered at the Idaho Springs Public Library, under the watchful and stern eye of Librarian Annette Scheid.

“I think the competition should be open to viewing by the public, and I propose that we each muster cheerleading squads. I select the colors of purple and turquoise for my cheerleaders.

“I have no preference as to whether the results are made public or not.

“I will be anxiously awaiting a response from ‘Hacksaw Tom,’ if he’s willing to put his brain on the line.”

(*Clear Creek Courant*, “Maligned reporter challenges ‘Hacksaw Tom,” 26 November 1986, 4)

Gingerbread bakeoff? . . .

I ADORE ‘Sound Off.’

This is your friend, SPF [Sugar Plum Fairy, or in real life, Buddie Mees].

What would you think about getting a Gingerbread Competition going for the county which would be sort of *really* fun?

Come talk to me. I will build a house. You can take a picture of it. But it will not be my competition house, okay?

Let’s do it, and let’s see if we can get everybody going. . . .

EDITORS’ NOTE: Anyone interested in taking part in a Gingerbread House bakeoff? Call The Courant at 567-4491.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 26 November 1986, 5)

When a district judge took two years to decide a case and was censured by the Colorado Supreme Court, that inspired one “Sound Off” contributor.

About judges . . .

I THINK ‘Sound Off’ is a good idea. Keep it up!

It is time something is done about “holier than thou” judges.

It looks awfully fishy from this side of the closed legal brotherhood that the censure of Judge [William L.] Jones came after the election, when the case against him has been going on for over a year.

The Supreme Court is as guilty as Judge Jones in that they did not put the censure before the public in a good and timely manner. The case against him is ‘not complex’ and should have been aired before election.

Most people never have occasion to know or come into contact with a judge, so [they] blindly vote for retention.

Oh, for the good old days when we had a choice of two candidates!

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 26 November 1986, 5)

More on ‘Sound Off’ . . .

PLEASE DON’T, whatever you do, stop the ‘Sound Off’ column.

It’s the best thing that ever happened to *The Courant*.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 26 November 1986, 5]

Chop dead wood . . . !

LISTEN UP, you poor excuse for county commissioners!

Instead of worrying about the nit-picking you do, how about the county workers who eat breakfast on the county time and read their papers for one to 1_ hours every day?

You have women to pick up trash on roads – pay a good wage, I may say – and they spend time cleaning at home and doing their shopping instead.

And then you have the nerve to ask the tax payers for a tax raise?

Wake up! Get rid of the dead wood that surrounds us! You [*chuckle*] included.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 26 November 1986, 5)

Soon after Round had castigated “Hacksaw Tom” in her staff column, another reader let her have it in “Sound Off” for suggesting a competitive I.Q. test. Here’s what he had to say:

‘Shame on you, Penny Round, for your column!’

SHAME ON YOU, Penny! You should know that trying to put someone like ‘Hacksaw Tom’ in his place [‘Maligned reporter challenges ‘Hacksaw Tom,’ ‘Staff Stuff,’ Nov. 26] is a waste of time and good copy space.

And of all things to challenge poor old ‘Hacksaw’ to – a competition IQ test! Isn’t it obvious to you that he is not able to read or write? Why else would he have to constantly resort to using ‘Sound Off!’ as the only means of expressing himself? You could have challenged him to something a bit more in line with his obvious talents – like a mud fight.

Keep up the good work, Penny, and remember that ‘Hacksaw Tom’ may be going around with ‘only one oar in the water,’ but that most of us veterans know how to row a straight course and are more or less doing so.

Perhaps it’s time for ‘Hacksaw’ to change blades.

DALE LANGE
Floyd Hill Area

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 3 December 1986, 6)

***Georgetown officials
need watching . . .***

Good paper – ‘Sound Off’ is great!

Please *continue* your *exposure* of affairs in Georgetown. We have many problems here.

An inept city administrator (who has ‘resigned’ instead of being fired in Jan.)

A very good deputy marshal (V. [Vern] Katz) who was fired by above administrator, [Lee] Woolsey.

A new marshal, Greg Wood, who promises to clean up junk cars (according to new city ordinance), but same old cars are still around.

A mayor, Ann McConnell, who operates in a glaring conflict of interest when fines or citations are levied against other restaurant operators (Crazy Horse – for accepting extra asphalt for their mudhole parking lot, and Lizzie Greer’s for flying attractive triangle flags outside.)

