

BEFORE BLOGGERS THERE WERE PLOGGERS (PRINT LOGGERS):

COMMUNITY JOURNALISM CORRESPONDENTS

by

BETH H. GARFRERICK, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

University of North Alabama

Department of Communications

bagarfrerick@una.edu

256-765-4941

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Introduction

Since its inception, “weekly,” “rural,” “country,” “grassroots” or “community” journalism has relied on correspondents from small, rural communities within the weekly or small-town daily newspaper’s service area to provide detailed accounts of local happenings.¹

Much like today’s bloggers, these early bloggers, or “ploggers” (print loggers) wrote about issues that mirrored the lives of “average folk.” A “names make news” approach was popular in determining newsworthy local articles. Throughout the twentieth century, these correspondents were mostly farm wives who wrote about their communities and recorded everyday happenings. They wrote about births, marriages, deaths, social events, such as bridal showers and church receptions, out-of-town visitors, and travel. These country correspondents played an important role in boosting the morale of readers and the bottom line of weekly publishers. Correspondents wrote columns under the heading of a community’s name that contained news about its residents. Their writings revealed that even during tough economic and political times, people still enjoyed their lives, attended church, visited friends and relatives, hosted social events, got married, and had babies, most of whom the newspapers described as “beautiful.”

¹ The terms “weekly,” “community,” “country,” “rural,” and “grassroots” are used interchangeably to describe the small-town community weekly newspapers referred to in this paper.

Small-town publishers recognized that correspondents maintained newspaper subscriptions because of their columns' popularity. For some publishers who lacked funding to pay even a single reporter, the only newsgathering help came from local correspondents, whose only pay might be a subscription to the newspaper. By the 1960s, however, a number of "housewife columnists" expanded their traditional correspondent roles to commenting on their daily lives and families in a more sophisticated and, often, humorous manner.

Critics of community or rural journalism were especially harsh when it came to discussing the "personals" that reported on the social gatherings and comings and goings of area residents.² But proponents of community journalism argued that the personals helped the community stay connected. The society columns of metropolitan dailies usually mentioned only the financially well connected, but the personals in small-town newspapers included folks from varied income classes.

Traditional correspondent columns have persisted in weeklies throughout the country into the twenty-first century. In his 1993 book about his years in weekly journalism, Maine publisher Alexander Brook boasted that before he left the *York County (Me.) Star* in 1977, it averaged between sixty and eighty-four broadsheet pages a week devoted exclusively to news about 50,000 residents in fifteen communities. In comparison, he observed that the *New York Times* devoted roughly forty pages a week on crime and government activities of the roughly twelve million residents of its city and surrounding communities. "A moderately active Kennebunker could expect to find his name repeated hundreds, even thousands, of times in the *Star* during his lifetime and the community events that shaped it," he said. "The average Brooklyn resident never, all his life long, finds himself mentioned in the *Times*."³

² A personal is a short news item of local interest that features names.

³ Alexander B. Brook, *The Hard Way: The Odyssey of a Weekly Newspaper Editor* (Bridgehampton, N.Y.: Bridge Works Publishing Co., 1993), 255.

Names, names, and more names

Weekly subscribers looked to correspondents from small, rural communities within the newspaper's service area to provide detailed accounts of local weddings, baptisms, and funerals. The local content, printed on the blank sides of the ready-print⁴ newspapers, was usually designed to promote good will in the community. A "names make news" approach was popular in determining newsworthy local articles. Not surprisingly, some correspondents thought highly enough of their position in the community to include their own names and those of family members several times in each column. For example, Mrs. William Baker, Bentonville correspondent for the *National Road Traveler* in Cambridge City, Indiana, included eleven separate news items in her Thursday, June 16, 1955, column. Of those items, she and family members were listed in three. One item noted "Mr. and Mrs. Wm. Baker and son Stephen entertained the Home Builders class Sunday evening." After listing those in attendance, the paragraph concluded with "A cooperative supper was enjoyed." She was also mentioned among a group of Bentonville women traveling to Indianapolis. And finally, "Mr. and Mrs. William Baker and son Stephen, Mrs. Alma Reddick of Mays, and Mr. and Mrs. Carl Reddick and daughter Carla Sue of Milton, were Saturday evening guests of Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Lindsay and sons, Gregg and Brad. A hamburger fry was enjoyed."⁵

Agriculture, illness, and religious revivals were also topics in high demand among rural

⁴ Ready-printed pages, a system introduced in this country in the 1860s by Wisconsin weekly publisher Ansel Nash Kellogg, were usually two, inside, pre-printed pages sent to smaller newspapers to help fill a four-page newspaper. The material on these pre-printed pages contained general news and features of a regional interest. The other sides of these pre-printed pages were left blank to be filled with local content. Ready-print was also referred to as "patent insides" or "printed service pages."

