

Reading Local



Small-town newspapers like the Cabot Chronicle are thriving—and creating community connections—across the state.

WHO WON the ice-out contest? What's on the menu at the senior center in May? When's hazardous waste collection day? Where do you register the moose you just bagged and why did the local diner close down?

If you happened to live in Cabot before the 2008 launch of *The Cabot Chronicle*, you might not have known. Located on the periphery of two newspaper districts, the Montpelier *Times Argus* and the Hardwick *Gazette*, “for decades the only Cabot news in regional papers was the once-in-a-blue-moon fire or accident,” wrote Peter Dannenberg, one of the *Chronicle* founders, in an essay about the paper’s inception. More often known as the home of Cabot Creamery, the 1,300 people

of this town live within easy driving distance of Montpelier. Dannenberg cites farm failures and a gradual rise in commuting—the slow transformation from self-contained small town to a state capital bedroom community—as the reason citizens felt “they didn’t know their neighbors or what was going on here. We’re fighting that.”

“One of the things we realized... was that communication was a giant issue,” says *Chronicle* publisher Lori Augustyniak. “We needed a newspaper. So we pulled together 25 people with experience or interest in starting one.” Among the 25 was Dannenberg, who grew up in Poughkeepsie, New York, and had worked as an auditor, accountant and copy editor before moving to town a decade ago. His daughter,

Allison Joyal, became the first editor of the *Chronicle*, helping to guide the paper from a good idea to a free monthly publication. Even though the town has an informative Website and sends e-mail bulletins on upcoming meetings, Cabot town clerk Tara Rogerson says the site “doesn’t give you the story, week to week or month to month, of what has happened [in town].”

By launching its own publication, the community defied the national newspaper downswing. When the *Chronicle* printed its first monthly issue on March 1, 2008, making it one of the newest papers in Vermont, it joined the ranks of more than four dozen small-town newspapers across the state that connect legislators to constituents, local business owners to

shoppers and neighbors to neighbors. The motive and hypothesis? You can restore a feeling of community by reporting local events.

“Newspapers are trying with all their might...to stay relevant,” writes Chris Evans, who teaches journalism at the University of Vermont, in his media blog (<http://uvmmedia.wordpress.com>). “And they must. Are we ready to trust our news-gathering bloggers who can’t discern personal bias and opinion from fact? I hope not.” He goes on to add that the “future of objectivity—the future of fact—is at risk.” Yet small community papers are faring better than the big metropolitan dailies that are going belly up across America. A 2009 article in the *Wall Street Journal* reported that compared to bigger daily papers (with circulations greater than 100,000), the community newspaper across the country is a “relatively healthy brethren... where advertising revenues fell 3.6 percent... as opposed to a nearly 17 percent decline for the industry overall.”

Mike Donoghue, executive director of the Vermont Press Association, observes that in his 30 years of involvement with the Vermont newspaper industry, he has seen little fluctuation in the number of local newspapers. “If anything, the number of ‘non dailies’—and by this I mean weekly, biweekly and monthly newspapers—has increased slightly.”

Dick Drysdale, publisher of the 135-year-old *Herald of Randolph*, concurs. “I see many Vermont newspapers and I don’t see signs of death,” he wrote in a 2009 editorial. “I see newspapers that are a bit slimmer than they were 18 months ago, but still full of good stuff.” In another editorial, he reported that when representatives of 13 of Vermont’s community newspapers met to discuss the industry’s outlook, “they heard none of the doom and gloom that pervades much of the national discussion of the newspaper business, nor were fears expressed that the Internet is seriously threatening their advertising and circulation base... Three of the newspapers said they had

experienced their best year ever in 2008, just before the recession crippled the economy. Most publishers said this year’s sales are down, but in the four to six percent range, which is a far cry from the plunging bottom lines at metropolitan newspapers that are getting most of the publicity.”

