

“The Decline of Country Correspondents in Small Newspapers in Kansas”

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“A big thank-you to the Good Samaritan who picked up our hubcap and hung it on the fence along Agnes City Road. We noticed it missing when we got to Council Grove, and was happy to see it on the way home.”

—From “Chalk Dust News” by Barbara Rowley in the Council Grove Republican

My wife and I published a weekly newspaper in the small town of Valley Center, Kan., a city of about 4,000 residents just north of Wichita in south-central Kansas. We inherited several community correspondents, or country correspondents, as they are often called.

Initially, I wanted to fire them, and put what I considered more important news in the paper. Over the 27 years we published our paper, however, I grew to respect not only the dedication and community-mindedness of the correspondents, but also their news.

In my 35-plus years in the newspaper business, I have noticed a decline in the number of community columnists appearing in weekly and small daily newspapers, not only in Kansas but in other states, too. In visiting with editors and publishers at state and national conventions, it became apparent that the days of country correspondents, like the lifestyle of our parents and grandparents, might be numbered.

Most correspondents are elderly. Most are women who have the time and tend to be more community-minded than their younger counterparts. The pay is negligible, if there is any at all. Most newspapers offer a free subscription, stamps and envelopes in the old days, and maybe a small gift at Christmas. E-mail has helped logistically, but older writers tend not to be adept at computers. Often, if they do have computers, they often don’t have Internet access. Some use their computers only for word processing.

Most editors and publishers find that it’s difficult and often impossible to replace correspondents when they quit, move or, most likely, become unable to continue writing, or die. Several of the correspondents featured in my paper are well into their 80s or 90s.

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My two favorite correspondent stories from my days at our weekly newspaper involved Helen Brunn, who wrote “Furley Highlights” for several decades—starting long before I was born. Furley was a tiny town about 13 miles from our city. It was primarily a farming community, with a gas station, co-op elevator and general store that Helen and husband Jake ran for many years. The pride of her weekly column was what I called “chicken noodle dinner news”—who had dinner with whom in and around Furley. That was the *real* news to her.

One week, I opened her envelope marked “Furley Highlights” and found a brief, handwritten note inside. It read simply: “No news this week. The Co-op burned.”

Another week, her column focused on a break-in at the general store she operated with her husband Jake. She listed every item that was missing, down to

the numbers of quarters, dimes, nickels and pennies taken from the cash register. Her last line read: "Anyone who saw a car Friday night in Furley is asked to call the sheriff."

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Using e-mail, I surveyed weekly and daily newspapers in Kansas for this paper on community correspondents. Even though some of the responses came from daily newspapers, most of the information I was seeking was available through weekly newspaper editors and publishers. Weeklies and small dailies are the newspapers in which community or country correspondents have flourished since the early days of our nation.

In the survey, in addition to basic background information, I asked the following questions:

- How many country correspondents does your newspaper use?
- Is this number more or less than in previous years?
- How do you compensate these writers?
- How do you recruit new correspondents?
- What do your community correspondents typically cover?
- How do your readers view these correspondents' columns?
- What value do you see in running correspondents' columns?
- How long have some of your correspondents written for your newspapers?

In addition, I requested the names and contact information of some of the longtime newspaper correspondents. I followed up by contacting correspondents.

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Regretably, two of the correspondents I wanted to contact died before I could contact them. Ina Merle Williams had covered Prairie View news for years, first for the *Waverly News* and later for the *Coffey County Republican* in the eastern Kansas community of Burlington.

When Ina Merle had to move to a nursing home, she not only continued to cover Prairie View news but also added a column that covered news at the nursing home. She died at the age of 97.

In central Kansas, Marj Nienstedt, longtime correspondent for the small farming community of Antelope, died at age 91 two weeks before I tried to contact her. Marj reported comings and goings of her tiny farming community for several decades for *The Marion County Record*.

Unfortunately, when people like Ina Merle and Marj "pass on," as they would have written, it's nearly impossible for newspapers to find replacements.