⁵ Mrs. William Baker, "Bentonville," *National Road Traveler*, 16 June 1955, 3. Cambridge City, in Wayne County, is located in the east-central part of Indiana. The newspaper proclaimed to be the largest weekly in the state, offering a "complete weekly review of eastern Indiana." Cambridge City had a population of 2,559 in 1950. *Seventeenth Census of the United States*, "Population," volume 1, section 5, 14-19, Table 7. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

newspaper readers. It was not unusual for correspondents to begin their columns with weather reports. In the October 9, 1969, edition of the *Llano (Tex.) News*, Mrs. Abbye Sessom wrote the following in “News from Valley Spring”:

This news column will be short this week due to the big rains that cut off all telephone communications in west Llano. Hudson Long reported he got 7.40 inches at his place. Others around that we were able to contact reported about five inches. It was badly needed in some ways, except some of the peanut farmers were plowing up their peanuts and it will delay the work for some time. Creeks were on a rise Sunday morning and the ground is real boggy everywhere, but no one is complaining, just thankful for a wonderful rain.”⁶

A non-bylined correspondent bemoaned the fact that unusually nice weather one Sunday kept many from church. Page six of the July 15, 1948, edition of the *Mexia (Tex.) Weekly Herald*, headlined “Activities Through the Week,” contained a column from the community of Farrar in which the writer noted, “Everyone has been enjoying the cooler weather after so much hot weather. There was very poor attendance at Sunday School Sunday afternoon. It seems that most everyone had gone visiting.”⁷

Farm bureau agents began writing agricultural columns, which became a mainstay in many community newspapers by the 1930s, but decades prior and after, correspondents continued to write about the successes and woes of local farmers. A column from the community of Timberville, Virginia, in a January 1903 edition of *Shenandoah Valley* reported, “Mr. J. H. Hoover shipped a fine load of 100 hogs from here Monday to Mr. J. A. Earman, Keezletown, Va. They averaged 197 lbs. and will be butchered by Mr. Earman, whose hams are famous and are

⁶ Mrs. Abbye Sessom, “News from Valley Spring,” *Llano (Tex.) News*, 9 October 1969, 2. Llano, in Llano County, is located in central Texas, northwest of Austin. Llano had a population of 2,656 in 1960. *Eighteenth Census of the United States*, “Population,” volume 1, part 45, section 2, 45-38, Table 8. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

⁷ “Activities Through the Week,” *Mexia (Tex.) Weekly Herald*, 15 July 1948, 6. Mexia, in Limestone County, is located in central eastern Texas. Mexia had a population of 6,410 in 1940. *Sixteenth Census of the United States*, “Population,” volume 1, section 9, 1,059, Table 5. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.gov/>.

sold in New York and Chicago where they are in great demand. The old time ‘old ham’ is as palatable in New York as Virginia where they are always in demand.”⁸

The correspondent served the role of hospital or nursing home spokesperson, recording the illnesses and conditions of those in hospitals and nursing homes, as well as those recovering at home. Doctor-patient confidentiality was ignored as correspondents wrote in wrenching detail of the maladies suffered by friends, family and mere acquaintances. Even out-of-town doctor visits were recorded. For example, under the heading “Lilbourn News” in the August 1, 1957, edition of *The Sikeston (Mo.) Herald*, it was noted that “Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Edwards spent Tuesday in Cape Girardeau where Mrs. Edwards consulted her doctor ... Mrs. Ed Beavers and daughter Eddie Jean, were in New Madrid Tuesday wher [sic] Eddie Jean visited her doctor.”⁹

Correspondent columns were usually organized haphazardly, seemingly written in the order in which the newsy tidbits reached the columnist. For example, the “Society” column of a 1911 edition of the *Butts County Progress*, published in Jackson, Georgia, reported that “Miss Jane Stanfield is the attractive guest of Col. and Mrs. Y. A. Wright,” followed by “Miss Mamie Kate Watson is at home from school this week on account of measles.”¹⁰ House paintings and home visits were the topic of the day in the May 1908 report from the South Lee community in the *Marshall (Mich.) Expounder*. The column stated: “Pearl Mead has completed painting Geo.

