



Rural Report

INSTITUTE FOR RURAL JOURNALISM AND COMMUNITY ISSUES

SPRING 2008



Covering Obama

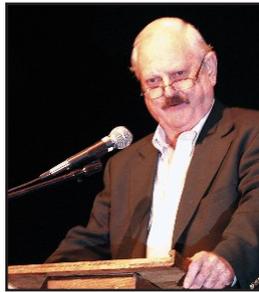
Rural newspapers have an impact
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We lose a friend

Remembering Rudy Abramson: Rural journalism loses one of its greatest advocates.

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A touchy subject

A story about a Habitat for Humanity house raised some big issues on covering immigrants in a rural town.

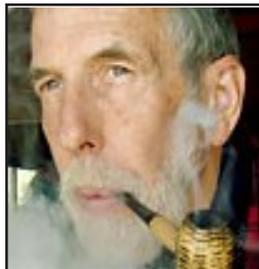
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Change Offers Lessons

Sale of a newspaper puts focus on essentials of community journalism.

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From the Director

By Al Cross

Welcome to the new Rural Report. For the last two years, this has been a magazine-style newsletter about the work of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, printed on heavy, slick paper and distributed mostly by mail.



Now it is more of a journal about rural journalism, in PDF form and distributed mainly electronically. We're killing fewer trees and saving money, which is important, but we think the change in content is even more important.

Before Al Smith and Rudy Abramson conceived the Institute in 2001, the term "rural journalism" was rarely heard in the United States. Rural media were lumped in with all of community journalism.

Since its creation in 2004, the Institute has advanced the idea that rural journalism should have its own identity because of the issues that face rural communities, and the difficulty that rural news media often have in helping their communities address those issues. Helping them do that is our main pursuit.

Part of our work is helping rural journalists and their communities overcome the relative isolation that defines "rural." We see the need for a journal about rural journalism, a forum for shared experiences in dealing with issues and a platform to hold up good examples to follow, ideas to pursue, questions to think about, or simply to share experiences. We will continue to expand our online efforts in those areas, but we still see the need for a publication that journalists can archive, print, and pass along.

Rural Report will continue to have news about the Institute and its work, but we hope it will be mainly a publication about rural journalism and how it can help rural communities. You can help us do that, by writing for it. Drop me at line at al.cross@uky.edu.

Obama worked rural papers in Iowa, and it paid off

While Barack Obama didn't run as strongly in Iowa's rural caucuses as he did statewide, his courting of rural newspapers probably helped him rack up his surprising margin of 8 percentage points. The freshman Democratic senator from Illinois was endorsed by more newspapers than any other candidate in any party -- nine, including four weeklies -- and probably benefited from the coverage that he and his staff enabled.

"The Obama campaign developed a reputation for doing the little things as it carefully built its organization in Iowa, where personal relationships famously matter in politics. The effort to win coverage in the local media was more ambitious, by far, than anything other campaigns put together," Peter Slevin of **The Washington Post's** Midwest Bureau wrote in **The Trail**, the Post's general political blog. Slevin's example of the attention that Obama paid to small newspapers was Douglas Burns, a columnist for the **Daily Times Herald** of Carroll, circulation 6,000, and a frequent writer for the online-only **Iowa Independent**. "He has interviewed the presidential candidate no fewer than

six times, including a pair of 15-minute sessions during the crazy final days of December," Slevin wrote on caucus day, Jan. 3. "Look, they kept giving me interviews, and I thought I was putting some good questions out there," Burns told Slevin, noting that he asked Obama about his drug use as a youth. "I wasn't just rolling over. They still did interviews with me after that, which is to their credit. They kept taking the questions."



Iowa journalist Douglas Burns interviews Sen. Barack Obama

on the pages of the weekly newspaper, particularly in an edition that is likely to be sitting on coffee tables at Thanksgiving," Zeleny wrote on **The Caucus**, the Times' political blog, reflecting his knowledge of rural Iowa.

In contrast, some small papers in Iowa reported difficulty dealing with New York Sen. Hillary Clinton, who placed a close but disappointing third in the Democratic caucuses. A survey by **NBC News** of 15 weekly and small daily papers in Iowa—which has 272 weeklies—found they had "mixed experiences with all the campaigns, Democratic or Republican," the NBC political unit reported in its First Read blog. "The majority of newspapers reported being able to get a few minutes with a candidate either immediately after the event during the rope line or with a one-on-one interview. Senator Clinton was the exception in this case." NBC's survey was prompted by a report on Iowa coverage by the **Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues**.

"Clinton spent 45 minutes at Sam's Sodas and Sandwiches in downtown Carroll with Burns, Lopez and two other reporters," Slevin reports. Burns got 15 minutes with Romney, but "Edwards made no effort to reach out to the local media during his four visits, Burns said." After writing a column headlined "Why Barack Obama will win the Iowa Caucuses," then reporting that as fact, Burns is "back to covering streets and sewers and eight-man football."

"There is, perhaps, no better way to give an hour-long presidential visit far greater staying power than appearing on the pages of the weekly newspaper."

— Jeff Zeleny, writing in *The Caucus*, the New York Times' political blog

The campaign's first contact with the Herald came in March, just weeks after Obama declared his candidacy, when one of its Iowa spokesmen came to Carroll—population 10,000 and seat of Carroll County, 21,000—and met with two staffers for an hour and a half. "Those early efforts to cultivate relationships probably helped," Burns told Slevin. "When they showed us a lot of respect, I looked at it that they were showing Carroll a lot of respect."