"We wish we could add more," said Bill Meyer, publisher of *The Record* in Marion for more than 50 years, "but it's a dying concept. Same is true of 'social' or 'personal' items. The newspaper business has changed, and you must shift gears and change with it. The reading public is vastly different than 20 years ago."

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Bill Meyer, publisher of three weekly newspapers in Marion County, said community correspondents keep the country personality in his newspapers and give the reader something they can't get elsewhere.

"They cover the local goings-on, who visited whom, who went to Wichita or Salina, birthdays, back-fence stuff," Meyer said. "Readers make fun of the correspondents, kid about them being in the paper, and read them religiously."

Some of the small- and medium-sized daily newspapers in Kansas also see value in running correspondents' columns.

"I highly value them," said Grey Montgomery, publisher of *The Daily Union* in Junction City. "I think we have a lot of growth potential in small towns around us."

Susan Lynn, publisher of the *Iola Register* in southeast Kansas, agreed.

"The *Register* is the only daily newspaper in Allen County," Lynn said. "If we didn't run our correspondents' news, we'd be missing out on a large section of county happenings."

Carol Bronson, editor of the *Pratt Tribune* in south-central Kansas, said correspondents help provide a sense of community in smaller towns.

The way readers view the columns depends a great deal on the correspondent and how thoroughly he or she covers the community.

"We had one who reported primarily on her own relatives and activities," Bronson said. "She was not well read. Another is pretty general and sticks to the facts, which she primarily gets right. I hear comments that people have seen items in her columns."

Delores Herrs, society editor of the *Miami County Republic* in far eastern Kansas, said her newspaper edits correspondents' columns, which sometimes makes it difficult to find someone who will follow the paper's policies.

"We do not use the 'who went to dinner with whomever' type items," Herrs said. "Our survey from several years indicated people still like to read the columns, so we have continued. I personally feel it is the hometown, neighborhood news that pulls people together."

Jan Epp, co-publisher of the *Greeley County Republican* in far western Kansas, compensates her correspondents with "many thanks and a fruit basket." Epp said the writers are "exceedingly important" in her small community, where the population of the entire county is only 1,534.

Jerry Schwilling, publisher of the *Chase County Leader-News* in east-central Kansas, uses 10 correspondents, "not counting preachers."

"They are essential," Schwilling said. "Elimination of them would cause, I believe, a reader revolt. Many of the readers are former community members. This is what they subscribe for—who ate with who."

Joan Green, editor and advertising manager of *The Record* in Turon in south-central Kansas, worries about recruiting new community correspondents.

"This is a problem," said Green. "When the older generation is no longer able to write, it will be a lost art."

Marj Nienstedt and her husband Alvin ran the small store and post office in the central Kansas community of Antelope, Kan., for decades. *Marion County Record* Publisher Bill Meyer recalls that folks would stop by for a friendly visit, even though they weren't in need of anything except conversation.

The store didn't gross a great deal of revenue, Meyer said, and the post office served a scant few customers. But people made their way to Antelope to visit Marj.

Marj and Alvin would sit in their favorite chairs on the front porch. She'd knit and Alvin would hold the yarn. It was a picture that could grace any magazine, Meyer said, but to be complete the photo would need audio. It was their conversation that was so heartwarming and enjoyable. That conversational style carried over into Marj's weekly column that she penned for decades for *The Marion County Record*.

Many newspapers across the United States have stopped publishing community news. Meyer says that's a big mistake, adding that to serve the community, community newspapers must have community news.

"Marj supplied it in spades," Meyer wrote in a tribute to his longtime columnist earlier this year. "She would report on the comings and goings of people across the area, tell about the birth of a batch of kittens, and the condition of a nasty carbuncle on Alvin's neck."

Readers loved the Antelope news in Marj's column in *The Record* because they loved Marj, Meyer said.

"There was no doubt about it," Meyer added. "This newspaper's had a multitude of readers who subscribed merely for Marj's column."