⁸ “Timberville, Va. Items,” *Shenandoah Valley*, 15 January 1903, 2. New Market, in Shenandoah County, is located in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. New Market had a population of 684 in 1900. *Twelfth Census of the United States*, “Population,” volume 1, section 1, Table 8. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

⁹ “Lilbourn News,” *The Sikeston (Mo.) Herald*, 1 August 1957, 8. Sikeston, in New Madrid and Scott counties, is located in the southeastern part of Missouri. The newspaper was listed as a member of the National Editorial Association and the Missouri Press Association. Sikeston had a population of 11,640 in 1950. *Seventeenth Census of the United States*, “Population,” volume 1, section 7, 25-25, Table 7. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

¹⁰ “Society,” *Butts County (Ga.) Progress*, 10 February 1911, 1. Jackson, in Butts County, is located in north-central Georgia, southeast of Atlanta. Jackson had a population of 1,862 in 1910. *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, “Population,” volume 2, section 3, 343, Table 1. Population of Minor Civil Divisions: 1910, 1900, and 1890. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

Cushman's house. Mr. and Mrs. Younglove visited at Rolla Moats' Sunday. Miss Jessie Cushman visited her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Cushman Sunday. Elgin Wagner is having his house painted."¹¹

Sentimentalism vs. sensationalism

Longtime *Abilene (Kan.) Reflector* editor Charles Moreau Harger argued in a 1907 article in *The Atlantic Monthly* that there were sentimental, even psychological, attachments one had for his hometown newspaper that could not be matched by readers of a metropolitan daily. He observed that a city businessman would throw away financial papers and sensational tabloids but would eagerly open the pencil-addressed home papers "that bring to him memories of new-mown hay and fallow fields and boyhood. Regardless of its style, its grammar, or its politics, it holds its reader with a grip that the city editor may well envy." He said the time had not yet come for the country paper to "assume city airs," nor would it be for many years to come. He explained, "The city journal is the paper of the masses; the country weekly or small daily is the paper of the neighborhood. One is general and impersonal; the other, direct and intimate. One is the marketplace; the other, the home."¹²

Weekly and small-town daily newspapers in the early 1930s were better mirrors of the public than their daily newspaper counterparts, closely representing the daily lives of their readers. In fact, University of Minnesota journalism professor Thomas Barnhart's 1936 textbook on weekly newspaper management emphasized how important it was for an editor to turn out a newspaper that "mirrored the lives of small-town and rural folk."¹³

¹¹ *Marshall (Mich.) Expounder*, 1 May 1908, 2. Marshall in Calhoun County, is located in south-central Michigan, just east of Battle Creek. Marshall had a population of 4,370 in 1900. *Twelfth Census of the United States*, "Population," volume 1, part 1, section 8, 456, Table 8. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

¹² Charles M. Harger, "The Editor of To-day," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January, 1907, 92, 94.

¹³ Thomas F. Barnhart, *Weekly Newspaper Management* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936), 5.

Because of its close community tie, the weekly served as a valuable research source. A sociology professor at New Jersey College for Women, Rutgers University, described the content of the average weekly as being “consistent and repetitive in nature” and primarily concerned with local affairs. He acknowledged that while some weeklies reported inconsistently, varied their editorial policies, or were careless or negligent about omissions, average community newspapers were considered accurate and thus could be considered as reliable a source as public records that were “often badly kept.” He observed, “The person who does not know America’s small-town papers does not know rural America.”¹⁴

An appreciation for these country scribes was voiced in a *Time* magazine article that profiled the 1935 winner of “The Best Country Newspaper Correspondent in the U.S.” contest, sponsored by the Crowell Publishing Company’s *Country Home* magazine. The contest winner was fifty-eight-year-old Mary Elizabeth Mahnkey of Oasis, Missouri, who had been a correspondent for forty-four years for the Taney County *Republican* in Forsyth, Missouri. She had also contributed poetry, letters, and farm gossip to *Country Home* magazine over the years. Her community was like that of many country correspondents in that its population numbered less than 100. In fact, at the time the article was published, Oasis had only twenty-one residents while the town of Forsyth, from which the weekly was published, had a population of 281.¹⁵ As the winner, she received fifty dollars, a “fine silver meat platter with a vegetable dish to match,” a free trip to Manhattan, and the title of the best country correspondent.¹⁶

According to country editor C.M. Meredith Jr. in his 1937 textbook on country journalism, correspondents were “apostles of the country editor” because they sold the

¹⁴ John Winchell Riley, Jr., “The Country Weekly as a Sociological Source,” *American Sociological Review* 3:1 (February, 1938): 41, 43.

¹⁵ The Taney County *Republican* had a weekly circulation of 871.