Jeff Zeleny, who once worked for **The Des Moines Register** and now reports for the **New York Times**, knew there was a story when he saw Obama giving interviews in Clarion with **The Wright County Monitor** and in Grundy Center with four other weeklies in a 10-mile radius, three with circulations under 1,000.

"There is, perhaps, no better way to give an hour-long presidential visit far greater staying power than appearing

Football team forfeits perfect season due to ineligible player; paper doesn't use name, citing permanence of the Internet

The Alabama high school football playoffs began last fall without a team that enjoyed a perfect regular season. Soon after its victory over Pell City (*right, with quarterback Judd Edwards scoring*) the Oxford High School team was declared ineligible. (*Consolidated News Service photo by Bob Crisp*)

Acting on an anonymous complaint, the Alabama High School Athletic Association ruled one of the team's players ineligible, meaning that the Yellow Jackets had to forfeit seven of their 10 wins. That news warranted a special four-page section Oct. 30 in the local newspaper, **The Anniston Star**, but the coverage did not include the name of the ineligible player. Although the paper's in-house media critic questioned the decision to omit the name, Editor Bob Davis said it was the right thing to do, especially when considering the student's age.

"I didn't think and we didn't think that it added anything to the coverage" to print the student's name, Davis said in an interview. "The argument is that it is generally known in the school. Our readership goes far beyond that one small community." The Star's daily circulation of 25,000 reaches several counties in eastern Alabama. Oxford is a town of 14,600 in Calhoun County, tucked between the county seat of Anniston, population 24,000, and the border with Talladega County and Cleburne County. Calhoun County's population is 112,000.

The Star first reported news of a possible penalty for the Yellow Jackets Oct. 23. In that story, reporter Nick Birdsong wrote that an investigation had begun about a transfer student's eligibility. He referred to a similar investigation

underway at another Alabama school, Hoover High, and named the player whose status was in question there. When the AHSAA ruled against Oxford High a week later, the stories in the special section noted that neither the school nor the AHSAA released the name of the player who was declared ineligible. The reports did say that the student was the team's only transfer.

In a Nov. 2 column analyzing The Star's coverage of Oxford High School, media critic Paul Rilling wrote, "The strangest blank was the name of the player ruled ineligible." He questioned why the Star would name the Hoover player and not the local one, especially since many in the area knew the Oxford student's identity. He also complained that the newspaper should have kept more of its coverage of the news on the front page, instead of using photos and headlines to refer readers to the special section.

While some of the Star's reporters knew the name of the transfer student, Davis said the decision to keep it out of print was modeled after the way the paper would treat minors in legal matters. As for naming the Hoover player, Davis said media outlets in Birmingham already had named him, so the Star followed suit. Hoover is a Birmingham suburb about 70 miles west of Anniston. Its football team has been profiled in the MTV reality show, "Two-A-Days."

In the case of the Oxford student,



"The identity was mostly unknown," Davis said. "Second of all, he didn't commit a crime, but we wanted to treat him with the respect of someone who is under age. It's the same reason we withhold the names of minors — there shouldn't be something that follows you forever."

That was the key for Davis in his decision-making process — the idea that forever linking this student to this incident would be unfair. Thanks to Internet search engines, it's not far-fetched to imagine some future employer running across the student's name and learning about the lost season. "We don't want someone eight years from now saying, 'You're the guy that cost us a state championship,'" Davis said.

In the days following the special section, the Star attempted to speak with the student's family and give them the chance to speak on the record, Davis said. They chose not to. The night before what would have been the Yellow Jackets' playoff opener, the Oxford City Council issued a proclamation declaring them "national champions" for their season.

This story was originally published in the Rural Blog, Nov. 11, 2007.

Rudy Abramson, author and co-founder of Institute for Rural Journalism, dies at 70

Rudy Abramson was a role model for reporters and an advocate for rural America who put on no airs and treasured his small-town roots.

Abramson, a nationally known journalist who helped start Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, died Feb. 13 from injuries suffered in a fall at his home in Reston, Va. He was 70.

A Washington reporter for the **Los Angeles Times** for 30 years, he wrote a highly praised biography of American statesman Averell Harriman, co-edited with Jean Haskell the *Encyclopedia of Appalachia* and was nearing completion of a biography of legendary Eastern Kentucky lawyer and author Harry Caudill. He also led an effort that kept an amusement park from being built next to a Civil War battlefield.

Above all, he was a storyteller, one who “understood the power of storytelling,” said Freedom

Forum Chairman and CEO Charles Overby, who presided at Abramson’s memorial service, held Feb. 26 at the Freedom Forum in Washington.

“He was imbued with the ethic of his craft. He knew the potential of what he did and what we did,” John Seigenthaler, who worked with Abramson at **The Tennessean** said at the service. “He knew the power and the flaws, and he came to a sense, as we talked more recently, of the weaknesses and the loss of enduring values. He was a man who was loyal — loyal, as I’ve said, to his paper, to his home ground, his place, his country, his craft. Loyal to his friends, and I was blessed to be one.”