From time to time, Meyer said, he and Marj would have a disagreement, usually about why editors at the newspaper had deleted something from her "items," as she called them. Marj would get as sore as Alvin's carbuncle and quit, Meyer said, but a couple of weeks later, a contrite Marj would come into *The Record* office and say, "Bill, I don't see how you put up with me. Can I start writing again?"

"Of course," Meyer said, "we welcomed her with open arms. That's the way her 'Good Lord' must have received her in heaven. The devoted member of Marion Christian Church will soon be active in all the affairs up there. We only wish she could write a column."

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Meyer laments the decline of community newspaper correspondents. *The Marion County Record* is down to four correspondents. Ten years ago, he said, there were 19, and before that, the newspaper boasted as many as 25.

The remaining four still have a strong influence in their communities, Meyer said.

"They are well read, and there are those who subscribe by mail and online to read them," Meyer said. "They are especially interesting to the older reader, and to the folks who grew up here and moved away."

Meyer compensates his community correspondents at 10 cents per column inch. He also gives them free classified ads and a big box of chocolates at Christmas.

"Their principal reward is recognition as doing something for their communities," the publisher said. "Many of the smaller communities are 'hanging on' because of their community correspondent. It's an important role."

Meyer and his staff have tried to recruit new writers, but find it nearly impossible.

"They have to volunteer—come to us," Meyer said. "We just lost one of our best—she wrote about 60 column inches a week—but has moved to Lawrence. She wrote the news from Pilsen. I won't be able to replace her."

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Clarke Davis, publisher of *The Valley Falls Vindicator* and *Oskaloosa Independent* in Jefferson County, in northeastern Kansas, agrees with Meyer's assessment of the decline of community newspaper correspondents.

When Davis came to Jefferson County 35 years ago, there were 15 correspondents writing for *The Vindicator*. Now, there is only one. The same is true for Davis' other newspaper, *The Oskaloosa Independent*, which is down from about 15 correspondents to only two.

According to Davis, there were 100 rural school districts in Jefferson County, and each had a community name. Schools had long been consolidated by 1968, but the farming communities encircling Valley Falls still identified themselves with such names as North Cedar, Swabville, Peter's Creek, Half Mound, Coal Creek, Dunnivant, Boyle Station, Nichols Corner, Blue Mound and Bloomfield. Each community had a correspondent. Some wrote every week. Others wrote monthly when their club or extension unit met.

They were all women—farm wives—who worked hard and for some reason cared enough about everyone to get their happenings in the paper.

"It gave the paper 100 percent saturation in those communities, and no one stubbed their toe or got kicked by a horse without it being reported," Davis said. "There was no pay. Maybe their subscription, paper, envelopes and stamps. And we had to have early copy for all of it to be typeset on the Linotype. They all wrote in longhand, so we didn't have to provide typewriter ribbon."

In the intervening years, the farmers have mostly left, due to a lagging economy, or died. The daughters of those women are all in a new job market, trying to make a living, Davis said.

"And something else has happened here," the longtime publisher added. "This is a rapidly growing area of new suburbanites commuting to Lawrence and Topeka, and I doubt if they would take kindly to someone calling from the newspaper to ask them personal questions about what was going on in their lives."

Contacting people for news items also would be more difficult, Davis said, because most have recorders on their telephones and use mostly cell phones, whose numbers are difficult to find. It would take a special newspaper personality to make journalism that personal hip again, he added.

"Papers were made fun of in those days, called 'The Weekly Wipe,'" Davis said, "because that was about all the news we did carry. The mechanics were too demanding, but at the same time and pace that society changed, so did technology, freeing us to write and report. What fills those columns today? Reports of city council and school board meetings, politics, tax issues, sports, big

pictures, court trials, car wrecks. Big, important stuff for which we are probably all poorer.”

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“Perhaps I shouldn’t have delayed my cataract removal until summer. I missed the halftime wardrobe malfunction.”

—From “Chalk Dust News” by Barbara Rowley in the *Council Grove Republican*

Barbara Rowley can’t remember when she started writing for the *Council Grove Republican*. Or the newspapers in Alma, White City and Eskridge, for that matter. Barbara, 74, jokes that she’s a syndicated columnist.