¹⁶ “Crossroads Correspondent,” *Time*, July 29, 1935, 40.

newspaper to hundreds that were “too far distant for him [editor] to reach directly.”¹⁷

Publishers recognized that correspondents maintained subscriptions because of their columns’ popularity. In fact, the author of a textbook on weekly newspapers estimated that editors devoted more space to country correspondence than to any other single category because roughly half of the average weekly’s circulation went to readers on rural routes and in small communities. State press associations and the National Editorial Association (now the National Newspaper Association),¹⁸ also recognizing the importance of correspondents, joined forces in 1937 to publish a monthly informal, instructive magazine named *Folks*, which was described as “the Helpmate of the Newspaper Correspondent.”¹⁹ Thus, the country’s view of rural journalism, as displayed among the pages of nationally syndicated magazines and newspapers, was both complimentary and critical. Critics of country journalism continued to raise questions of fairness and favoritism while supporters of the back-to-county-movement applauded the rural press for its microscopic examination of the intimate details of small-town life.

Emphasis on local news

Many weeklies during the 1930s decreased their subscriptions to nationally syndicated ready-print and boilerplate material companies and increased their use of government propaganda.²⁰ A growing number of government agencies provided informational columns and

¹⁷ C.M. Meredith, Jr., *The Country Weekly* (Boston: Bruce Humphries, Inc., 1937), 63.

¹⁸ To address concerns about competition with the metropolitan dailies for subscribers and advertisers, concerns which had been voiced by country editors since the late nineteenth century, Minnesota weekly publisher Benjamin Briggs Herbert led a group of publishers from across the nation to New Orleans in late 1885 to organize the National Editorial Association, a professional organization for the country press. From its Chicago base, the association began publishing a trade magazine, the *National Editorial Journalist and Printer and Publisher* (later re-named the *National Printer-Journalist*) in 1893.

¹⁹ Thomas F. Barnhart, *Weekly Newspaper Writing and Editing* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1949), 191, 197.

²⁰ By the late 1940s, there were an estimated 250 newspaper syndicates that produced 2,000 non-local features such as columns, editorial cartoons, and comic strips. Most of the country’s estimated 10,000 weeklies purchased at least one non-local feature. The main syndicate source for weeklies was the Western Newspaper Union, which served an estimated three of every five of the country’s non-dailies. By this time, WNU was based in New York, with thirty-five branches throughout the country. According to country journalism textbook author Thomas Barnhart, the WNU’s service to small-town newspapers was so complete that the company was referred to as “the Sears and

articles on such pocketbook issues as family finance, consumer spending habits, and business and farming practices. But, even though there was an increased amount of government publicity in their publications, weekly editors continued to place a strong emphasis on local matters, as evidenced in the heavy use of community correspondent and locally written columns. The importance of correspondents to “local” coverage was emphasized in a page two paragraph in the April 6, 1933, edition of *The Journal-Advance and Benton County Gazette* in Gentry, Arkansas.

Placed under the headline “From Our Rural Correspondents,” the paragraph stated:

Most of our rural editors were, a little late this, week and we are not complaining because we realize that they are busy with their own problems. This is the time of the year that folks in the country have much to do and work left undone may mean a considerable loss at harvest time. We have had occasion to drive over almost the entire trade-territory the past few days and without exception the people seem to have a renewed confidence in the return of better conditions and are busy at their tasks with new hope and courage. They seem to be contented and are satisfied with their lot. All things considered, the average farmer has every right to feel proud of his position in the community. We folks here in Gentry really appreciate our farmer friends more than any other place that the writer has ever been. Without them we could not exist and with that in mind we will continue to cultivate their friendship and interest and at all times endeavor to help them in every way that we can.²¹

For some publishers who lacked funding to pay even a single reporter, the only newsgathering help came from local correspondents. Sometimes a correspondent’s only pay was a free subscription to the newspaper, according to Charles Wilson, who wrote about weeklies in a 1934 article, “The Country Press Reawakens.” Regarding country correspondents, he observed, “Few of them sign their work. Yet they write on, through flood and famine, drought and

Roebuck of the weekly newspaper field.” Other syndicates that served weeklies were the National Weekly Newspaper Service, owned and managed by WNU, the Newspaper Enterprise Association of Cleveland, and King Features Syndicate of New York, the largest producer of syndicate material. Also, some state press associations sent out weekly news releases to members at little or no cost. Thomas Barnhart, *Weekly Newspaper Writing and Editing* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1949), 202-06.

