

Community newspapers alive and doing just fine

Since this is National Newspaper Week, it's a good time to talk about newspapers today and the future.

Newspapers have been a vital force in American democracy since Colonial times. Their importance in public affairs was recognized by the Founding Fathers, who gave newspapers second billing only to God when they wrote the Bill of Rights.

That has not changed, nor is it about to. Newspapers have been around for nearly 400 years, and they will be here for the foreseeable future.

You may have heard that newspapers are dying, about to be replaced by the Internet. That's hardly the case.

You may have heard that newspapers are broke, about to disappear. That's not true, either.

Many bigger papers, dailies in the cities, are struggling. Several large publishing firms are in bankruptcy. That is only vaguely related to technology or competition.

Larger dailies are under pressure from electronic competition, it's true, but their real problem is the shift to the suburbs which began after World War II and the resulting fragmentation of urban communities.

Most grew up serving a single city with a single mayor, school board and City Hall. Now, dozens of suburbs and suburban schools split the urban pie. There's little sense of community. And city newspapers have struggled to keep up for decades.

The big bankruptcies stem mostly from leveraged takeovers that left newspaper companies unprepared to meet new competition and most of all, short of cash to pay their inordinate debt loads. When a financier, not the founding family, controls the Tribune Co., owner of the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times and other major papers, that can't be good.

And it wasn't. Today, those venerable names are part of the parent company's bankruptcy, and with competition and a recession, the papers can't help the firm pay its debt. It's sad, but it's not an indication of health or outlook of the newspaper industry.

Outside, the cities, where more than three-fourths of all American newspapers do business, things are going much better. These operations, known as community newspapers, are alive and healthy. Their balance sheets look nothing like the red-tinged reports of

the big dailies.

The *Wall Street Journal*, the Associated Press and others have, in fact, reported this, but the good news had been but a drop of ink among the market reports and horror stories about the city press. The National Newspaper Association, which represents community newspapers, has tried to get the word out, but it's like swimming upstream in a flood.

So, what of the future?

We think community newspapers will be around for a long time, because they do something no one else can or will: produce local news about a town or county or neighborhood that people who live there just have to have.

Without newspapers, our towns would be in the dark about public affairs, socials events, neighborhood doings. This may seem like slow news to a city dweller, but it's the stuff of community.

You hear talk of websites taking over, but no one has figured out how to make a website pay, at least not the way newspapers pay. They can't sustain themselves. You hear cities and school board talk about putting their public notices on the Internet, but have you ever tried to find anything on a government website? Or even been to one?

One plan would have foundations and government put up money to replace newspapers with nonprofit websites. Without economic justification, though, it's hard to imagine those ever having much punch or lasting long in the market. It's just not realistic, and besides, any news organization that relies on public money can't maintain the independence so necessary to news media in a democracy.

No, newspapers will remain — and thrive. There's nothing around to replace them.

They may become more electronic — we've succeeded in converting the entire process except the printing on paper to electrons so far — but their basic form and function has proved both enduring and important.

Newspapers have survived other challenges — from King George to radio news to the loss of all their national ads to television in the 1950s — and come out more vital than ever, because we need them.

What will your newspaper look like at mid-century? Hard to say. Things change fast. But we believe there will be one, and you'll be glad to see it, however it arrives at your home.

— Steve Haynes



IT MAY BE A BIG PICKUP, but it doesn't come even halfway up the gun turret of the USS Alabama. A caterer had parked his rig after unloading food and gear; concrete bridges allow vehicles to drive right up onto the battleship's expansive fantail. The Alabama's been moored in Mobile Bay since the 1960s.

— Herald staff photo by Steve Haynes

Boys enjoy old, new ships

We got to spend most of the week in Mobile, Ala., a one-time sleepy southern port city that seems to be slowly coming to life, at least partly due to investments by the state employee's retirement fund.

The combined Retirement Systems of Alabama (separate funds for teachers, state employees and judges) maintain most of their money in stocks and bonds, as most such operations do. But they put a small, if significant, share into real estate and business investments, many of them designed to boost the economy of their own state.

The agency has put millions into resort and business hotels across Alabama from Auburn to Mobile. These in turn bring visitors, conventioners and others to the state to spend money.

Another major focus is the "trail" of Robert Trent Jones-designed golf courses which have become a major draw. The Mobile riverfront has two big Marriott hotels towering over the quay where, thanks partly to state investment, Carnival cruise liners dock once a week or so. The retirement system also owns the historic Battle House downtown. (The systems also invest in several dozen small-town newspapers through a company known as Community Newspaper Holdings Inc.)

All that investment seems to be sparking a gradual revival of Mobile's old downtown, where an entertainment district is developing along Dauphin Street. Restaurants range from the traditional Wintzell's Oyster House to sushi and trendy



Along the Sappa

By Steve Haynes
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pizza, bars from college hangouts to fine wine.

From the hotel window, you can see the outlines of old slips where Liberty ships and landing craft took form during World War II. Port activity declined after that, but Carnival, tourism and the remaining defense work are changing that.

You can see two eras of naval history from the window: The historic battleship USS Alabama sits in 17 feet of mud out in the bay to the east, where she's been an attraction since the people of her namesake state raised more than \$1 million to save her from scrapping in 1964.

The mammoth ship is the star of a military history collection that includes aircraft, from a float plane once used on a battleship to modern jets, plus tanks, artillery and a World War II submarine. There's a preserved B-52 in Vietnam-era camouflage, a World War II Navy Corsair and an Air Force F-16.

Us boys could have spent a day or two on the ships. On the Alabama, you can take marked tours or just wander through the amazing spaces, from the bridge down to the engine rooms and the berthing areas. Much of the ship is open and available.

