

# Publishers mourn deaths of weeklies

## Can small papers survive tough times?

BY DARCY HENTON, THE EDMONTON JOURNAL MARCH 23, 2009 COMMENTS (2)

Alberta weekly newspapers are going through horrific times these days. Two long-standing weeklies closed their doors for good this month and more newspaper offices could be shuttered before the year is out if the recession drags ever deeper.

Just how scary is it? Last week, the president of the Alberta Weekly Newspapers Association (AWNA) was laid off from his job as editor-publisher of the Devon Dispatch and the Beaumont News. George Brown, a 27-year veteran of the weekly newspaper industry, returned from vacation to find out he was the latest casualty of Sun Media restructuring.

"It was a surprise to me and to our staff," says Brown, who was in the process of updating his resume Sunday. "We endured some cuts in December and thought we were through that and ready to meet the challenges of 2009."

Sun Media, which owns nearly 200 weeklies across Canada, eliminated more than 600 full-time positions in December, but the restructuring in its weekly and daily newspaper operations continues. Two weeks ago, the chain shut down the Jasper Booster, which had been operating in the Rocky Mountain resort town for 46 years, and turned out the lights at the Morinville-Redwater Town and Country Examiner.

"I've never seen anything quite like this," says past AWNA president Scott Fitzpatrick. "Newspapers are under a lot of pressure right now,

like we've probably never experienced before -- both the chains and the independent newspapers. Everybody is seeing cutbacks and drops in revenue."

It's sad to see. Community newspapers are the lifeblood of rural communities. The daily papers won't be covering the local 4-H club or the Rotarians, and they seldom get to the council or chamber of commerce meetings unless there's a controversy. The community news reporters write about ordinary people doing ordinary things that are very important to everybody. They keep a community in touch with itself in the way no blogger can.

The closure of the Examiner was particularly disheartening for Mansoor Ladha, who operated the paper for 25 years before selling it to Sun Media in 2004.

"This is a product of my love and sweat and blood," he says. "When I bought the paper it was a one-year-old baby, and I nurtured it to adulthood and made it a profitable business. It is obviously very sad for me to see it die like this."

Ladha, 66, said he and his wife invested their lives in the paper, but sold because they were approaching their retirement years and wanted to slow down. His wife staffed the front office and did the paper's books, and he did a little of everything else, including driving truck to haul the printed papers back from the presses in Leduc.

"As a newspaper publisher, you are on duty 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I used to get calls at home: 'Can you come and take a picture?' It was not my job to take a picture, but these are the people with whom you live with in the community. You can't refuse."

Ladha says it was always difficult to get local merchants to advertise in the paper -- even in the boom times -- and he had to expand his advertising base by approaching businesses in St. Albert and Edmonton.

"People in small towns don't really advertise," he says. "They say, 'I am on Main Street. Everybody knows we're here.' "

When the curtain was pulled down on the Examiner, it was left to freelancer Jan Buterman to write its epitaph.

"Writing the final farewell was disheartening, absolutely," he says. "I'm not exaggerating when I say that it was an honour and a privilege to serve these communities.

"Perhaps sitting through dozens of village, town, and county council meetings seems tedious, but I've observed and reported on a lot of dedicated people working through problems both mundane and exceptional."

Brown, 48, who was elected president of the 114-member weekly newspaper association last fall, isn't convinced the big newspaper chains are on the right track with their restructuring programs.

"It's easy for us on the ground in the community to take a swipe at the people higher up the ladder, but it's community publishers and community editors who know what is going on in the community, and when you hear they are cutting staff but they want more local content, you wonder where they think they will get it from," he says.

"If you don't have those reporters on the street, there's a lot of news and a lot of stories that will go unreported and unread."

Fitzpatrick, who publishes the Fairview Post and the Peace River Record-Gazette, says times may be tough now, but he's confident community newspapers will survive and thrive.

"Young people may be going to websites and blogs to get their information, but community newspapers are still a necessary ingredient of a really healthy community," he says.

"The vast majority of the newspapers in Alberta are doing rather well and they're still the glue that holds everything together. There will always be a real need for community newspapers."

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