²¹ “From Our Rural Correspondents,” *The Journal-Advance and Benton County (Ark.) Gazette*, 6 April 1933, 2. Gentry, in Benton County, is located in the northwestern corner of Arkansas. Gentry had a population of 779 in 1930. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*, “Population,” volume 1, section 3, 121, Table 5. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

pestilence--miniature historians who expect neither money nor fame.”²² But while some correspondents received no cash compensation, C.F.R. Smith, editor of the country correspondents’ magazine, *Folks*, conducted a survey covering a large sampling of rural weeklies in Minnesota that showed that 87.5 percent of rural correspondents received cash payment for their work. The survey revealed that column inch rates paid to correspondents varied from two to five cents, while payment per column ranged from twenty-five cents to one dollar. The study also reported that monthly rates ranged from one to two dollars.²³

During the Great War of the earlier 1900s and later, when Japan’s 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor brought forth a declaration of war, weekly publishers had to decide how to balance local news with news from the war front. The following July 2, 1918, correspondent column in the *Monticello (Ia.) Express* from the community of Castle Grove provides an example of war news that varied from pleas for patriotic support to updates on the whereabouts of local servicemen:

Nearly all of our citizens responded to the call and came to the headquarters to buy their allotment of W. S. Stamps last Friday. A few, however, did not consider it a duty to visit the committee and left it to a committee of busy men to spend another day in hunting them up.

Forest Deischer was last heard from at Jersey City several days ago, and it is believed that he has sailed for somewhere “over there.”²⁴

This balancing issue became more of a concern during World War II considering that syndicated news wire services made war news in the 1940s more affordable and accessible than during previous international conflicts. Much of the local content concerned the impact of war on

²² Charles M. Wilson, "The Country Press Reawakens," *The North American Review* 238 (September, 1934): 262.

²³ A survey covering a large sampling of rural weeklies in Minnesota, conducted by C.F.R. Smith, editor of *Folks* magazine, showed that 87.5 percent of rural correspondents received money payments for their work. Column inch rates varied from 2 to 5 cents, payment per column ranged from 25 cents to \$1, and monthly rates ranged from \$1 to \$2. (Barnhart, *Weekly Newspaper Writing and Editing*, 198).

²⁴ "Castle Grove," *The Monticello (Ia.) Express*, 4 July 1918, 1. W.S. stood for War Savings stamps, a patriotic program of the U.S. Treasury Department to help fund the war effort. Monticello, in Jones County, is located in east-central Iowa. Monticello had a population of 2,043 in 1910. *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, "Population," volume 2, section 5, 595, Table 1. Population of Minor Civil Divisions: 1910, 1900, and 1890. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

the community. Correspondents submitted community reports that told of American Red Cross projects and soldiers stationed overseas sent columns home with their first-person accounts of battlefronts and foreign travels.

By the 1950s, weekly publishers who wanted to stay competitive with daily newspapers, radio newscasts, and the emerging television news industry, realized they should concentrate on doing what community weeklies could do best—provide in-depth coverage on local issues.²⁵ No longer could they rely on ready-print and stereotype plate or “boilerplate” material to fill news holes within their pages.²⁶ A 1951 review of thirty surveys and studies of weekly newspaper reading conducted during the previous twelve years affirmed the unique role that weeklies had in connecting residents to their community. University of Illinois journalism professor Wilbur Schramm and research assistant Merritt Ludwig found in 1951 that “localness” and especially the publishing of local names made for high readership in weekly newspapers. Despite the fact that nearly all weekly newspaper readers surveyed relied on radio for current news and roughly half also subscribed to a daily or Sunday newspaper, Schramm and Ludwig found that the weekly did a better job of “knitting together its readers with the little understandings which are the essence both of communication and community.” They asserted that the daily served more as a bulletin board of the latest political, economic, and commercial news, while the weekly served as a “great wide window through which readers look out into their community and into the lives

²⁵ "Weeklies Becoming Increasingly Important, Says Florida's Governor," *The American Press* 77 (October, 1959): 18. The sub-headline of the article read: “Bigness of dailies re-opens field for coverage of activities of individuals by small town and neighborhood newspapers.” The article referred to an address by Governor Leroy Collins of Florida to the fall meeting of the New England Weekly Press Association held in Crawford Notch, New Hampshire. The governor’s main message was that weekly newspapers, rather than fading into obscurity, were becoming increasingly important.