Then, you'd need another day for the planes and tanks. Great stuff.

But berthed on the river is one of the Navy's newest weapons system, known as a littoral combat ship, LCS 2, to be the Independence, is berthed at the Austal shipyard for refitting after builder's trials. This version, built by a team led by General Dynamics, will compete with a version being built by Lockheed-Martin. Both are capable of going close in to shallow waters where larger ships would be in danger, and of sprinting to 45 knots (about 52 mph).

And those of us who got to see it were pretty impressed by the catamaran hull, angular stealthy profile and anti-radar surface coating.

"Can you take a picture of that?" someone asked.

Guess you can when it's parked on the river. I'm sure the Chinese already have.

After visiting the Alabama, strolling along Dauphin (Everyone here says "hi" as they pass. Everyone.) and downing some oysters at Wintzell's, we went out for shrimp and crab at a place on the causeway. It's not Aspen or Telluride, but it is not bad duty either, sailor.

Let's get this campaign going

I have a new title: Campaign Manager. Not just any campaign either. It's a presidential campaign.

Our 10-year old granddaughter, Taylor Lane Bravo, a fifth grader, has announced her candidacy for president of the student council at her school in Texas. She called last night to get my opinion of her campaign slogans. Of course, Grandma had to add one of her own: "Stand up and cheer, Bravo's here." Taylor's two favorites are: "Forget the rest, Bravo's the best" and "I May Be Short But, Big Things Come in Small Packages. Vote Bravo For President." That, of course, referring to the fact that she has always been the shortest kid in her class.

Candidates are not allowed to make banners or signs — only one poster. But here's the kicker: she has to make a speech in front of the student body. That would eliminate most of the competition right there. But not Taylor.

I asked her what her campaign platform was going to be. I thought perhaps, she would promise better lunches or longer recesses. She's much more mature than that.

"I want to be the kind of president who will really listen," she said. "I want the kids to know that I will schedule an appointment before



Out Back

By Carolyn Sue Kelley-Plotts
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school, during recess or after school to talk with them. I want them to know their opinion is important."

If only all politicians would take a few pointers from a 10-year old.

I'm going to tell Taylor's mother to hang on to that campaign poster. In 2033, when Taylor turns 35, we'll dust it off for the national campaign.

— ob —

People tell me it must be fun living with Jim Plotts because he's such a cut-up. And, I admit, I wouldn't have much to write about if it weren't for his antics. But, I have to know about them, first. I found out this week that he's been holding out on me.

On our way to church he confessed that he had pulled a real "doozy" in front of one of his friends. The friend said, "Well, I bet that makes it into the paper."

Jim said he told his buddy, "Not if

you don't tell her it won't."

— ob —

I'm afraid I really did pick the last rose of summer. It's perched on the shelf above my kitchen sink but, it's fading fast. Flowers seemed to be extra pretty this summer. And, as much as I love the fall, I will miss the splashes of color.

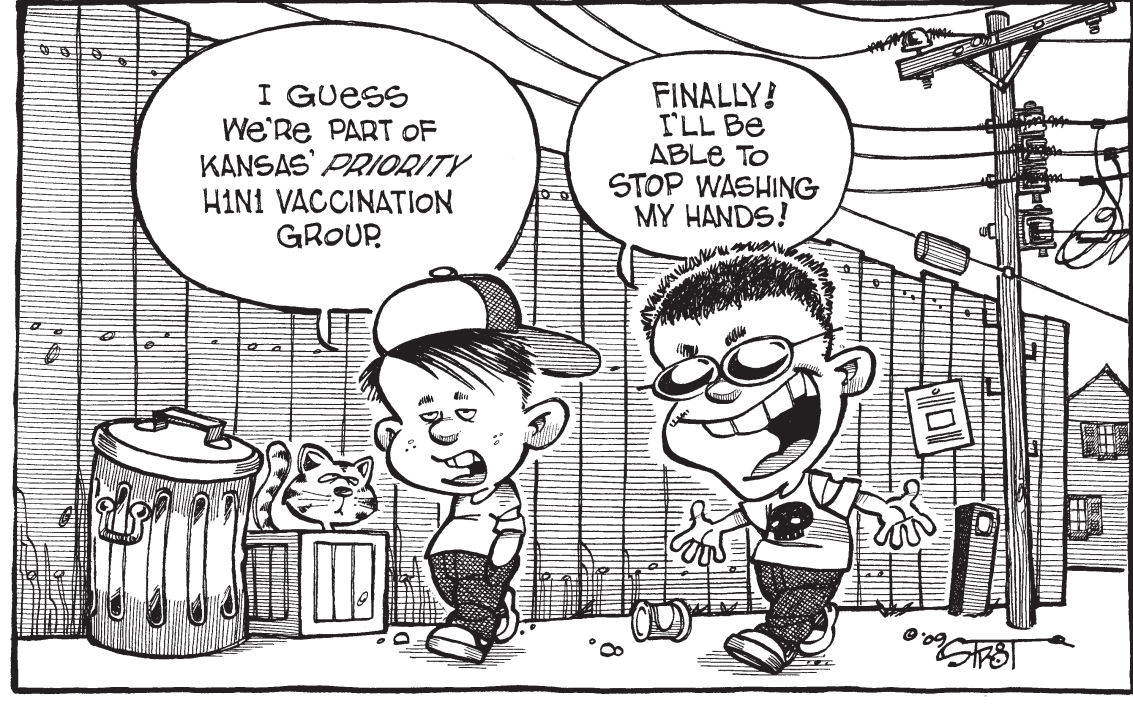
From the Bible

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30



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