Those qualities were obvious to political commentator Mark Shields. “He was a stranger to self-importance and a sworn enemy to smugness,” Shields said. “Rudy never, never forgot where he came from, or the people from who he came. Rudy understood that the one demographic group that could be caricatured could be ridiculed and could be condescended to with total impunity, are the white working-class Americans that did not go to college, and who often live in the rural United States. He was truly the voice for the voiceless.”

Abramson wrote an acclaimed biography of Averell Harriman, *Spanning the Century*, which he finished at Berea College in Kentucky, thanks to a grant that Al Smith helped him get from Mary Bingham of Louisville. As part of the deal, he and Smith visited four other Appalachian colleges to talk with students about journalism and issues.

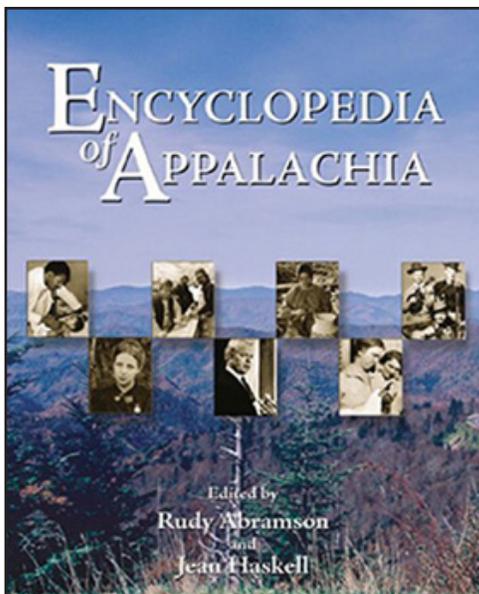
“Engaging them, Rudy honed his perspective on the region’s

complexities,” Smith told the mourners. “It was a transformative experience. His journalism changed. He left the Times. He became a champion of the Appalachian region. Three more books followed — *On Hallowed Ground*, about the endangered Virginia landmarks like Manassas Battlefield where he led the successful fight against Disney’s proposed theme park; the *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, an 1,800-page volume which was a 10-year labor of love for which he and a co-editor also raised the financing; and, still to come, the biography of Caudill, who illuminated Appalachia’s woes for John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.”

While he was an Alicia Patterson Foundation fellow, writing an update on Appalachia in 2000 and 2001, Abramson reported to Smith that newspapers in the region, as Smith put it, “lacked the vigor to confront the issues” like poverty, disease, drug abuse, poor schools, local corruption and mountaintop-removal strip mining for coal. That led him and Smith to think up the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues.

Smith quoted Abramson on the Institute: “We are not about crafting pretty paragraphs. We want to change lives for the better.” He concluded, “The Institute, we hope, will be his legacy to all of rural America.”

“Although he was always a big city reporter, Rudy never forgot his rural roots in northern Alabama,” said Smith. “He was passionately concerned about environmental and economic



Abramson co-edited and raised the financing for this 1,800-page volume.

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problems in Appalachia. While writing stories about the region, he concluded that one major improvement might be to help local news folks do a better job covering the serious issues. That's how we came up with the ideas for the Institute, which we sold to President Lee Todd at UK."

The Institute did its first work in Appalachia and remains rooted in the region, which was the subject of the 2006 encyclopedia. Abramson told Howard Berkes of **National Public Radio** in a 2006 interview about the encyclopedia that the word "hillbilly" first appeared "in the **New York Sun** about 1900 and the definition of it was a white person from Alabama without visible means of support, ambition or much of anything else. And I suppose that was one of the reasons that I got involved in this project. It seems that I'm the absolute hillbilly by that definition."

"It's a big loss for Appalachian journalism," said Ken Ward Jr., coal reporter for **The Charleston Gazette**, noting the reporting Rudy did on mountaintop-removal strip mining for coal on the Patterson fellowship, and the help he gave Ward in getting his own Patterson fellowship to produce a series on coal-mine safety.

Abramson was born in Florence, Ala., on Aug. 31, 1937, one of 19 children. After graduating from the University of Mississippi in 1958, he became a political reporter for *The Tennessean* in Nashville. He joined the *Times* in 1965. At the *Times*, "He had a part in just about every major story for 30 years," said a longtime colleague, Richard T. Cooper. He was hired to cover science and became one of the first national reporters assigned to the space program. He covered the development of the Apollo 11