I love Georgetown – have owned a home here since 1968 – plan to stay – BUT there is just no real interest in City Hall for the rest of the town. Main Street (6th) is so *well cared for*, but the rest of us on other streets live here, too, pay taxes, etc., and we are left to endure junk cars, littered yards, ungraded streets, etc.

Guess what we need is a total *turnover* of administration.

Please do *not* use my name in print. . . .

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 3 December 1986, 6)

Who makes the law?

I’VE JUST READ the article and editorial concerning Dr. [Pat] Conroy’s – quote – ‘resignation.’

I would like to know who is responsible for making the law that silences our school board.

I’d like to know who they are. I’d like to know how the law reads. And I’d like to know how to write to them. . . .

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 10 December 1986, 6)

***School employee
angry about Conroy***

ALL WE NEED is a brass band playing ‘Seventy-six Trombones’ and the Music Man illusion [*sic*] would be complete. Think about it for just one minute, citizens of River City (Clear Creek County), if a person did good work he certainly wouldn’t invoke laws suppressing that information. If I had something to hide, however, it would be comforting to know my tail was covered while retreating.

Judging from Dec. 3rd’s article, [‘Conroy quits; board accepts resignation, buys out contract’], I’d say there was some mystery and controversy surrounding [School Superintendent] Pat Conroy’s last position. At least one set of sirens and whistles should have gone off. It’s always easier looking into this stuff later when there’s more time for a thorough job.

We’re told the school district is having a tough time financially. Yet money keeps getting ‘found.’ First, enough to halt a referendum and the public opinion it generated, and then, enough to pay this guy off while school programs and budgets are getting cut. Things aren’t adding up.

The board’s faith in the superintendent selection process seems interesting. The events surrounding Conroy’s service here cast a shadow over both the selection committee’s and the

board's credibility. Whether he means it or not, [School Board President Rich] Casperson's note for community input on Conroy's successor should be taken seriously.

. . . The \$32,000 buy-out can be interpreted as a couple of teachers, numerous band and sports program additions, or any number of endless needs. Now we have none of these and must yet shell out more for another superintendent.

. . . I'm connected with the district, supporting a family, probably vulnerable and don't believe I'm entitled to the same buy-out privileges as Pat Conroy.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 17 December 1986, 6)

'Sound Off' a great idea

Cary—

I think 'Sound Off' is a great idea – we can't wait to read it every week – and I don't feel you need to sign your name as a lot of people are shy about being in the limelight.

DEE MUNCHIANDO

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 17 December 1986, 6)

In his "Stiff Lip" column, co-editor Stiff sounded the death knell for "Sound Off." The headline said, "Say 'goody-bye' to the 'Sound Off' column." Here is the text:

SAY 'GOOD-BYE' to our 'Sound Off' column.

After this week, we're merging it with our letters to the editors into a new column called – with ghastly originality – 'Vox Pop' (from *vox populi*, Latin for 'voice of the people').

You'll still be able to pick up your phone after business hours and on weekends and sound off on our 'Vox Pop' line (567-4492). And we'll be happy to publish whatever you say, as long as it doesn't violate the laws of libel or good taste. BUT . . . you'll have to leave your name and phone number (the latter for verification purposes only), because we're going back to our 13-year-old policy of not publishing any unsigned communications.

I thought 'Sound Off' was lively and interesting reading, and let the community take its own pulse. My co-prop. and co-spouse, however, hates it because too often the same callers took advantage of the anonymity it afforded to take swipes at other people.

I suppose that's human nature, but I'm disappointed in the people who let that unpleasant side show when they made anonymous calls to the 'Sound Off' line. I'm turned off by the image a handful of callers project, because I know the Clear Creek community really isn't like that. And I'm tired of fending off the complaints of readers who attack us for printing some[one]else's opinions.

So say 'good-bye' to 'Sound Off.' It's dead.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 24 December 1986, 4)

Pat Conroy . . .

I'VE GOT ENOUGH tar and feathers for Pat Conroy and two lawyers, plus at least two school board members.

I'll probably need a little help. . . .

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 24 December 1986, 6)

'I hardly ever saw him . . .'

To the happy Georgetown resident:

I WOULD LIKE to set you straight on a few things. I don't appreciate the way you attacked my father. He was a fine police officer and probably the best one Georgetown has had in a long time. You are calling him a liar and undependable and not responsible for his duties.