²⁶ Stereotype plates required squeezing a sheet of damp cardboard over the type. The cardboard sheet was then dried, lifted, and turned over and molten metal was poured onto the cardboard, making a cast. Stereotype plates were more expensive to use than ready-print because they required a press run, but some editors preferred the stereotype plates because they could move the syndicated material around on the pages. The term “boilerplate” was popularized to refer to any syndicated material. Eugene C. Harter, *Boilerplating America: The Hidden Newspaper* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, Inc., 1991), 33.

of their friends and acquaintances.” As an example of the strong community of interest developed by a weekly, researchers found that it was difficult to find readers who were away from their communities for more than a few weeks without having their hometown newspaper mailed to them to addresses in all parts of the world.²⁷

So, how did weekly editors, reporters, and correspondents stay in touch with their communities? Mabel Temby, editor of the *Kewaunee (Wis.) Enterprise*, wrote in a 1959 article in *National Publisher* that she worked seventy to eighty hours a week and that her phone rang constantly. “The farmers get up at five o’clock,” she said, “and before they go out into the fields, they call to tell me about the hay they have for sale, or the cow they want to buy.” She even received calls in the middle of the night, recalling, “The taverns close at one, and they sleep mornings, so when my phone rings at 1:30 I know before I pick up the receiver that it will be one of them.”²⁸ Newspaperman Eugene Harter seemed to imply that some weekly reporters became too closely involved in their readers’ personal affairs, blurring the line between news and gossip, when he recalled working with a society editor who penciled in wedding dates and another date nine months later. She’d then check the “Blessed Events” column, according to Harter, and match it to her chart. “Some weeks she would rush to the phone,” he wrote, “and amid much tittering, reveal the results of her biological research to her friends.”²⁹

There was no blurring of the lines between news and gossip in “The Spillway,” a popularly read gossip column that ran for more than forty years in *The Florence (Ala.) Herald*. The column was named for the spillway of Wilson Dam on the nearby Tennessee River and was written by several anonymous authors throughout the years. “Nobody knew who wrote it except

²⁷ Wilbur Schramm and Merritt Ludwig, “The Weekly Newspaper and its Readers,” *Journalism Quarterly* 28 (Summer, 1951): 301, 304, 314.

²⁸ Mabel Temby, “Hometown Editor Says Country Journalism Is For Me,” *The National Publisher* (May, 1959): 21.

²⁹ Harter, *Boilerplating America*, 7.

me and dad,” recalled John D. “Jack” Martin in a 2009 interview.³⁰ He said that most of the authors were women but “a couple of men did it at times,” adding, “It was a well-guarded secret.” To avoid being discovered, Martin said it was often under the cover of night that he went to the author’s home to collect that week’s column. An emphasis on gossip made the column “wildly popular” throughout the years, according to Martin. Following is a typical “Spillway” item: “A little bird has whispered to us that Louise Jones’ visit in North Wilkesboro, North Carolina, which delayed her arrival here and shortened her vacation with us by several days, was a significant one. We don’t know a thing but how we are a-guessin’.”³¹ “The Spillway” not only focused on who’s who, but who’s with whom, according to Martin. “If you were with your boyfriend instead of your husband, everyone knew about it,” he added with a chuckle.³²

Commenting on the importance of covering a wide span of local issues, including social and gossip columns, Alexander Brook, publisher of the *Kennebunk (Me.) Star*, wrote that to be the community weekly of record it was important to report on what appealed “to the thoughtless as well as the thoughtful of all ages.”³³

Not provincial, personal

Certainly a distinguishing characteristic among many weeklies was that they reported news from areas that no other print media outlets covered, or that were only minimally

³⁰ Marcy B. Darnall, John D. Martin’s grandfather, bought *The Florence (Ala.) Herald* in 1921. He had been editor of the *Key West (Fla.) Citizen*. His son, Marcy B. Darnall, Jr., and daughter, Louise Darnall Martin, inherited the paper from their father. Marcy Jr. ran the paper. His sister lived in Atlanta with her husband, Albert L. Martin. Marcy Jr. served in World War II as a Navy pilot. Before going to war, he asked his sister to take over the paper if he died while serving his country. After receiving his discharge papers in 1945, Marcy Jr. was tragically killed in a plane accident on his return to the states. So his brother-in-law, Albert L. Martin, who had never worked in the newspaper business, came from Atlanta with his wife, Louise, to run the paper. Their son Jack worked in various positions, mostly in the print shop, from the 1950s until the paper was sold in the mid 1970s. The *Herald*, a member of the Alabama Newspaper Advertising Service, Alabama Press Association, and National Editorial Association, was established in 1884. Florence had a population of 23,879 in 1950. *Seventeenth Census of the United States*, “Population,” volume 1, section 4, 2-18, Table 7. <http://www.census.gov/>.

³¹ “The Spillway,” *The Florence (Ala.) Herald*, 2 January 1958, 4.

³² John D. Martin, “In-person interview with author,” (June 23, 2009).