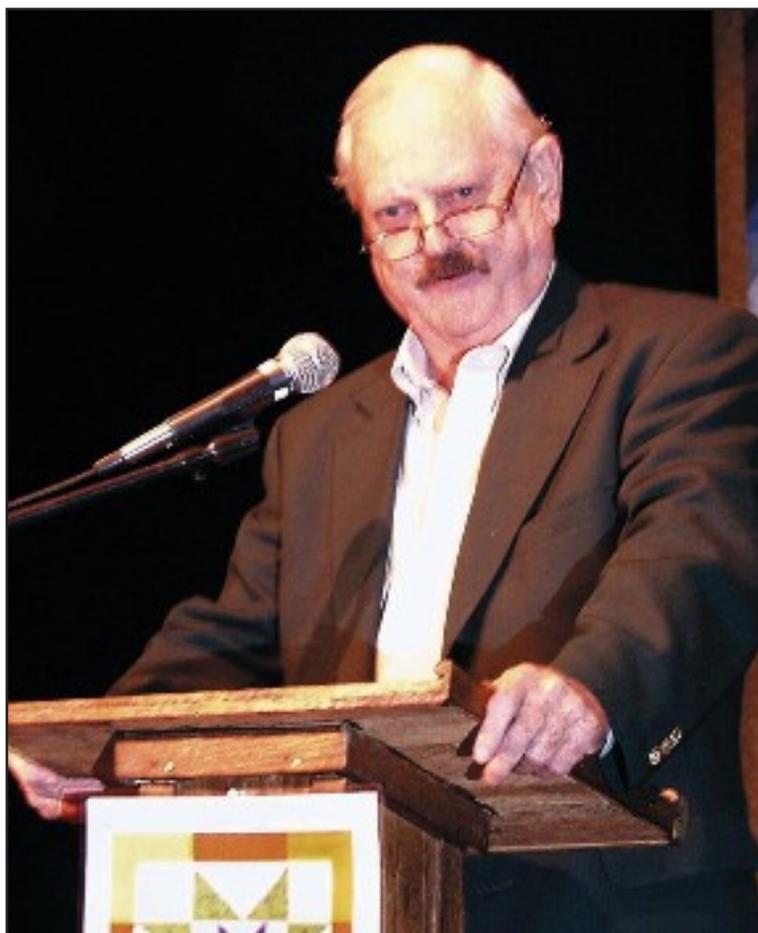
mission and the first manned landing on the moon in 1969.

He was the paper's White House correspondent when Richard Nixon resigned the presidency, and before that covered the Vietnam War policy debates, the bombing of Cambodia, the Watergate scandal and the Nixon impeachment hearings.

"After leaving the *Times* in 1996, Abramson became one of the most prolific and powerful voices for and about

rural communities," said the **Daily Yonder**, the online rural news site that he helped start after getting the Institute for Rural Journalism off the ground. He wrote about how coal mining in Appalachia had "outgrown human dimension," and in 2002, he wrote a column that sparked a successful effort to keep **CBS** from producing a reality version of "The Beverly Hillbillies."

Abramson's latest subject was Caudill, a Kentucky lawyer, author and environmentalist whose 1963 book, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, focused national attention on the underdevelopment of Appalachia and helped start the War on Poverty. Caudill committed suicide in 1990 when he was 68 and facing an advanced case of Parkinson's disease. In researching



Rudy Abramson speaks at an Institute event in Whitesburg, Ky. in 2004, announcing the Tom and Pat Gish Award, named for the publishers of **The Mountain Eagle** in Whitesburg.

the book, Abramson came to appreciate the strong alliance between Caudill and Tom and Pat Gish, publishers of **The Mountain Eagle**, the crusading weekly newspaper in their hometown of Whitesburg. "I don't remember my parents ever being this upset over the death of a friend," said the Gishes' son, Ben. "Harry Caudill's former law partner walked in and said the news of Rudy's death left him feeling just like he did when Harry died — that the community library had just burned down."

Abramson was chairman of the Institute's national Advisory Board at the time of his death. His family asks that memorial gifts go to the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues or the Berea Opportunity Center for Women.

Newspaper struggles with covering immigrants

By The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues

On the Web site of **The Sentinel-News** in Shelbyville, Ky., one story remained a lightning rod for comments for more than a month after its publication – a short article about a family moving into a Habitat for Humanity home.

That is usually an innocuous, feel-good story, but the article and its subject remained controversial because of one short sentence that raised the issue of illegal immigration in America, and especially in Shelby County, home of many Latino immigrants.

That made it more than a standard story about a Habitat move-in, and how the twice-a-week, 9,000-circulation paper handled it provides an interesting case study of the coverage of immigrants and a popular charity.

Reporter Nathan McBroom wrote about the Villa family, which had just purchased its first home through Habitat. McBroom explained that Pedro Villa and his wife, Magdalena Vieyra, who came from the Mexican state of Michoacan, would be sharing the home with their four grown children. McBroom described the application process for a Habitat home, as well as the group's Christian philosophy, as outlined by local affiliate Secretary Travis Davis.



This Habitat for Humanity home sparked controversy.

McBroom made an oblique reference to the family's residency status, writing, "Davis said that Habitat International does not allow local branches to require U.S. citizenship as a requirement for application."

Nothing else was said about the Villa family in particular, but the likely question for many readers was, "So, is the Villa family legal?" In Shelby County, that question is being asked more often.

In the last two decades, the Latino population has grown rapidly in the largely rural but fast-suburbanizing county, which is in the Louisville metropolitan area. The Census Bureau estimated in 2005 that 8 percent of the population had Hispanic or Latino origin, compared to 2 percent in Kentucky as a whole.

With that background, once the story was going to press, "We knew there would be a response," McBroom told the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues.

McBroom said he spoke to the Villa family through an interpreter and didn't ask Davis or the family if its members were citizens. McBroom said the question seemed irrelevant, because it was not a criterion in the Habitat process.

"I didn't know, but I thought that it had no bearing on the story," he said. "If it doesn't matter to (Habitat), for us to print that he might be illegal would be sensational. The point of this article was that this man and his family got a house."

But in the hands of readers, the story became something else.

On the message boards of the newspaper's Web site, readers posted lengthy rants about the broader issue of immigration, especially in light of reform legislation being debated in Congress at the time. In most posts, the question of the Villa family's citizenship was asked directly.