You obviously don't know what it's like to have a cop in the family. I hardly ever saw him unless he waved to me at work as he passed by. It seemed like every time we sat down to dinner, he wouldn't get a chance to start or finish his. And where were you when we didn't have a marshal? The two remaining police officers worked day and night for a couple of months before the selection was finally made, and in reply to your comment about not working while drawing pay from the town, you should have seen what I and two other witnesses saw last week. One of Georgetown's police officers was at a mall in Denver in a patrol car in uniform. Since when did a cop's duties include shopping?

And who do you think you are for viciously attacking people and then not having the guts to have your name printed?

LEA KATZ
Georgetown

(Clear Creek Courant, 24 December 1986, 6)

It is interesting to note that sometimes "pro" and "con" contributions balanced each other out, providing an unexpected and unplanned editorial juxtaposition, as in the two letters below:

Carlson program . . .

I WOULD like to complain about the Carlson Elementary Christmas program, and how unorganized it was and how long it was, and how it did not relate to Christmas at all. . . .

(Clear Creek Courant, 24 December 1986, 6)

Proud parent . . .

I JUST WANTED to say how much I enjoyed the holiday program last Wednesday at Carlson Elementary School – and especially watching teacher Carol Wolfe deftly handle everything from Eskimo games to Chinese music.

I especially enjoyed the songs by the Honor Choir. They – and the young soloists, especially – did a super job.

Christmas just wouldn't seem like Christmas without school programs. Thanks to everybody who worked so hard!

A PROUD DADDY

(Clear Creek Courant, 24 December 1986, 6)

***A school board member
replies to a critic . . .***

To the Anonymous School Critic:

. . . I hope you are not an employee, because I would hope that school district employees are better informed than you are.

Money is not ‘found’ in a school district budget. Certainly, monies can be transferred from one fund to another with the approval of the board, and some revenue is kept in reserve accounts to handle unforeseen developments. All this is a matter of public record to anyone who takes the time to get involved in the budgetary process. But to say we ‘found’ the money to pay off the superintendent’s contract implies some kind of sneaky maneuvering. The ‘secret’ account from which the superintendent will be paid is from the account titled ‘Superintendent’s Salary.’ Amazing!

You wrote (or said), ‘Now we have none of these . . .’ referring to the list of possible expenditures in the above paragraph, namely ‘a couple of teachers, numerous band and sports program additions, or any number of endless needs.’ I think we still have much of that list still funded in the budget, except for the ‘endless needs,’ which by their very nature are difficult to fund.

You criticize Rich Casperson, ‘whether he means it or not,’ and suggest we need to heed his call for citizen involvement in the superintendent search process. In the last search, 14 community members helped the board sift through more than 50 applications The final four applicants were interviewed in person by the board and representatives from the search committee. . . .

. . . If you are a school district employee, it’s ironic that you are critical of the superintendent’s contract being paid. You are likely employed on some kind of contract, and if you are a tenured teacher, you certainly enjoy a heap [*sic*] more job security than any superintendent in the world. But to ‘sound off,’ one doesn’t have to be responsible or play fair, does one?

TODD LOWTHER
Empire

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 24 December 1986, 6)

The last issue of the year, on Dec. 31, 1986, included a healthy Vox Pop page, with 17 letters, including this one:

In appreciation . . .

Editors, The Clear Creek Courant:

I believe the whole community, and county, owes Marjorie (Chee-Chee) Bell a very big debt of gratitude for her tireless effort and long years of gathering family histories and doing research—always looking and hoping to bring it all together in a wonderful book

Many a lesser soul would have given up the fight years ago. . . .

LAVERNE BOWLAND
Idaho Springs

(*Clear Creek Courant*, Vox Pop, 31 December 1986, 5)

Two Florida readers seemed to assess the paper’s credibility as a whole, rather than using “Sound Off” as the only barometer. Here is what they wrote:

**A word from a
Southern correspondent**

. . . I love *The Courant*, and think ‘Sound Off’ is fine except for the more virulent bitchers who should use more wit and less sulk!

My nomination for Citizen(s) of the Year, who has probably already been chosen, are you, Carol and Cary.

Best regards – Happy New Year.