She remembers “two ladies” before her who wrote about news from Chalk for the area newspapers. “One lady wanted to quit,” she said. “Another’s house burned down, and she moved to Alma. And that left me.”

Chalk used to be a town, Barbara said, but that was well before her time. She’s lived in the area between Alma, Alta Vista, Eskridge and Council Grove for nearly 50 years.

Barbara has written her column for nearly three decades like she writes letters to her three children who live in Council Grove, Topeka and Texas. People from as far away as California and Oregon have written in response to her columns.

“People who used to live here have an interest in what the weather’s doing, or almost anything,” she said. “I figure as long as they (the newspapers) keep sending me stamps, they still want it.”

Barbara either calls families for news, or they call her. There used to be more than 10 families on her calling list; now, there are only three. She considers anyone who votes at the Chalk schoolhouse a couple of miles from her home as being from Chalk.

“There aren’t too many people left out here in this area,” Barbara said. “As people die out, nobody moves in.”

People who live in the area are mostly aging farmers. There were three farmers under age 55, but one had to quit for financial reasons, she said. Her husband Carl, 81, used to farm, too. He still bales hay, and, ironically, said Barbara, they are making more money than when they farmed full time.

Barbara’s column contains not only the goings-on in the Chalk area, but also her comments on current events. Each column begins with a saying or thought (“These days about half the stuff in my shopping cart says ‘For fast relief.’”). She reads a lot, she said, and frequently copies some of the phrases she encounters.

Barbara isn’t paid for her weekly column, but the newspapers that carry her writing supply her with postage and envelopes. She used to type her columns before her kids bought her a computer.

“It’s not hooked up or anything,” she admitted. “I just use it for word processing.”

Most of the newspaper editors and publishers who carry her column give her a Christmas gift: a couple of boxes of Hallmark Christmas cards from Council Grove, a check from Alma and a gift certificate from a nearby store from White City.

“And the Eskridge paper I have hopes for,” Barbara added, chuckling. “New owners.”

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“Butler City has enjoyed beautiful days with the weatherman predicting temperatures in the high 60s and low 70s, with brilliant sunshine all week. Willie Mays would have enjoyed these great days of spring!”

—From “Blaine Department” in the *Westmoreland Recorder* by Mary Cummings

Mary Cummings and husband John have been responsible for a Blaine news column that has appeared in newspapers in Pottawatomie and Marshall counties in northeast Kansas for more than 80 years.

John started writing about Blaine news around 1916 until his death in 1966. That’s when Mary assumed duties as the Blaine correspondent. Her weekly “Blaine Department” column runs in the *Westmoreland Recorder* and the neighboring *Frankfort News*.

It’s called the “Blaine Department,” explained son Tom Cummings, because it was created when the Blaine newspaper folded and was bought by the Westmoreland paper. That was in the 1880s.

“Technically, my mother has her own department,” he joked.

John Cummings was postmaster, worked in the oil and grain business, and owned and operated a general store, Cummings Emporium, with his wife from 1939 until Mary closed the store in the mid ‘80s.

Mary was one of four graduates, all girls, in the class of 1926 at Blaine High School class. She left the town about 30 miles northeast of Manhattan for a couple of years, then moved back in 1929. The town’s population back then was a couple hundred. Now, Mary said, it’s dwindled to 25 or 30.

Mary’s routine has been the same for many years. On Sunday evening, she calls her neighbors—about eight or 10—and gathers the news. Then she writes it by longhand. Each Monday, her son Tom drives her the seven miles to the newspaper office in Westmoreland. She quit driving a couple of years ago.

“If I mailed it, it would be late,” said Mary.

Mary knows her column’s importance, which she gauges by response from friends and neighbors. After people move away from the Blaine area, she thinks they enjoy her column even more.

“If people know something special going on in town, they tell me,” she said. “I think it keeps our community alive.”

Westmoreland Recorder publisher Jim Travis said if any of the three community columns his newspaper carries do not appear, subscribers call to found out why.