A few months before McBroom did the story, his editor, Walt Reichert, had followed a similar tale. The scenario was much the same: a Habitat home was ready for its new occupants, and the local paper felt obliged to take some pictures and publish a short article. The

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family was Hispanic, but the question of residency status never arose, Reichert said. “Not a word” was said about it, he recalled, adding that he “never thought about it.” In that instance, the story ran without incident or uproar.

McBroom raised the issue in reporting the latest story, Reichert said. The answer Habitat gave the enterprising reporter could have led to follow-up questions or stories, but the paper chose to stick to its usual focus, on the move-in.

“The Habitat official did not even know if they were legit, because he was not allowed to ask,” McBroom said. “I didn’t know, but I thought that it had no bearing on the story.”

For McBroom, asking about the citizenship of the Villa family would lead nowhere, even if it were a question readers would have posed themselves. “Whether I should have asked, well, that’s debatable,” he said.

Many online commenters, and likely many readers, wanted an explanation from Habitat for Humanity. Since many in the community had donated to the charity, they wanted some answers about where and to whom their money was going.

The newspaper did not see Habitat as a local institution to be held accountable. “The way I look at it, Habitat for Humanity is a charity that can do as they please with their money and work,” Reichert said.

Shelbyville is the headquarters town of Landmark Community Newspapers Inc., which owns The Sentinel-News. Landmark Executive Editor Benjy Hamm said he was aware of the controversy but the company followed its standard policy of local editorial autonomy. The paper recently did a series of stories on local immigrants.

The evolution of a usually routine story highlighted the intensity of the immigration debate. It could be argued that the paper should have represented readers by directly asking about the family’s status. If Habitat had not answered that question, at least the story would have acknowledged the effort. But that would have given the question a higher profile, which the paper wanted to avoid in the story.

“It’s difficult to write in such a way as to seem unbiased, because people are so passionate about it,” McBroom said. “I go over every word because I know every word will be scrutinized.”

Tips on covering immigration

Reporting on immigration is complicated. The issue has many angles, and such coverage requires reporters and editors to be careful. Here are some tips for finding pertinent data and for navigating the ethical issues that arise along the way.

Resources

Most available data addresses immigration at a national or state level. As always, reporters should test the accuracy of all information and be skeptical of all sources, especially since many are interest groups.

U.S. Census Bureau:
<http://www.census.gov/>

Department of Homeland Security:
<http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/>

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
<http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>

The Pew Hispanic Center
<http://pewhispanic.org/>

Providing Balance and Perspective

From story development and throughout the process of reporting, writing and presentation, journalists should reflect on their approaches to immigration coverage. Providing balance and perspective is key — even when it means offering some views that may seem offensive. The “hard-working immigrant” story has become cliché, and journalists should delve deeper than that. Still, building trust with immigrant communities — and the other sides involved — is an important step since statistics and studies can’t tell the whole story.

Making the Right Choices

The accompanying article demonstrates how editing and reporting choices matter in these stories. Not only does it matter what information is presented, the information left out matters, too. Editors and reporters have to consider how readers will approach these stories. With that in mind, it makes sense to provide as much context as possible. The possibility or reality of an emotional reaction should not keep newspapers from tackling immigration. As with any story, accuracy is the best defense, and fairness is also essential.

Student project covers news, mends fences

By The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues

One recent Saturday, three University of Montana journalism students drove six hours from the school's campus in Missoula across the state to the town of Crow Agency, the capital of the Apsaalooke Indian nation. They make the 800-mile roundtrip at least once a month — on a weekend, usually — as part of their class in rural journalism. Their class project is to develop and maintain a Web site devoted to providing news content for and from the people of Crow Agency, which has no local newspaper.

CrowNews.net went online in November, and it's the second site for the Rural News Network, which the **Montana School of Journalism** began in the fall of 2006 with funding from **J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism**. The project is work in progress — associate Professor Keith Graham said he has to change the syllabus almost every week as it evolves — and there have been some growing pains, mainly in the relationship between the RNN and some neighboring newspapers.

In November, Wes Eben, the publisher of the 2,300-circulation weekly newspaper near Crow Agency, the **Big Horn County News**, told **The Missoula Independent** he was concerned about a possible loss in circulation due to creation of CrowNews.net. He told the **Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues** that he has watched to see if there have been any effects on his newspaper — which he says devotes about 60 percent of its coverage to Crow Agency — but he has not seen his concerns realized.

Eben's main complaints were that CrowNews.net linked to other Montana newspaper Web sites, but not his, and that he wanted more communication with the School of Journalism. The RNN took care of that with a link to the Big Horn County News as well as a listing of the paper's top three stories.

"We never imagined that this would cause a problem," Graham said. "Of course, we don't want to cause confusion with our neighboring newspapers. We will continue to communicate with them to avoid that."

The project has also wrinkled brows at the **Choteau Acantha**, the 1,900-circulation weekly 25 miles from Dutton, population 400, site of the RNN's first project. Dutton native Courtney Lowery, managing editor of NewWest.net and an alumnus of the Montana School of Journalism, had the idea for the RNN because her hometown had lost its newspaper. With help from Lowery, Graham's journalism class created the **Dutton County**

Courier (duttoncc.org), which has stories, photos, video and audio created by the journalism students as well as locals.

