

For Editor Fred Berner, career in news, business a mix of luck

(Our editor and friend Fred Berner penned this column for the newspaper's centennial edition in 2005. We thought it was appropriate to reprint today, as we celebrate his life. Mr. Berner passed away on Monday, while preparing that day's edition.)

By FRED BERNER
Antigo Daily
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I guess I'm just a lucky guy.

I've been in a newspaper publishing family for more than 57 years and here at a desk at the Antigo Daily Journal for about 34 of them. But for the other 23, I don't think I got too far away from it.

When I arrived in 1948 my father was editing the newspaper and running the business with his brother, Henry, and when I was old enough to know, I was at the office with dad and mom was at home doing the books for WATK radio.

The newspaper plant was my sandbox. Harvey Goebel, Mux Mader, Dick Baraniak and Charlie Fogeltanz would sit me in front of the type

cases and I'd fiddle all kinds of time away. The newspaper offices before 1972 was a massive building with a million hiding places and more than ample situations for mechanized danger — just the sort of thing a kid loves.

At 12 I was a paper carrier and at 16, worked in the press room dropping off bundles of papers.

I was shown how to operate some of the commercial presses and still know a little something about how the flavor of ice cream got printed on the Hy Land Lakes boxes.

For years the biggest job in the commercial printing shop was publication of the National Mutual Benefit News for a Madison-based fraternal insurance company. I spent what seemed like a lot of time either mailing or working on the press four decades or so ago.

After high school there were four and one-half years of college and a stint as editor of the Hartford Times-Press in that delightful Washington County community. During those university years I had convinced myself

that there were greater pressmen and I certainly should not try to compete.

And I got a real lesson under fire at the Hartford Times-Press, coming in the door

thinking I knew it all. It was a matter of bumping into a real boss, John Shinners, a

towering man, who did know it all.

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In a photo taken from the cover of the 2005 centennial edition of the Antigo Daily Journal, Fred Berner and his mother, Marie, hold a portrait of one of the original Berner brothers, Henry, in front of the newspaper office. They are surrounded by members of the Journal family at the time.

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The time in Hartford was a learning experience in a number of facets because it opened a technology window that was carefully recorded and in 1972, I brought those lessons back to Antigo to modernize the Antigo Daily Journal.

And today, here I am.

The luck in this mix is that I truly like what I'm doing.

It offered great opportunities including a press conference and cocktail party at the White House when Gerald Ford was in office, I've had the opportunity to meet dozens of political figures when they are making their pre-election tours of Wisconsin and have worked with some of the finest people anywhere on community projects in Antigo and Langlade County.

Of course, there have been tragedies, too, including a rather spectacular mix of death and crime. But they add the spice and excitement to the more flowery things many of us are involved in.

That mix of fun, accomplishment and: excitement make this a very interesting and rewarding job and then you can toss in the people I work with and you recognize

at 34 years, it is difficult to be considered a veteran around here.

Earle Holman, who was editor emeritus and our historical writer when I arrived in 1972, worked for the Daily Journal for 71 year's before retiring for health reasons. We still have a couple with us with 62 and 63 years of service to the newspaper printing business — a total of 125 years.

Our pressman started when he was 12 years old as a paper carrier out of the old 533 Superior St. plant, and remains here today. And there are others who said they were just joining us for a year or two who now have been around for decades.

I keep adding elements to this picture including the rewards, excitement, people I work with and a supportive and interested family as the reason I do like what I am doing.

Then mix in the challenge of meeting the expectations of subscribers and the complexities of keeping the business profitable and aggressive, and you have some real excitement.

Some young people who are asked to step into a family business absolutely hate it and I'm sure that we all can come up with examples.

See what I mean?

Plenty of luck.

We remember our editor and friend, he would be pleased

At 1:50 in the afternoon on Monday, Al turned 42 levers on his meticulously maintained press and the big Goss started to roll.



Ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk, sending out 182 copies a minute of the Antigo Daily Journal.

We were 10 minutes late. Fred would not be pleased.

Early that day, our publisher, editor, boss, and friend, Fred Berner, came to work—way before dawn as was his custom—took off his jacket and began what was scheduled to be his final week producing the newspaper to which he had devoted his life. He liked that quiet time of day, perusing the Associated Press wire, surrounded by the various accoutrements of the business. He was unhurried and unharried.

The day had a plan and there would be no reason to be late.

But daily newspapering is unlike any other business and no plan goes unpunished. At age 71, robust and looking forward to a long future, Fred passed away at his desk.

It was, as a journalist friend said, a horrible, yet fitting and even poetic end.

There is a reason for the stereotype of a hard-living, hard-driving newspaper editor—think Jason Robards in “All the President’s Men”—it’s a tough business.

News is often unpleasant, whether it be a house fire that kills a family, a car accident that leaves a teen-ager maimed, or a political scandal that cheats the public and robs their pocketbooks. Court proceedings must be reported and that may involve friends and perhaps even family. The hours are atrocious.

But there are wonderful moments, too. The Christmas parades and chili cookouts, the youth fair, the ability to hobnob with game-changing leaders, and the opportunity to share the honor rolls, the anniversaries and the accomplishments. It’s all part of the game.

And every day, the ka-chunk, ka-chunk of that big Goss.

Fred loved it all. He was a chronicler of the community. Hundreds, thousands of times, he penned the first line of the historical record, long before the rewrites.

He loved Antigo with an unrivaled yet quiet passion. He mourned its shortcomings and reveled in its successes.

As one person wrote in a tribute, “he made me proud of my hometown.”

He could be imposing, always in a good suit or sport coat and tie, and he could be self-effacing. A couple decades back he came across one of those “you know you’re from a small town” ditties that talked about being a newspaper publisher. He reveled in the fact that he fit the bill perfectly, right down to always carrying a camera and running (if necessary) a paper route.

Above all, he could be brave, standing up for his family and his community. And one of

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the bravest things he did was realizing that in a changing business environment, the best way to ensure a successful, stable future for the Antigo Daily Journal was through an association with a larger organization. He researched carefully to find a good fit with his philosophy of community journalism, and signed the papers in June, transferring the newspaper to Adams Publishing Group.

It was time to turn the page, start the next chapter, pick whatever publishing cliché you wish. It was time to revisit some old haunts and find some new. It was time to relax with his beloved Kay, play board games with friends, watch those old Sherlock Holmes and Thin Man movies that he could recite by heart, and read those books he never had time to finish.

At the same time he wanted to remain involved. He wanted to keep writing his Bits & Pieces and his 50 and 75-Years-Ago Peeps at Our Past. He wanted to be relied upon to run a paper route or two and certainly grab a camera and cover an event.

He was ready to retire. He wasn't ready to leave.

Our Antigo Daily Journal family feels Fred's loss deeply. And we have a responsibility to our—and Fred's—larger family that encompasses the Antigo, Langlade County and farther-afield communities we serve.

On Saturday, we will say good-bye to Fred. As someone noted earlier in the week, for the first time in the Journal's 115-year history, there will be no Berner in the building, at least not in a physical sense. But Fred's legacy, his knowledge, his love of the community and of us, permeates everything we do. He taught us well.

And when that big Goss starts ka-chunking in a few hours, we will be on time.

Fred would be pleased.