“Their columns are the integral thread binding together this gray and otherwise thankless, demanding mistress,” said Travis. “It also fills in the blank spaces around the ads.”

Travis has high praise for Mary, whom he says is “simply put, a delightful person to talk to.”

“Her work as a correspondent has been and is a staple to our paper,” he said. “She brings a sense of refinement and decorum to what might otherwise appear chaotic. Looking over these past eight years at the helm of this

newspaper, getting to know Mary Cummings is one thing that has made it worthwhile.”

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“Notes from Infinia of Kensington: The usual greetings and rehab exercises, along with one-on-one sessions, were held. Cowboys made for interesting conversation Monday afternoon. The beauty shop was open Tuesday, and manicures were given. Doris Slavik and Betty Wagner helped call bingo in the afternoon.”

—From “Kensington News” by Ruth Bienhoff in *The Phillips County Review*

About 25 years ago, Ruth Bienhoff started writing a news column covering the communities of Kensington and Athol for *The Phillips County Review* in north-central Kansas. She began by filling in for the regular correspondent. When that writer quit, she took over.

Ruth focuses on past and current happenings involving friends and neighbors, plus a description of the weather and crop reports for those living away from the area. She doesn’t see anyone “jumping for the job” when she quits writing her column.

“I have trouble even getting someone to fill in for me when I want to be gone,” she said. “It takes a lot of time to do it well, and the pay is not that great. I enjoy writing and also keeping in contact with people, so this is my contribution to the community.”

One of Ruth’s fellow correspondents in Phillips County, Sherri Baker, started writing because no one was writing the Agra news. She thought her community should be covered, too. She said she receives both verbal and written thanks for her effort.

Sherri is paid—10 cents an inch, which totals \$5 to \$6 a week—but it barely covers her long-distance calls necessary to gather news in nearby Kirwin.

No one wants her job, Sherri said.

“I spend six to 10 hours a week gathering news,” she explained. “It really kills my Sunday afternoon. There used to be a service organization in the community that wrote the news, but they burned out. No money for the time invested. When they quit, the news was dropped, so that’s why I started.”

Like Ruth, Sherri sees her news column, which also runs in *The Advocate* in Phillips County, as a form of community service.

“I enjoy calling and visiting with people to get their news,” she said. “I appreciate having e-mail now to help with some of it. I used to have to type it up, then take it to the newspaper office. E-mail has really helped. They (newspaper employees) don’t have to retype it now.”

“The Eastern Heights juniors arrived home on Wednesday from the spring break trip to Washington, D.C., and New York City. They reported having a wonderful time and especially enjoyed going to “Ground Zero” in the family area and the Broadway musical, “The Phantom of the Opera.”

—From “Agra News” by Sherri Baker in *The Phillips County Review*

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"To me, a little 'joke' someone told me: 'Times have never been as hard as now.' They have no idea what we had to go through in the 'Dirty '30s.' We were used to nothing before, but we got used to even less. We had grasshoppers, chinch bugs, dust storms and hot days, some 110, no fans. It was plain miserable, and no price for what little we were able to raise and sell."

—From "Greeley News" by Marie Katzer in *The Anderson County Review*

Marie Katzer was 17 when she started writing for the *Anderson County Review* in Garnett. That was in 1927. Marie, 93, lives four miles south of Greeley, or about eight miles from Garnett.

"I cover the Sutton Valley news," she said. "The Suttons started this territory, but there are no Suttons left anymore. They're all gone."

The world is different, too, said Marie.

"People don't visit as much as they used to," she explained. "Now nobody visits. They just kind of live here."

Marie said she likes to hear from people in her area for news items for her column, but most everybody has either died or moved.

"I keep wishing someone would come, or call, to tell me something," she lamented. "When the telephone rings, someone tries to sell me something."

Anderson County Review publisher Dane Hicks views his correspondents—which have dwindled to three—as a vital connection to smaller communities in his area. He gives them free subscriptions, ads and photo processing—plus an annual appreciation luncheon. He tries to make them feel included as staff members.