Despite the initial dust-ups, all interviewed for this story said they want to keep lines of communication open to eliminate confusion and perhaps lead to future collaboration. Peggy Kuhr, the dean of the School of Journalism, said communication is key, and that she hopes to continue that dialogue.

"I believe in the no-surprises rule and this became a surprise to some," Kuhr said, while also noting The Independent never contacted her about its story on Eben and the RNN. "We've got to try to avoid that. The most important thing is communication, not just with the local newspaper but with the people in the community."

Since the project is still in its early stages, there are questions about what happens after a class moves from one town to a new one.

"In the first town, we are looking at possibilities — private ownership,



Many students in the Rural News Network travel great distances from Missoula to provide news outlets for areas that do not have one. The map above shows Indian reservations.

et cetera,” Graham said. Maybe a person will take over, maybe we’ll ***continued from page 8***

give it over to the town. The ultimate goal is for the community to own it completely.”

Eben said he would be interested in a collaborative effort between his newspaper’s Web site and the RNN. In the past, his paper has tried using local stringers from Crow Agency, but nothing has lasted. He said such a collaboration, in any form, could be good for both sides since “helping locals have more of a voice” is what everyone wants.

For now, the RNN and its journalism students will continue making connections and building trust in Crow Agency, because that’s the only way this project can work, Lowery said. The project relies on trust and succeeds when the local community gets involved and sets the agenda.

“If you’re going to have a local paper, you have to have local people,” she said. “You get them involved by convincing them you’re not just trying to ‘save the town.’ Rural communities have seen that a lot and seen those folks leave two weeks later.”

Early this year, a top story on CrowNews.net was a commentary on a court case that arose from the killing of a bald eagle by a Northern Arapaho tribal member on a Wyoming reservation for use in a religious ceremony. The case is now before the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals, and its ruling will be of interest to the Crow Tribe, wrote Jay Harris, an enrolled Crow Tribal member and law student at the **University of Colorado**. The site also had video clips of recent local athletic contests, announcements of community events and other local coverage.

The RNN hopes to have an application process for the next

community it chooses, but the class is focused on Crow Agency right now, Graham said. While the community gains a local news source, Graham said his students learn about rural journalism and they get chance to gain valuable experience. The lessons of the class are also available to everyone in the Montana journalism community, he said.

“I hope this makes everyone aware of the possibility to do rural journalism in different ways,” he said. “Nothing we have is hidden. We’re happy to share what we have.”

During a meeting in late February, members of the **Montana Newspaper Association**, including the Choteau Acantha’s editor, Melody Martinsen, and representatives from the Montana School of Journalism had an opportunity to talk about the RNN. The RNN wasn’t the sole reason for the meeting, but the meeting provided some ideas about how the RNN and the MNA could collaborate in the future.

“I see such great potential for this not only to be a tool for the journalism school but for publishers,” Martinsen said. “The idea that we came from the meeting was the need to form a partnership, not in the legal sense, with the MNA and RNN. We could take the experience of the Rural News Network and use that to develop educational tools and provide them to Montana publishers.”

Martinsen said such a tool could be a pamphlet or guide that shows publishers how to take their papers online or expand their Web presence. That project is in its infancy, but it is needed, Martinsen said, because the question for publishers is “how we can remain the news leaders in our communities in a Web age?”

“I came away from the meeting thinking about what doors this

could open for readers, students and publishers,” she said.

In addition to generating ideas, the meeting helped keep the lines of communication open for everyone involved, MNA Executive Director John Barrows said.

“It was the communication that overcame any real stumbling blocks,” he said. “As long as those papers are involved, there won’t be

Kentucky project gives small town a news outlet

Midway, Ky., pop. 1,620, last had its own newspaper during the Great Depression. Now it again has its own news outlet, thanks to a class project of the **University of Kentucky** School of Journalism and Telecommunications.

The advanced writing and reporting classes taught by Al Cross, director of the **Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues**, are covering Midway and posting stories on a blog (<http://irjci.blogspot.com>) and a **Web site**, both named Midway Messenger.

Stories on some news events were published before those in **The Woodford Sun**, the weekly paper in the county seat of Versailles.

The plan is to maintain the site through classes and independent-study courses, but if that doesn’t work out, the Sun will get the first chance to take it over.

Cross touched base with the Sun before beginning the project. The editor of the paper, Steve Peterson, and its Midway correspondent, John McDaniel, spoke to the class about Midway and rural journalism.

At this writing, students’ final stories were being edited for publication on the Web site and possibly in the Sun.

Small Midwest papers, especially in Oklahoma, struggle to publish in wake of huge ice storm

The massive ice storm that tore through the Midwest in December 2007, leaving hundreds of thousands of electric customers without power, posed considerable challenges for small newspapers in the region. In the hardest-hit state, Oklahoma, the daily Norman Transcript and the weekly **Oologah Lake Leader**, were among the papers that had to improvise to get issues out this week.

The offices of the **Transcript**, a 14,000-circulation daily, went dark on Monday morning, and as the hours passed, editors realized power might not be back in time for the night's deadline. The biggest hurdle was finding a working printing press, the Transcript's M. Scott Carter reported. "Finding such a press isn't like going to the convenience store for some new batteries; fact is, there aren't that many eight-unit Goss Urbanite offset presses just sitting around," Carter wrote.