DEBBIE HURLEY

MIKE & CATS

‘SANDY C. ROCKET LIGHTFOOT’

and

‘MAMA GARBO PANDA BEAR’

Palatka FL

EDITORS’ NOTE: Debbie (Hard) Hurley is a former resident here and member of the I.S. City Council. She formerly operated Mountain Records & Books on Miner St.

(Clear Creek Courant, 31 December 1986, 5)

**‘Glad you killed that
loathsome column . . .**

Dear Cary,

Bravo! I have privately told you how loathsome I have found ‘Sound Off.’ I applaud your decision to withdraw the opportunity for those people who would make vicious, rude, or unkind statements without taking responsibility for the comments by giving a name.

I consider this one giant step towards encouraging decent and responsible community reactions.

Sincerely,

CAROL S. HICKAM

Idaho Springs

(Clear Creek Courant, Vox Pop, 31 December 1986, 5)

The editors eased readers back into the habit of signing their letters with boxed

announcements that read:

***How to sound off in
the Vox Pop column***

GOT SOMETHING to say? Want to get something off your chest? Or maybe you’ve got a gripe, or a pat on the back for someone.

Let’s hear it in ‘Vox Pop,’ *The Courant’s* new ‘voice of the people’ column. Here’s all you do:

Write us at ‘Vox Pop,’ P.O. Box 2020, Idaho Springs CO 80452.

Our [*sic*] call us after business hours or on weekends at 567-4492.

Be sure to give us your name and a phone number we can call for verification or further information. We will not publish the phone number.

Sorry, but we cannot publish any unsigned communications.

WILCOX & STIFF
Co-Props.

(*Clear Creek Courant*, 31 December 1986, 5

SHOULD LETTERS BE ANONYMOUS? WHAT OTHERS THINK . . .

Clearly, this issue is still simmering on editorial front burners. To assess what other editors and publishers think about anonymity for letter writers, a few were polled through the Web site of the ISWNE—International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors. Some editors and publishers encourage all feedback from readers, signed or anonymous. And some try to convince letter writers to sign, on the basis that their comments are innocuous and non-threatening. Others are adamantly against unsigned comments in any form.

Responses came from Britain, the United States and Canada during three days in August. Here is a sampling of the results from papers that publish anonymous letters—at least occasionally—and those that have set up call-in plans.

Readers love an Iowa newspaper’s editorial section for which contributors can write up to 40 words without signing their names. They say it’s “the first thing they turn to after receiving the paper,” said publisher **Barb Mussman** at the *Wright County Monitor* in Clarion.

But respect for the two-year-old policy is not universal in the north central Iowa town. “Needless to say, the government officials hate it. We have had one incident when we allowed a comment that was too personal to get through but I never considered ending it. . . . I never thought I would do something like this as I really believe people should stand behind their comments by signing their name, but it’s been ok,” Mussman continued. She has been publisher in the town of 3,000, where the circulation is about 1,400, for 20 years.

Comments in Mussman's *Monitor* during the third week of August included the following:
"So now we have a 'Redemtion' Ceenter, a 'Fire Eixt' on a business patio and the Chamber promoting 'tourisim'. When did spelling stop counting?"

"Firemen's Park always has tree branches laying [*sic*] around; the slide is broken and other equipment needs work too. Is there a senior who needs a LIFE project?"

In a Kentucky community, the biggest employers are health care groups, schools and coal operations. "It's an impoverished area," editor Ben Gish said about Whitesburg, Ky., where his 6,200-circulation weekly, *The Mountain Eagle*, is based. Tennessee's Tri-Cities—Bristol, Kingsport and Johnson City—are 70 miles away, and Whitesburg is 14 miles from the Virginia state line.

In 1983, the paper started "Speak Your Piece," a call-in program for readers. When someone writes a letter to the editor, he or she must sign it. But when you call *The Eagle's* "Speak Your Piece," you don't have to say who you are.

"People talk about discipline in the schools, how they're treated at work or complain about potholes. It does delve into national politics, too," Gish said. When the information is clearly wrong, he uses an editor's note to point out inaccuracies.

"This is much more civilized than what you see on many Web sites," Gish continued.

The section's lead-in says, "Tell us what's on your mind. No need to give your name. Call 633-7508 from 9 am Tuesday to 9 am Friday. In addition to the telephone and the U.S. Mail, The Mountain Eagle accepts comments to Speak Your Piece by electronic mail. Our address is: mteagle@tgtel.com." Anyone may access comments older than two weeks. Subscribers may also access current "Speak Your Piece" items in the paid subscriber archive.