Readers sometimes joke about his correspondents' columns, Hicks said.

"But that beats the hell out of other things we publish that never generate a single word of conversation," he said. "I think they like to read them, but many people just don't want to participate in them."

Hicks said the gist of the correspondents' copy is the meat and potatoes of small-town life—rarely of barn-burning significance.

"But if somebody's barn burns," he added, "they usually include that in their column."

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"I've got the urge to go somewhere, today. Honduras would be interesting. Hawaii would be wonderful, Houston has fine art galleries, I hear, but I'll have to settle today for Herington—a sleepy little town on the prairie that sports a great lumberyard. I'm in need of wire mesh for sanding drywall. Yep, it's just another day in the country!"

—From "Another Day in the Country," by Pat Wick in *the Marion County Record*

Sisters Jessica Gilbert and Pat Wick had been coming back to Ramona, Kan., since they were little girls. They called it their "secret place." It was the place, the sisters say in an excerpt from a book they're writing, where all the stories began. It's where their grandparents lived, where their parents were born and raised. It's where their dad was a basketball champ and their mother drove the Model T into the lilac bush because she didn't know how to stop it. It's where their parents romanced in orchestra class, where they

wed, where Pat swallowed kerosene out of curiosity and where Grandpa sneaked Jessica chocolate chip cookies, even when her mother emphatically said, "No!"

In their Web site (www.californiasisters.com), Jessica and Pat, known affectionately as those girls from California, moved to Kansas in 2000. It was their millennium statement. They resigned their corporate jobs and set out to fulfill several cherished dreams, which were connected to the little town of Ramona, population about 100.

They've taken the town by storm. They now own four houses, the bank building and the original barbershop. They've published one book and are working on another. They are the proprietors of a bed and breakfast called Cousin's Corner, they hold seminars and appear for speaking engagements, take on writing projects, teach art and have even started a little museum at the old bank building. And, they both write weekly columns for the nearby *Marion County Record*.

"They are great," said *Record* publisher Bill Meyer, "and have a broad following. But they are no old ladies with blue hair."

Pat, 67, writes a personal column, "A Day in the Country," and Jessica, 54, writes more in the style of an old-time country newspaper correspondent in "Ramona News."

"Jess writes good stuff and has turned Ramona around as a small town," Meyer said. "She's an accomplished writer."

The weekly newspaper columns are not their only writing ventures. They also produce a town newsletter, which they started out of their own pockets. Now, they have people—even from out of state—sponsor issues at a cost of \$100.

The sisters create the newsletter on their computer, then take it to Salina to have it printed. They deliver the newsletter on foot to all 48 houses in town. Their total distribution has grown to 300, including those out-of-town supporters.

Jessica said they relish the face-to-face contact with fellow Ramona residents.

"We always see it like a needle and thread," she explained. "Every conversation you have, weaving something, bringing people together."

The sisters recently went a step further in their civic involvement. Jessica is city clerk of the five-block-square community, and last fall, Pat moved into the mayor's position.

In their newspaper columns, the sisters don't cover crime or other hard news. They concentrate on more nostalgic, heartwarming pieces—to make their readers smile.

"When our columns aren't in, people call and ask what's wrong," said Jessica. "People, especially those who live away, tell us they clip them out and send it to two or three friends."

Jessica tells one story that illustrates the community support for their weekly writings. She was fixing dinner one evening when two little girls showed up at her front door.

"They asked me if I'd heard about the new people who had moved to town," she said. "They said they thought I'd want to know for my column."

She said she burst out laughing.

"They were so darling," she added, stressing the importance of "interacting with fellow human beings."

“The world needs more trust, confidence, connection, believing—there will always be someone like an Osama bin Laden,” she said. “Someone needs to be on the other end of the teeter-totter.

“And that’s the news from Ramona, where we walk with our feet firmly on the ground (most of the time), and a traffic jam is two parked cars and a dog in the road.”

—From Ramona correspondent Jessica Gilbert in the Marion County Record