

PAGE Opinion

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FOR COURAGE, TENACITY & INTEGRITY
IN COMMUNITY JOURNALISM

'Nobody reads the newspaper anymore'

By Record Editor Laurie Ezzell Brown

THAT WAS THE VERDICT Commissioner Nicholas Thomas delivered to his fellow elected officials during last month's court meeting. It was bluntly stated, with no hint of uncertainty. A death penalty for *The Canadian Record*, issued by one man: self-appointed judge, jury, and executioner.

He was dead wrong, as anyone holding this newspaper in their hands today, or reading *The Record's* e-Edition on their computer or iPad or smartphone, could easily attest.

But our readers were not present in the commissioners' courtroom, nor had any been called to testify on our behalf.

In fact, nobody but a handful of other county employees, and this reporter—quietly typing notes of the proceedings on a well-worn laptop keyboard—was present to hear Thomas' pronouncement. Or to respond to it—as I did, violating one of the abiding principles of journalistic ethics, by intervening in a story I was there merely to cover.

The public rarely attends these public meetings. Nor do they tend to fight for seating at the hospital board, school board, water board, city council, or economic development council meetings, where their representatives routinely set priorities and adopt policy, approve annual budgets, and determine how local tax revenues will be spent.

For the past 26 years and counting, the one consistent witness to this particular slice of Hemphill County history has been a *Record* reporter. We are the watchdog in the front row, shining a little light on our public officials and their decisions.

Thomas might just as well have said, "Nobody attends public meetings anymore." And on that count, he would have been pretty much right, with the above-noted exception.

In fact, Thomas might just as easily have delivered an equally-grim verdict on any number of topics that provide accurate measures of our present civic disengagement, and been much closer to hitting the bullseye.

Nobody votes anymore. Nobody volunteers for public service anymore. Nobody runs for office anymore—a point that might be argued, but

is still often more right than wrong.

In some communities—and even, to some extent, in this one—nobody attends church anymore, as a group of local ministers I spoke to a year or two ago told me, citing a surprisingly high percentage of this county's residents whom they had determined were "unchurched."

In another couple of years, it's even entirely possible that nobody will attend Memorial Day observances at Edith Ford Memorial Cemetery anymore, either. That would be a reasonable conclusion to reach, given the small number of mostly-aging citizens who paused, Monday morning, to honor generations of military men and women who fought in this nation's wars, and who are now buried in Hemphill County cemeteries.

The list of things "nobody does anymore" is long, and growing daily, but the essential point is clear. In none of those other instances would Thomas be likely to simply shrug, and accept what is disturbing evidence of our growing civic disengagement. Nor should we.

It is not OK that nobody votes anymore. It is not acceptable that nobody volunteers for public service anymore, or that nobody runs for public office. Many would argue that the world would be a darn sight better if church attendance improved, or if, at the very least, more people regularly engaged in the quiet act of contemplation and spiritual meditation, with an added dose of soul-searching, for good measure.

It is not OK that nobody attends public meetings, though at least in this community—as long as *The Record* reporters do—the public is guaranteed some accountability for what is said and done there.

You are wrong, Commissioner Thomas, when you say nobody reads the newspaper anymore. They still read this one, though not, perhaps, in the same manner, as in the past.

More and more of our readers subscribe to our e-Edition, though the dead-tree version still has its fiercely loyal defenders. We hear from them every day. I hope you will, too.

Many more read what we publish on Facebook, where they regularly reap the benefits of the reporting we do, the accuracy and timeliness we guarantee, and the public service we honor, without ever having to pay a penny.

A finer point, and one I urge you to consider, as an elected official and community leader, dedicated to Hemphill County's well-being and strong future: Instead of pronouncing *The Record* dead, try commending it to others for the vital information it provides, and for the essential role a free and independent press has always served, and must continue to serve, in protecting and defending democracy.

To Our Readers

WE HAVE NEVER ASKED anything more of you than to subscribe. In doing so, you provide both financial and moral support for the work we do here. But today, we are asking for more.

While our readership is still strong, *The Record* is facing an uncertain financial future. That is due, in large part, to the same economic slump that has affected the businesses whose advertising we rely on for about 95 percent of our revenue.

As most of you know, the ongoing economic impact of the decline in oil and gas production has been compounded by the dramatic effect of last year's wildfires on this area's other major industry. Recovery has been slow. None of us has managed to escape the consequences.

In addition, Department of Commerce-imposed tariffs on Canadian newsprint have already resulted in a 20 percent increase in our printing costs.... with the threat of additional price hikes ahead. Efforts to reverse those tariffs, or to have them temporarily suspended while the impact on jobs and small businesses can be studied, have thus far been unsuccessful.

Those tariffs are job stealers and newspaper killers—not just here in Canadian, but throughout this state and this country.

These are perilous times for the newspaper industry. Under these difficult circumstances, we are grateful for the continued advertising support of our local small business owners. We urge our readers to support them, in return, and to make sure they know their advertising in *The Record* is important to you.

Today, we are seeking an additional pledge of help from all who have expressed your appreciation for this newspaper, as so many of you already have.

Buy a subscription. Buy one for yourself, for a friend, or for someone you know who is not already a subscriber. An annual subscription saves you money and ensures that you will never miss the news of your community. It also provides year-to-year revenue we can count on, instead of week-to-week, and assures our advertisers that you are seeing their message because you want to—not because it arrives in their email inbox or mailbox unbidden.

We do not mine our readers' personal data, or sell it to marketers elsewhere. We don't bombard you with unwanted junk mail and nuisance phone calls, or share your information with anyone who might. You are our customers....not a product we sell to others for our own profit.

Advertise. This newspaper offers the benefit of focused readers—readers who are interested in and care about Canadian and Hemphill County. Our pages are free of the distraction posed by pop-up ads and enticing links, that draw the readers' attention elsewhere.

Your advertising dollars are what fuel this newspaper. From the full-page ad for the local grocery store, to the 20-word classified ad for a weekend garage sale, your advertising enables us to cover the news and sports and arts and events that matter to our readers, and to continue to make this a publication worthy of your time and attention.

Our advertisers write our paychecks and pay our bills. They keep *The Record* doors open. Without them, we are not possible.

Send us a note. If you can't afford to do anything more than you already do, just let us know you value our work, or tell us what you think we could improve or do differently. While this is a privately-owned business, it is also your community newspaper. Your ideas and suggestions can only make us better.

Your letters to the editor are welcome. Your opinions matter. We have fought hard—at sometimes great cost—to maintain the integrity and independence of this newspaper, and to provide a public forum for all who wish to take make use of it.

We will continue to do everything possible to keep this 125-year-old business alive, and to keep delivering a quality newspaper to our readers. But without your help and support, our future is uncertain.

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