Samples from August 5 selections follow. “Mr. Preacher, when God looks at you and your congregation, which is He going to chastise? What are you teaching? When you look out there, what do you see? You tell them everything is all right and they believe it. You need to check the word of God and see what it says about what's happening to the whole world. It's coming apart. You say it's all right for interracial marriage and you say it's all right for the homosexuals. You see what this has led to. You need to think about what you've been teaching.”

“Every time I hear a coal company talking about pride I want to puke. Yes, they've got pride all right, that they've taken the tops off mountains that will never be the same again, native plants and trees gone for good. Now we have bare mountains with cheap pine trees scattered around, our hollows are filled in, and all of the native plants gone. Too bad we can't give them a pick and shovel and let them dig them out. They need to either mine underground or be run out of here. Pride? Yeah. Real proud of what they've done, not counting destroying people's homes with sludge ponds they never admit to owning.”

Sometimes comments are upbeat, like this one: “Peace and love to my Tennessee man. All my love from your Kentucky woman.”

Gish has fans and critics inside and outside the community. Al Cross, the director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, defends him. In an interview with a *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reporter in 2008, Cross pointed out that “Whitesburg and Letcher County (and many other places in Central Appalachia) have a long history of domination by coal companies and corrupt officials, and people are not in the habit of signing letters to the editor. In *Speak Your Piece*, the identities of malefactors are usually not clear, but I imagine a lot of people in town know who's being referred to. It's a useful if imperfect means of holding them accountable.”

Charley Wallace, publisher of the *Winters Express* in Winters, Calif., runs unsigned letters “when the writer can demonstrate to us that there is a chance of retribution. I always know who the letter writer is, their fears and concerns,” he said.

Two examples of the types of acceptable unsigned letters are complaints against the school district when the writer has children in the district or a complaint against police. “I don’t run unsigned letters that show up in the mail or under the door. We probably run two unsigned letters per year. . . ,” Wallace added.

He has been the publisher of the 2,500-circulation weekly since 1983 in the farm-based community of walnut and almond growers. The town is 30 miles from Sacramento and 70 miles from San Francisco.

Across the Atlantic, editor **Jeremy Condliffe** said his paper, the *Congleton Chronicle*, has always used anonymous letters and will continue to print them as long as he has the contributors’ names and addresses. The newspaper might not use personal attacks and stops unsigned letters on political topics right before elections.

“We do get some people complaining about it, in some cases in terms that make you realise why the letter was anonymous. However, I always tell complainers that they can’t libel an anonymous person so we get some strongly worded replies.”

Defending his policy further, Condliffe pointed out that “A lot of the ISWNE folk are adamant about not using unsigned letters, but we have four (tabloid) pages of letters every week and some of the adamant ones struggle to get four letters a week. Most of our letters are signed.”

The newspaper is based in Cheshire, England.

A publisher who permits anonymous letters in rare instances is **Julie Boren**, the publisher for 17 years at Campbell Publications in Pittsfield, Ill., in the west central part of the state. The

combined circulation of Campbell's six weeklies is about 25,000. Pittsfield is 30 miles from Jacksonville and 40 miles from Quincy.

"In the case of an anonymous letter, the publisher must know the identity of the writer," she said. Anonymity is allowed only "if there is convincing evidence that the person's job or safety might be in jeopardy by going public and if there is a need for the public to be informed of the situation the anonymous contributor can address," she said.

Another Illinois publisher, **Tom Mathews, Jr.**, said his policy of publishing anonymous letters can provoke criticism. "Sure it allows people to take pot shots at public officials. But sometimes people would not come out and say things if they thought they would be identified," he noted.

Topics range from politics to religion. Most center on local issues.

"I have to know the author and the phone number to check the authenticity of it. I have to know it's a responsible person" sending the letter. Because other readers know that the publisher knows the identity of anonymous letter writers, that fact minimizes any negative impact.

"I'm not going to take just any crackpot who wants to lob a grenade," said the publisher of the twice-weekly paper located 120 miles "straight east of St. Louis."

Mathews has been the publisher of the 7,250 circulation newspaper for 25 years, and the letters policy has been in place for a long time.