Nevertheless, as veteran journalist Donoghue points out, “people just aren’t spending money—on cars, on bagels or on TVs.” That plays out in



Brad Limoge has been publisher of the weekly *News and Citizen* in Morrisville since the mid 1980s. It’s one of the few remaining local newspapers in Vermont that still prints in-house; they also print the *Cabot Chronicle*, *Richmond Times Ink* and *Fairfax News*.

fewer advertisements and leaner budgets at papers that depend on ad revenues. “Certainly the communications explosion of the last 10 or 20 years surpasses the developments of the past 400 years,” he says. “Will [news of the future] be on paper? I don’t know.”

And yet into these “interesting times” of proliferating Internet news outlets and a struggling economy, *The Cabot Chronicle* was born. Or rather, reborn: *The Chronicle* is actually a revival of a newspaper that was

founded in 1920 and re-established 88 years later by the Cabot Coalition, a nonprofit charged with preventing drug and alcohol abuse in teens. As to why such an organization might break into the newspaper business, coalition coordinator and *Chronicle* publisher Lori Augustyniak explains: “Because healthy communities have healthy people, and one way to build healthy people is to have healthy connections between people of all different generations. Starting the paper was one way to try to achieve that. And an upshot of running the newspaper is, it’s a great way to get [drug and alcohol abuse] prevention information out into the community.” Though originally conceived as an incubator project that would transition into its own nonprofit agency, the coalition board of directors is pleased with the paper and plans to continue publishing it.

So with a shoestring budget (the Coalition spends about \$1,200 per issue to pay staff, print the paper and mail it to everyone in town), editorial meetings that are open to the public, and a simple mission—to strengthen their community through communication—the first storyboards were prepared to offer something for everyone, from “children to seniors, quilters to hunters, and politicians to musicians.” From those first 2008 exploratory meetings to becoming the official town record, putting together each monthly issue of the *Chronicle* has been half miracle, half labor of love. By way of example, about six months into production, the paper needed a new layout designer. Where do you find someone? A *Chronicle* volunteer bumped into his friend, a former graphic designer, at the local apple-pie festival. Before the grand prize was announced, Todd Jones had a new part-time job and the *Cabot Chronicle* had found its layout guy.

THE CABOT TOWN office basement isn’t much to look at. There is no “newsroom.” Instead, there’s a long table surrounded by chairs...and that’s it. In this semi-subsidized, semi-rented room (the Cabot Coalition pays the



Lori Augustyniak is coordinator for the Cabot Coalition and the founder and publisher of *The Cabot Chronicle*.



Chronicle coordinator Amy Hornblas does everything from proofing to picking up 1,000 copies of the monthly paper from the printer.

“We were there yesterday, we’re here today and we’ll be here tomorrow.”
—Angelo Lynn, *Addison Independent*

town a modest yearly rent), editorial meetings are held on Friday afternoons.

Gathered around the long table, with a bag of pretzels in the middle, you’ll find graphic artist Jones, still wearing a pager from his job overseeing autistic children; Amy Hornblas, the newspaper coordinator—whose responsibilities involve everything from proofreading to picking up 1,000 copies at the printer—fresh from her job at teaching health at Cabot School; editor Anne Nadel, the 4-H leader and elaborately tattooed mother of two; and executive editor Sergeant Jeannie Johnson, who works for the Vermont Department of Public Safety. Newspaper publisher Augustyniak distributes the storyboard and attempts to bring the meeting to order.

For the next two hours the *Chronicle* staff, who receive a meager honorarium for their efforts, toss out and claim stories that reveal life in Cabot. Jeannie Johnson collects ideas for *Curds and Whey*, a feature that notes those who deserve positive

recognition, as well as those who have committed negative acts. This is where dismay about the graveyard vandalism (whey) is counterbalanced by kudos for Cabot resident Chris Tormey, who rides his bike to work 60 miles round-trip (curds).

While some writers toil beside each other, the *Cabot Chronicle* crew disperses after the Friday afternoon meeting. They cobble their pieces together at home, after work, usually seconds before or just after the deadline, and e-mail them to the editor. A recent memo to *Chronicle* staff reminds all that deadlines need to be firm—“the paper needs a long runway to come in for a landing.” The last-minute niggles are worried out with editor Nadel through spasms of e-mails, until Jones’ layout is sent electronically to Morrisville’s weekly newspaper, the *News and Citizen*, where it manifests in hard copy less than 24 hours later.