While publisher David Stringer looked for a nearby press that still had power, the rest of the staff looked for a place to work, because the diesel-powered generator in

the newsroom only could do so much. Managing Editor Andy Steiger had hoped to use his home as a temporary newsroom, but the power was off there, too. Advertising Director Sandra Morris drove to the parking lot of a Panera Bread outlet to take advantage of the store's free wireless access. It was full, so she worked from her car.

Several reporters and editors found a temporary home in the public-relations offices of Norman Regional Hospital, where they wrote and edited stories and posted them to the paper's Web site. Stringer managed to secure some time on the press at the **Edmond Sun**, and a few editors made the 30-mile trip to design the print edition. Using content already posted online or saved on discs, they managed to complete the paper late Monday.

Once printed, the papers had to be delivered, and so the paper's 45 carriers navigated icy and debris-filled streets to get the papers from Edmond to Norman. On Tuesday morning, 96 percent of subscribers had their newspaper, the

Transcript reported.

In the northeastern Oklahoma, the Lake Leader was doing its best to cope with the storm. On Monday, the office of 3,000-circulation weekly was without power, as were the homes of all its staff members. Editor-Publisher John Wylie said in an interview that their printer offered to let them set up shop there, but the roads were so bad they decided not to attempt the 12-mile trip. "We were not sure we would publish at all," he said.

On Tuesday, power returned to the home of Marketing Director Carolyn Estes, but not the office. The staff packed up its production computer and set up shop on a table at the Estes' house. Together they decided that "We WILL put a newspaper together," wrote Publisher Faith Wylie, John's wife.

Wednesday, the staff finished its weekly edition a day late, missing its publication schedule for the first time. The power returned to the Lake Leader's office late Wednesday, just in time to produce mailing labels. "We published on schedule through James' liver transplant, John's life-threatening staph infection, family deaths and illnesses, a political campaign, automobile accidents, and even a tornado," Faith Wylie wrote. "We have been defeated by an ice storm. Not defeated, just delayed."

And also constrained. The paper was limited to eight pages, and much of it was devoted to storm coverage. John Wylie said the paper's Web site, www.oologah.net, would be updated frequently. Wylie, who has experience as an emergency communications director, said that their experience was probably typical of small newspapers in Oklahoma.



Oologah Lake Leader employees, with Editor-Publisher John Wylie at left, put out the paper on the dining-room table in a staffer's home.

Toddler pageant experience leads to book of rural news gems

By Jan Winter

My first job out of journalism school at **Western Kentucky University** was at a small-town Indiana newspaper that was the backbone of community communication, like most rural papers. So it wasn't totally outrageous that my editor forced me and the sports guy, who was also 22 years old, to judge the Little Miss County beauty pageant, which the newspaper had sponsored for decades. After all, we might have been the only two people in town without relatives in the contest. But what resulted is surely still referred to in county legend as the Great Beauty Pageant Scandal of 1982.

It was August and it was hot and we were 22 and it was county-fair week so, hey, we had a few beers while waiting for the kids to line up for the contest. By the time we settled into our seats at the outdoor arena, the sun was baking our buzz into a bit of a dizzy so when I looked up and saw forty-seven candidates, all between five and six years old, I knew we were well beyond "in trouble."

The format was deceptively simple: Each little darling, dressed in her Sunday best, would approach the judges' table, lean in, say her name and her age. We were to ask them what they wanted to be when they grew up, in order to "judge on poise."

Come on – they were five or six years old! They were all adorable! Each one in turn sweetly told us of aspirations of being a mama or a mommy or a mamaw. For more than one reason, they began blurring one into the next ... cuteness and curls, buttons and bows, ribbons and ruffles; who could tell them apart?

Then around about Number 41, a natural redhead came up to the table. Her round little face was now burnished by the afternoon sun, her sweaty curls now plastered to her dripping forehead. She was the kind of chubby little sweet pea you'd like to gather up and smooch. She was also smashed into last year's dress, the elastic cutting into her plump little upper arms like sausage casing. And, she was mad.

She marched up to the table, leaned in and growled a la Linda Blair, "I'm hot and I'm sick of this. I want to go home NOW." She turned on her foot and went back in line, somehow squelching every natural

Jan Winter of Louisville, Ky., is collecting amusing anecdotes from journalists who worked or still work at small-town news outlets. You are invited submit your stories for publication to her at winter.



jan@gmail.com. Stories should be true accounts that bring a smile and reflect the community-service role of rural news media. Names and locations are desirable for publication, but not mandatory. Profits from Winter's publication will be shared with the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues.

instinct in favor of continued conformity.

I looked at Steve, and he at me. Our thoughts were one: the winnah!

The arena held more than had showed for the previous night's mud-wrasslin' show with bikini girls. Every breath was held as I rose to announce the winner. Upon saying her name, a collective gasp was swallowed. It took about five seconds for it to sink in.

Then, it sank in.

Big Mama vaulted over the horse-show ring hollering "Thank you Jesus!" and scooped up the plump little winner, now wearing a crown, kissing all over her sunburned cheeks. Crying and wailing spread like first-grade lice, until all the other contestants were so loud I had to call for the mothers to come claim their stunned losers.