Richard Mostyn, editor of the *Yukon News* for four years and deputy editor for 15 years before that, tries to convince letter writers to go public, although he publishes occasional anonymous letters.

“Recently, we got a letter from a woman who was defending on-demand pornography offered through our local internet service provider. She was responding to one of our columnists and asked to remain anonymous,” Mostyn said.

He already had the woman’s phone number. The two reached a compromise. The letter would be published under her maiden name. “She was a real person with thoughtful opinions, but could have her reputation tarnished because she supported the porn industry. I believe the compromise to be elegant,” Mostyn wrote.

“Sometimes, people will be penalized for speaking out. A newspaper must recognize this and, at times, protect its sources. Sometimes that might include printing an anonymous letter.”

The three-times-a-week paper in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Canada, is “upfront with our policy on anonymity.” The editor prefers not to grant it, “and we don’t get many requests for it anymore.” The paper also prefers not to print letters about issues that have not been previously covered in its pages. “If a letter hints at something in the public interest, we’ll do a story rather than print a letter.”

Circulation at the *Yukon News* ranges from 5,500 to 8,500 per issue.

In Florida, *Island Sand Paper* publisher Carl Conley, who has held the post for 10 years, uses anonymous letters when they are topical. “Sometimes a point needs to be made and when the point stirs the status quo too much, anonymity sometimes helps people express themselves without fear of reprisal.” A water department employee who wanted to reveal that the antiquated water delivery system needed upgrading could be an anonymous contributor. This would be true especially if the employee didn’t blame or name someone for the problems. “I might publish the letter anonymously because the writer would have a vested interest to protect, he said.” The employee needs the job *and* has a timely and relevant point to make.

Conley's paper, on Ft. Myers Beach, circulates 10,000 in high season and 7,000 in low season. Its online version attracts "1,000 reads a day," verified by a counter.

Derek Kilbourn, the editor and owner of the *Gabriola Sounder* since October and former co-editor at the *Star News* in Wainwright, Alberta, has carved out a middle ground. *The Sounder*, across the Strait of Georgia from Vancouver on Valdes Island, does not print anonymous letters. But his "Smiles and Snarls" section is somewhat of a sequel to "Rants & Raves" at the *Star News*. The *Star News* anonymous section has since been discontinued.

"Smiles and Snarls" contains short commentaries about the life of the community, with no name, one name or a *nom de plume*. Kilbourn said he monitors the section carefully and edits it to be "tasteful" and "germane" for the 3,650-circulation paper.

"I have, once so far in my short five years as an editor, allowed a *nom de plume* to be used by a letter writer." The writer was a police officer who was writing about something that had nothing to do with the police. He did not want his out-of-uniform opinion linked to his in-uniform persona.

Here is one "pre copyedited" example Kilbourn provided: "Snarls to the woman walking at least 9-11 Shitzu dogs off leash on the gravel road in the Legends Friday July 31 about 8 p.m. My 13-year-old granddaughter was riding home on her bicycle and was harassed by the dogs who were biting her feet. They caused her to fall resulting in many scrapes, bruises and damage to her bike. You did not even ask if she was hurt or if she was able to get home. You called the dogs and left her there on a little travelled road. Shame on you! This column is usually filled with smiles to the many helpful people on this island. Regretfully not so in this case.—her Grandmother."

In some cases, much larger dailies provide for anonymous feedback. Nine years ago

the *Salina(Kan.) Journal*, a seven-day daily under the leadership of publisher Tom Bell, started a call-in program called “Extension 333.” Callers may use it blow off steam or state their opinions about almost anything.

“It’s an easy way to call in to vent. Some people say they can’t write letters and sign their names. That may just be their perception or an excuse. But it really doesn’t matter because it gives the disenfranchised a voice.”

Bell said Extension 333 is wildly popular with many readers.

“I’ve never seen anything create this kind of buzz. People love it or hate it. We’ve done public surveys twice and got hundreds of calls to keep it.”

“We get some really good comments, some awful ones, humorous ones and even some racist ones,” Bell said. The paper’s rules forbid attacks on individuals, unless they are public figures or public officials or Bell.

A city commissioner wanted to do away with all raises for city employees—cost-of-living, longevity—the works. But when readers disagreed, the commissioner “took a beating on Extension 333.”