³³ Brook, *The Hard Way: The Odyssey of a Weekly Newspaper Editor*, 141. The *Star* later combined with several area weeklies to become the *York County Star*.

mentioned in regional dailies. *The Titonka Topic* in Titonka, Iowa, made the claim above its front-page banner that it “Thoroughly covers a territory that is reached by no other paper.”³⁴ But “country” editors had to fight accusations of being provincial and more politically conservative than the general population. Mississippi editor Hodding Carter criticized rural journalism critics and their use of the word “provincialism” as applied to behavior and folkways associated with the “American hinterlands.” He observed “you can find hicks in New York City” and “world citizens in Lawrence, or Emporia, or Greenville.” While he acknowledged that small newspapers had only limited political influence, he stressed “their local news columns give a sense of individual existence and individual worth to millions of Americans.”³⁵

Critics of country journalism were especially harsh when it came to discussing the “personals” that reported on the social gatherings and comings and goings of area residents. But proponents of community journalism argued that the personals helped the community stay connected. The society columns of dailies usually mentioned only the financially well connected, but the personals included folks from varied income classes, although African Americans were routinely excluded from the general-circulation publications. An example of how closely readers perused the personals was relayed in a 1960 *Editor & Publisher* news brief. It noted that the *Walton (N.Y.) Reporter* published an apology to two of its readers after the weekly reported that a couple was leaving for New York on a Thursday. The report implied that the couple would spend the entire weekend there. They returned Saturday, and the wife, a church organist and choir director, went to church for a choir rehearsal, but no one else was there. The janitor told her they thought she would be out of town, as stated in the paper; so the rehearsal was cancelled.

³⁴ *The Titonka (Ia.) Topic*, 18 February 1965, 1. The *Topic* was listed as a member of the Iowa Press Association and the National Editorial Association. Titonka, in Kossuth County, is located in north-central Iowa. Titonka had a population of 547 in 1960. *Eighteenth Census of the United States*, “Population,” volume 1, part 17, section 2, 17-27, Table 8. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

³⁵ Hodding Carter, *First Person Rural* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963), 246.

That evening, the couple surprised other invited guests at a dinner party because the paper indicated they would be out of town.³⁶

Rural journalism's traditions were defended by the city editor of the *Portland (Ore.) Journal* who was a former weekly editor-publisher. He responded to a 1960 *Editor & Publisher* column arguing that suburban weekly newspapers were better than country weeklies. William J. Cary, Jr. said the assertion of the suburban weekly's superiority was based on the "false premise that anything bigger is automatically better." Cary also addressed criticism about the quaint wording of personals. "The fact that Mrs. Jones served a delicious dinner, as did Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Brown, probably will continue to appear in the news columns of the country weekly for a long time," he wrote. "Few of suburbia's editors have had to explain to an irate Mrs. Jones why, after thirty years, her dinner for the quilting club suddenly is no longer delicious."³⁷

It was not uncommon to find some correspondents whose length of service equaled or nearly equaled that of the number of years their community received designated column space in a nearby weekly. Among the faithful correspondents was Bruna McGuire, who began writing for Ray County, Missouri, weeklies in the early 1900s. In 1970 she was still going strong at age eighty-six, as was her column, "With Homefolks."³⁸

One noticeable change in the columns by the 1970s was the correspondent byline. In previous decades, the common practice was to precede the female columnist's name with the courtesy title of "Mrs." But a 1979 issue of *The Democrat* in Emmetsburg, Iowa, identified female correspondents by first and last name only.³⁹ However, other community newspapers

³⁶ "The Weekly Editor: Thursdata, Welcome home?" *Editor & Publisher* 93 (March 5, 1960): 30.

³⁷ William J. Cary, Jr., "The Weekly Editor: Rural press defended," *Editor & Publisher* 93 (October 22, 1960): 56.

³⁸ Viola Roadcap Groce, "The Weekly Editor: Little chronicler," *Editor & Publisher* 103 (April 25, 1970): 38.

³⁹ *The Democrat*, 6 December 1979, 5. The West Bend correspondent was identified as Vivian Nessen. Her phone number was listed under her name. Emmetsburg, in Palo Alto County, is located in the northwest part of Iowa. Emmetsburg had a population of 4,150 in 1970. *Nineteenth Census of the United States*, "Population," volume 1, part 17, 17-12, Table 6. <http://newspaperarchive.com/>, <http://www.census.gov/>.