We slunk out the back and skipped the rest of the fair. The following Monday, one mother called the newspaper to claim that she had "irrefutable evidence" that the Little Miss pageant had been rigged.

An exemplar of rural and community journalism changes, offering essential lessons in the craft

By The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues

Examples of community journalism are easier to come by than a clear-cut definition of the term. For years, the **Point Reyes Light** in western Marin County, California, has been an exemplar. The weekly newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize for public service in 1979, for its coverage of the Synanon drug-rehabilitation group that turned into a religion, but well before that had established itself as an essential part of community life and function. That is less true today, and the change teaches lessons.

A little over two years ago, the Light was sold to a newcomer, and things changed. So reports Jonathan Rowe, who lives in the village of Point Reyes Station, writing in the latest issue of **Columbia Journalism Review**. Rowe's article, "The Language of Strangers," highlights the importance of understanding your audience, and what can happen when readers think their needs and wishes are being ignored.

When Dave Mitchell owned the Light, from 1975 to 2005, the paper played a more important role than in most communities, because Point Reyes Station -- whose ZIP code has a population of 1,900 -- and other places in the rural Northwest Marin census subdivision (pop. 9,500, 29 per square mile) have no local government other than sprawling Marin County, below, pop. 250,000 -- 475 per square mile, most of them in sight of San Francisco Bay.

Because he was running the only true civic forum for west Marin, Mitchell made a point of running all letters to the Light. That stopped when new owner Robert Plotkin, then 35, took over, and that was just one example of how he didn't understand what community journalism is supposed to be. The 61-year-old Mitchell did, as he demonstrated in his farewell column.

Plotkin's goals for the Light were lofty. He told his



Point Reyes Station and other places in the rural Northwestern Marin census subdivision (pop. 9,500 per square mile) have no local government other than sprawling Marin County (left, in yellow), pop. 250,000- - 475 per square mile, most of them in sight of San Francisco Bay (Census Bureau Map)

Local newspapers can be unifying features of communities, as long as they speak the language of the locals.

mostly liberal readers he would be the “Che Guevara of literary revolutionary journalism” and that the Light would be “**The New Yorker** of the West.” He aimed to bring in graduates from top-tier journalism schools to do reporting and photography. Plotkin himself came to the paper after a career as an assistant district attorney in Monterey County and then a master’s degree from Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism.

In an interview on Rowe’s radio program in West Martin, Plotkin invoked Joan Didion’s writing as a model for his Light. “Joan Didion? She of the clinical dispassion and acidic eye?” Rowe writes. “Didion was writing about locals, not for them. She was trotting them out for the amusement of readers in Los Angeles and New York. That Plotkin hadn’t thought about the difference struck me as a little ominous.”

Under Plotkin, the Light changed its design but remained largely the same in many ways. Still, enough was different to make readers and Rowe notice. In December 2006, the town held a meeting to discuss the paper and what they expected from it. One comment said it all, and defined the core of good community journalism:

“When people used to complain to me about Dave Mitchell (right), I’d say, “**The Point Reyes Light** is what hold this community together. It is the center. It is the glue.’ ... I don’t find that to be the case anymore. It breaks my heart.”

More specifically, readers said they wanted reporters and stories that had a sense of place, that understood the community and its values. Plotkin relied on interns from faraway journalism schools, and some locals said the connection between the community and its newspaper was lost. When the newspaper stopped printing all letters, fewer were written.

For Rowe, that was just another sign of the Light’s “tone-deafness,” and it helped spark the start of a rival weekly, the **West Marin Citizen** – which is outselling

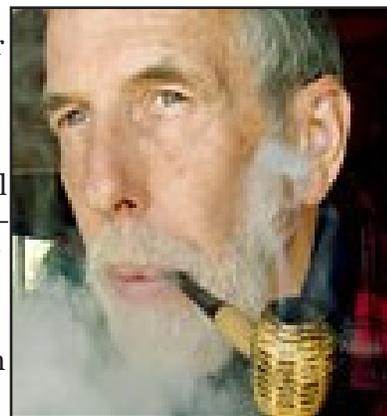
the Light in their stores, Rowe says merchants told him. Rowe writes that competition has been good for the Light, but Plotkin, below, has recently devoted more time to a tourist guide he started, the Coastal Traveler. Click “Editorial” on the Light’s Web site and you get one from July 12, 2007, headlined “How eating Red China’s food will make you Green.” Our repeated attempts to interview Plotkin were unsuccessful. Beyond the ups and downs of the Light, Rowe’s report is worth reading for his broader points about weekly newspapers, points rarely made in the pages of national journalism reviews. Weeklies have been succeeding at a time when so many others are struggling, and Rowe thinks that’s because “such papers seem to be connecting in ways larger media don’t.” Readers turn to local newspapers for a different reason than they look to national magazines or Web sites – for “a sense of familiarity and, most of all, place,” as Rowe puts it.

Local newspapers can be unifying features of communities, as long as they speak the language of the locals. That is not to say these newspapers must print what pleases their readers; it means the newspapers have to acknowledge they are part of a specific place. The best community newspapers recognize their connection to their readers and work to strengthen it.

(Photos by Victor Jose Cabo for *The New York Times*)



Robert Plotkin is the new owner of the Point Reyes Light.



Dave Mitchell owned the Point Reyes Light from 1975 to 2005.



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