One caller reported seeing a penguin in her Kansas backyard. “Then that took off, and we had a lot of penguin sightings.” Someone even made a metal sign—a penguin cutout—and placed it in the front yard of the *Journal* office.

Some of the comments are picked up for the opinion page—seven days a week. And the newspaper itself talks back to Extension 333 in the Friday edition, under a heading called “Talking Back.”

Samples of “Talking back to Ext. 333” follow. The calls are in quotes. The *Journal's* responses come next.

“I may be old-fashioned, but I wish we'd go back to a full-service filling station. I'd like to have my oil checked, have my air pressure checked, have it put in and have oil put in without fighting to see what I'm doing because I'm half-blind.”

While we sympathize with motorists longing for a full service station, which we have at the Sinclair station on West Crawford, we wonder what a “half-blind” person is doing behind the wheel of a car.

Bell editorialized against legalizing fireworks in rural areas of the county. The county commission approved it. Here's a call that came in after July 4, followed by the *Journal's* response.

“Mr. Bell, I'm happy to report to you that I went out in the county to shoot off some fireworks and did not get my hand blown off.”

Good news! Now you can wave at him with all your fingers.

Bell has been the publisher for 11 years. Before that, he was the editor and publisher of two papers owned by Harris Enterprises, Inc., the parent company based in Hutchinson. Harris owns six dailies, including the 25,000 circulation *Journal*.

On the other side of the anonymous letters and/or call-in plans debate are those who believe anonymous comments have no place in newspapering. Here are their views:

Paula Barnett is the publisher of the *Woodruff County Monitor* in east central Arkansas at McCrory—midway between Little Rock and Memphis. The paper has a circulation of 2,400. She is opposed to anonymous letters or comments and addressed the issue in an editorial.

“Through the pages of the *Monitor*, the community has a voice, but only those members of the community who have the courage to literally ‘put their names where their mouths are,’” she wrote.

“The *Monitor* receives an untold number of letters to the editor that bear no signature. Almost without exception, these letters are mean-spirited and slanderous. But we would still be willing to print these letters (with some editing to prevent problems for both the writer and the paper) if the writer felt strongly enough about his or her views to sign a name and give a phone number,” Barnett said.

Former publisher **Al Seiler** agreed. He was co-owner of the *Pike Press* in Pittsfield, Ill. for several years until the paper changed hands in 1990. He still writes an occasional column from his home in Des Moines.

“Safety and consistency dictates to throw all anonymous letters in the trash basket. Some newspapers nowadays run a small inside section called “Your 2 Cents Worth” or something similar. The paper accepts short pieces from anonymous letters or phone calls. They are popular with readers and some of them are truly funny. But as an editor, I’d be leery of ever starting the practice.”

An Oklahoma publisher, **John M. Wylie II**, had this to say about publishing unsigned letters. “We don’t, period, paragraph. I have made one exception in 25 years, when I genuinely feared for the author’s safety, and that was a mistake. It will never happen again.”

Wylie has headed the *Oologah Lake Leader* for those 25 years. The circulation is 3,000, except for a monthly TMC publication. *The Leader* touts its online presence like this: “Nine years of online news from the birthplace of Will Rogers.” The town is located in northeastern Oklahoma.

CONCLUSION

Many contributors to *The Courant’s* “Sound Off” had something interesting or important to say. Some even felt compelled to sign their names. Others wanted to express their anger about

something without letting readers know who they were.

“Sound Off” could be lively and did attract readers who had had little interest in the newspaper earlier. And occasionally “Sound Off” provided a springboard for the editors to set the record straight about something going on in the community that was misunderstood or inadequately publicized. But, in the balance, the disadvantages of “Sound Off” outweighed its advantages for both editors and readers.

Based on the ISWNE poll, it is obvious that many other publishers print anonymous letters and/or have similar call-in formats today, more than 20 years after the demise of “Sound Off.” Are the yardsticks they are using to justify their policies sound? Or are the publishers enabling irresponsible contributors who do not wish to take responsibility for their actions to harm others in the process?

Nameless contributors often express their vitriol toward others who are named or whose identities are known. When newspapers allow themselves to be vehicles for vitriol, are they complicit in publishing messages that are unfair?

During the first 13 years of their stewardship of *The Courant*, the editors were correct in their policy of requiring that letters be signed. Fortunately for the reading public, after experimenting for four months, the editors returned to their original policy. They decided that unsigned letters are indefensible.