

INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING TODAY: Thriving in a world of box stores and chain papers

By John M. Wylie II, Publisher, *Oologah (Okla.) Lake Leader*

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The stories of gloom and doom about our big-city brethren need not apply to our world. There's a simple reason: To our readers, we are not the newspaper, we are THEIR newspaper.

Down the block at Rogers Mini Stop, we sell more than a hundred papers every week. If our press run is late we get frantic calls from the Rogers family. They have a store full of irate customers who want THEIR papers NOW.

Three daily boxes are outside. If those papers are late people shrug, go inside, get a pop or a six-pack and move on.

We all know the traditional reasons—the little stories that never would be considered “news” anywhere else. Our readers really care about those things.

But bean counters who think that's all they care about don't have a clue. As you can see, we don't run from complex economic stories or tough investigations—we showcase them. And that's why nobody will ever run the Oologah Lake Leader out of Northwest Rogers County.

We know what interests our readers, what battles they want to fight, what wrongs they want to right, what problems they want to fix and what accomplishments they want to trumpet. And we do everything possible to exceed their expectations.

Some publishers believe that the local newspaper should carry only good news and never offend anyone. We say a good local newspaper should carry all the news, and provide quality coverage of the good, the bad and everything in between.

Our readers know that if they buy our paper and read our website, they will be insiders about everything important happening in the one-third of Oklahoma's fastest growing county which is our primary market.

When we fail, they tell us.

Our marketing director cringed when we began investigating Commissioner Mike Helm, the subject of the special section you have in front of you. He is, after all, a Republican in an increasingly Republican county. Many of his supporters are our advertisers. Many of them barely tolerate our “ungodly” Democratic political beliefs.

But we didn't start investigating Mike Helm because of his politics. We began investigating him because he wasn't doing his job.

When we started publishing our findings, even his core supporters were shocked. We have lost no advertisers. We have not lost any subscriptions. Street sales have skyrocketed. Many of those first-time readers have become subscribers.

Advertising? We just sold a \$5,000 home tour tab, a new project that stretched our resources to the limit. We hoped for perhaps \$3,000 and 16 pages. We got \$5,000 and 24 pages. Several of those were purchased by developers with close ties to Helm. They didn't care about that. They knew that selling land and homes in new developments meant advertising in our pages. We gained first time advertisers we can convert to regulars.

The other project you have in your hands involves perhaps the most significant economic development opportunity Oklahoma has seen in decades -- \$600 million, \$12 million in annual operating budget, a decades-long guarantee that our biggest employer will continue to grow and prosper. More important, the AEP commercial demonstration project at Northeastern Station is focusing worldwide attention on Oologah, Oklahoma. Coupled with the legacy of Will Rogers, this project has put us in the international spotlight.

AEP chose Oologah in part because corporate executives can bring distinguished guests from around the world to our community knowing they will not be embarrassed.

Although we are part of exurban Tulsa, our community has its own identity. Our people care intensely about where they live.

The newspaper is celebrating its silver anniversary, and Oologah is now Oklahoma's fastest growing small city in Oklahoma's fastest growing county. It is no accident.

* When we bought the newspaper in 1984, Oologah still had rotary dial phones and a local calling area of just three square miles. Most kids calling home to get picked up from football practice had to call long distance.

Working together, we changed that. Since we couldn't fix Oologah's problem in isolation, we forced the Oklahoma Corporation Commission to create the largest wide-area toll-free calling district in the state around Tulsa. Oologah now has the state's best phone service and is part of a dialing area that stretches 70 miles from north to south and east to west.

When high speed internet came along, we didn't have it. We worked with AT&T and fought off Cox Cable in front of the OCC. And we were the first small town in Oklahoma to have full DSL.

* When we arrived, Oologah was on a death-trap two-lane highway, unimproved since before World War Two. The killer bridges (we named them and it stuck) were so narrow that trucks passing each other in opposite directions usually lost their outside mirrors.

Today, US 169 is a four-lane interstate standard superhighway. It has redirected the interstate commerce from Kansas City to Tulsa and Dallas from toll roads to our roads, and made jobs in Tulsa an easily accessible 25-minute drive.

* When we arrived, downtown was one building which housed a combination barber shop and small engine repair. When a local resident started restoration efforts, we signed up and moved downtown.

Of course, once we got there, it wasn't "downtown." We'd learned from creating the killer bridges. It was, of course, "Historic Downtown Oologah." We're now three blocks of 100 percent commercially occupied properties, a jewel for locals and tourists alike instead of the eyesore found in most towns our size.

We didn't dream up these projects. Each one came from demands for change articulated by our readers and citizens. We just gave them the voice and the organization to solve the problem.

So what are the lessons for surviving in an age of box stores and cookie-cutter formats?

First, you are the only newspaper in the world that gives a diddly about your town. Act like it. Your town includes the preacher and the pauper; the millionaire and the welfare mom; the teacher and the mentally handicapped child. Speak for all of them, meet their needs, help them realize their dreams and you will prosper.

Second, take on the tough issues. Another weekly in our county had a flag depicting an ostrich with its head in the sand, coupled with the words, "Facts ignored are not problems solved." So true. Identify the problem and try to solve those you can.

Third, remember that Joan Baez was right when she said that love is just a four-letter word. But she never stuck that label on honesty. Love your community, but root out those whose dishonesty challenges it.

Fourth, work for the economic prosperity of your community the right way. Don't trust the economic gurus. Run, don't walk, from the folks who tell you that this private prison or that hazardous waste dump is the key to the future. They aren't. Build a real community based on real community values and a strong economic base, and your economic future will be secure.

Finally, keep your backbone full of steel. In 1976, I was doused with methyl parathion by a spray pilot who didn't want my investigation of aerial pesticide abuse to continue. The dangerous application practices now are banned, as is one of the pesticides involved. The wheat crops still flourish in southern Kansas and northern Oklahoma, but the dogs and fish don't die and the drinking water is safe.

More than a decade later, I stopped a scam involving a Biblical theme park and a 650-foot plastic statue of Jesus. The promoter went on TV, telling his followers that God would reward anyone who slew this agent of Satan—me. Well, I'm still here and the con man is long gone.

Now we have the Helm investigation. While our readers are supportive, some of those with direct knowledge are still reluctant to come forward. They're scared. So we just keep writing and helping to erase the fear.

So my message today may defy traditional wisdom. I say, "Don't worry about the consequences of covering the news well, thrive on the benefits. If you do it well, do it honestly, and do it fairly, your town will be one where the local residents come into the store and say, 'Hey, is MY paper in yet?'"