After all 1,000 copies of the eight-to-16-page paper are retrieved from the printer and loaded into the back seat

of a car, they’re brought to the town office. Volunteers (often youth) are recruited to collate the inserts, label the papers, and deliver them to the post office. The *Chronicle* staff distribute the rest, leaving stacks at the hardware store, the grocery store, the co-op in Hardwick, and other strategic locations—where they are quickly snapped up by passing locals.

So why are small-town papers surviving, with their downhome headlines (“Voters to Address Tree’s Future”) and with the same reporter writing five out of seven front-page stories? As Dick Drysdale points out, “The fact that a local paper is part of the community creates reader and advertiser loyalty.” According to Vermont Press Association president and Barton *Chronicle* co-editor Bethany Dunbar, “We’re still a really good place to advertise. Research shows that for every newspaper purchased, three people read it and spend on average about 40 minutes with it; on the Internet, advertisements only get glances.”

In an act of defiance and dedication, Ed Shamy purchased the 130-year-old *County Courier*, the weekly newspaper of Enosberg Falls, after losing his job at the Burlington *Free Press* in August 2008. His opinion is: "Micro news is what bigger papers have forsaken, there's a huge niche for what's going on locally." Almost two years later, Shamy reports that circulation is up and ad sales are stronger than when he took over, which he notes is "impressive, given what's happening to newspapers in general and the economy." "We were there yesterday, we're here today and we'll be here tomorrow," says publisher Angelo Lynn of his 25 years at the Addison County *Independent*. Another testament to longevity, *The Vermont Standard* in Woodstock, founded 156 years ago by an alcohol temperance society, has endured both a fire in 1867 and a flood in 1973, in which all the press equipment was destroyed—and has never missed an issue.

The Barton *Chronicle* mock-up for its first paper in 1974 boasts a mission that is as applicable now as it was then, proposing a local newspaper that will serve the community as it "offers the sustained reading interest from front page to back that assures maximum advertising impact" and "provides lively detailed coverage of local issues, local schools, local personalities and local economic trends."

Thirty-five years later the paper's veteran publisher, Chris Braithwaite, is still at the helm of his community news endeavor. Braithwaite summarizes why local papers survive: "Even if this trend [of dying newspapers] is permanent," he says, "the last gasp will be community journalism" because it pertains to a community of interest, be it a geographic location or a common investment. He notes that print news is swiftly becoming irrelevant to a readership with audiences in the millions, but news that is "very specific to a very small audience, that may not otherwise be available, still has a place."

I KNOW THIS PAPER is a success because I hear people talking about it in the grocery store," layout designer Todd Jones says. He's illustrating the point that what differentiates local news from regional and global news is that the readership is to some extent an extended family.



Clockwise from front: *Cabot Chronicle* editor Anne Nadel, executive editor Jeannie Johnson, publisher Lori Augustyniak, reporter and advertising sales representative Julia Shipley, layout artist Todd Jones and newspaper coordinator Amy Hornblas at an editorial meeting in the Cabot town office basement. Below: Author Shipley at work.

Newspaper reader Julia Purdy of Rochester expressed the appeal of her local paper in a recent letter to the editor of the *Herald of Randolph*, the 135-year-old community paper that belongs to third-generation publisher Dick Drysdale. She writes, "...I enjoy feeling connected to the place where I do my shopping, pay my property tax, exchange small-talk with and shopkeepers, and find out about the latest local adventure or misadventure."

Another attribute of local news is that the lives of the news producers and the news consumers are entwined. There is no separation of impact, be it a tragedy or celebration. Whether it's asbestos tailings or stimulus money, they'll affect both readers and the writers of the news. But as Secretary of State Deb Markowitz pointed out in an editorial published in the *Caledonia Record* last March, "The joy of a local paper is that you can read a piece by a reporter who knows her way around government and has personal knowledge of politicians; who can provide context and challenge assumptions." Lori Augustyniak of the *Cabot Chronicle* recalls the sweet feeling of helping to publish her town's news. At a meeting in which someone was criticizing the work of her organization, the Cabot Coalition, she realized, "I could tell it was based on something they had



read in the *Chronicle*." Instead of feeling attacked, she was privately gleeful.