retained the courtesy title and what might be considered “traditional” reporting on women’s club activities. For example, the April 27, 1972, issue of the *Hamburg (Ia.) Reporter* published “Riverton News” by Mrs. James Booker. It included highlights from an April 19 meeting of the Sunshine Circle Club hosted by Mrs. Ray Athen. After listing those in attendance, the column mentioned that “For entertainment they brought items for a ‘show and tell’ game, some of them being old dolls, quilts, a loom used for making hair swatches, old jewelry, and the one voted most interesting was a book of peotry [sic] some original, brought by Mrs. Shull and belonging to her great-great-grandfather, Abram Teachout, born in 1817 In Ohio.”⁴⁰

Lessons for today: authentic voices, archivists

Today’s small-town newspapers can serve as authentic voices and archivists at a time when musings and memories are highly sought. Consider the March 7, 2012, restaurant column posting by an 86-year-old reporter for the *Grand Forks (N.D.) Herald* on the opening of an Olive Garden restaurant in that community. In her column, “Eatbeat,” Marilyn Hagerty, a veteran newspaper reporter for sixty-five years, gave overall positive marks to the chain restaurant, especially for its ambience. Within a day her review went viral on the Internet. While some reaction via blogs, Twitter and Facebook postings derided her observations as unsophisticated, most reacted positively to a review deemed earnest and charming. Maggie Koerth-Baker, posting March 8, 2012, on the group blog *Boing Boing*, wrote, “If you grew up in places where Olive Garden and Red Lobster really were the best restaurants in town, you can’t help but feel a warm twinge of homesickness reading this.”

Therein lies the authentic voice missing in much of today’s formulaic journalistic writing according to blogger Katina Beckham French. In a comment posted May 17, 2012, to the *That Darn Kat Blog* titled, “Before Blogging, There Were Newspapers,” French criticized community

⁴⁰ Mrs. James Booker, "Riverton News," *Hamburg (Ia.) Reporter*, 27 April 1972, 3.

newspapers for adhering to a “journalistic style guide that didn’t provide enough local flavor and unique character to keep their material from becoming a commodity.” She concluded, “In their attempt to imitate the editorial standards of larger national papers, small town weekly papers have possibly shot themselves in the foot. They’ve given away their most compelling attribute: a truly local, intimate, personal and yet still professional perspective on community news.”

Others disagree. Canadian blogger Linda Seccaspina, posting July 10, 2012, on the *zoomers.ca* blog, believes that small-town newspapers continue to publish the news that most residents of those communities want to read. In “I’ve Got a Secret – Small Town Newspapers,” she wrote, “Who does not want to know who got arrested at the local watering-hole or whose lawn-ornaments are missing that week? Even though large newspapers are losing money the local weekly small-town newspapers still manage to survive. Why? Because the local population depends on their weekly words and supports them.”

Small-town newspapers provide important genealogical and historical records for their communities, covering many topics and events that never reached the pages of the regional daily. Archival issues should be highlighted and promoted on community newspaper web sites to draw readers in to both archived and current editions. Seccaspina observed that she was surprised and delighted at finding fifty-year-old social columns from her hometown newspapers on Google Archives. She re-posted several of the seemingly inane listings and proceeded to provide their “back stories.” For example, one listing mentioned a party hosted by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Knight, “at their lovely home on Albert Street.” What the column did not mention, according to Seccaspina, was that the adults played a game similar to musical chairs with a bag of women’s underwear. When the music stopped, the one holding the bag had to pull out an

underwear garment and put it on, while blindfolded. She also recalled that an inebriated female guest sitting beside an open window fell out of the opening into the bushes below.

Genealogists also find newspaper archival web sites useful. In a comment posted May 30, 2012, to the *Genea-Musings Blog*, Randy Seaver directed readers to the SmallTown Papers Collection web site as an excellent source for genealogy searches. *Newspaperarchive.com* is a popular subscription site providing access to weeklies throughout the United States. Within the growing number of small-town newspapers included in these electronic archives are the correspondent columns that follow the weekly activities of families through decades of church picnics, dinner parties, illnesses, vacations, weddings, births, and deaths.

Keep plogging along

So, although present-day correspondents might have the title of community blogger, the task must be the same: write about what is important in the everyday lives of local residents. More and more authentic voices are crying out in blogs and social media networks. But the problem is finding those that have relevance and provide emotional connections for local readers. Small-town newspapers can provide those authentic voices, young and old, through columnists and correspondents, whether in print or online. Country recording artist Miranda Lambert in her 2007 hit “Famous in a Small Town” asserted that everyone has a story to tell. One stanza of the song goes: “I dreamed of going to Nashville. Put my money down and placed my bet. But I just got the first buck of the season. I made the front page of the *Turner Town Gazette*.”⁴¹

⁴¹ Travis Howard and Miranda Lambert, “Famous in a Small Town,” Nashville: Sony-BMG Music, 2007.

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