Chronicle editor Anne Nadel dispatched an e-mail less than eight hours after distributing the November issue. "I just received my first three submissions for December. Jeannie, you weren't even the first. It was waiting for me at 7 a.m. And so it goes..."

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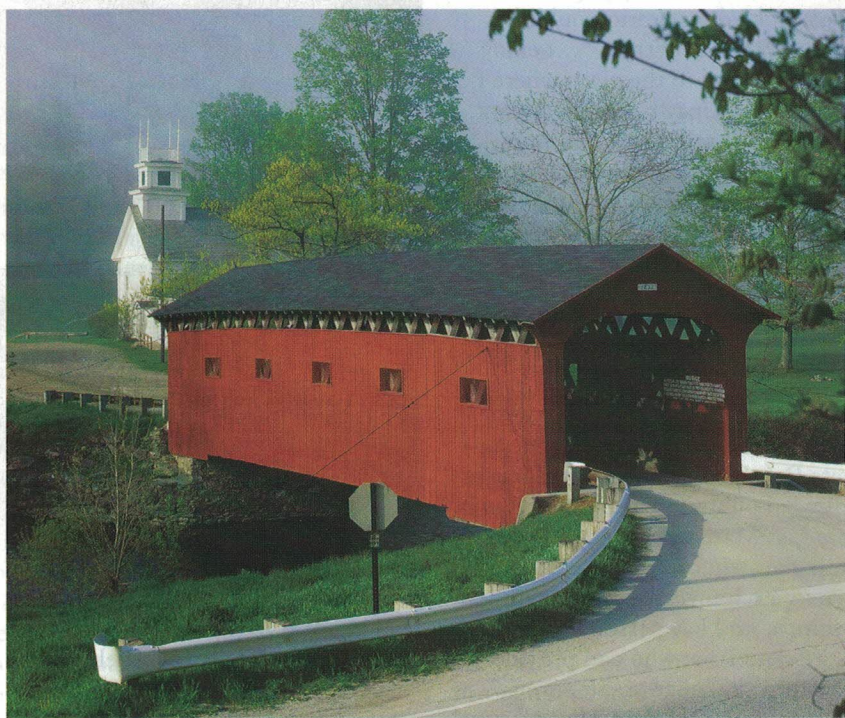
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WHILE THE RELATIVELY new staff of the *Cabot Chronicle* cite reasons of feeling connected, having a creative outlet, enjoying the camaraderie and witnessing the community come together because of their newspaper, some of the state's more seasoned news-people offer additional reasons for their commitment.

As the *Wall Street Journal* remarked in its March 2009 article on the "Viability of Small-Town Papers": "To be sure, owning a community newspaper is just one part business smarts, and several parts romance." Speaking of his 35-year "obsession with what's in the news," Barton *Chronicle* publisher Braithwaite says, "We wanted to see if we could practice professional journalism at the community level...to let people know what's going on. To inform people. To be an agent for change, like water dripping steadily on granite."

Perhaps *Herald of Randolph* reader Julia Purdy celebrates community newspapers best when she writes, "Specific editions bring us together as no Internet news ever could—the vacation issue, for example, or the holiday edition that proudly displays the schoolchildren's artwork. It's sort of what Garrison Keillor does on *Prairie Home Companion*, which is after the same goal: bringing together the far-flung and sometimes the long-lost who care about each other...As the world becomes ever more spread out, linked only by the ether, people seem to be reaching out for community." ▼

Julia Shipley lives in Craftsbury and subscribes to four Vermont community newspapers. As a freelance writer, two of her projects include a monthly poetry column for the *Barton Chronicle* and a feature ("The Cabot Cameos") for *The Cabot Chronicle*.

Just the facts

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