

# SURVIVING AND THRIVING

## Small Communities Cover Their Own

By Symone C. Skrzycki

“We tell people’s stories – and everybody has one.”

It’s a philosophy that Patrick Lanman contends has led to the success of newspapers such as the *Vevay Reveille-Enterprise* and the *Switzerland Democrat*.

The editor and general manager of Vevay Media Group (which operates both publications), illustrates his point with two poignant anecdotes.

“I have a fellow here who was a county commissioner and a career Navy guy,” Lanman shares. “He tells a story about how they’d be out on the ship for months (during the Vietnam War) and late at night, they’d get on the loudspeaker and read our newspaper to people because that was ‘home.’ ”

Fast forward to 9/11.

“That happened on a Tuesday,” he recalls. “By the time you get the paper in the mailbox on Thursday, there’s nothing I can tell you that you haven’t already seen 1,000 times. But what I can tell you is, a kid named Mark Dunning – a 1984 graduate of Switzerland County High School who was working at the Pentagon – was sitting in his apartment and looked out the window and saw it all happen. Our interview with Mark, because he connects here (was something

readers couldn’t find anywhere else).”

Another longtime local media source in southeastern Indiana is *Register Publications* (based in Lawrenceburg).

“Local. Local. Local. It really comes down to that,” asserts managing editor Joe Awad. “In today’s world, you’re competing with Facebook and all kinds of social media. In my opinion, (our success comes from) keeping our finger on the pulse of the community.”

Founded in 1933, the Hoosier State Press Association (HSPA) represents 167 daily and weekly paid-circulation newspapers in Indiana. Steve Key, executive director and general counsel, reflects on the role newspapers play in shaping a community’s identity.

“Newspapers are the voice of the community,” he stresses. “Unfortunately over the past 50 years or so, there are communities that have lost their newspaper. Whether it’s a little town like Farmersburg or Oakland City – just recently, their paper has decided to close up. When you lose that voice, that community loses a part of its heart – what binds it together. That’s part of why newspapers are always going to be valued.”

According to a listing on the HSPA web site, approximately 125 member newspapers across the state were founded before 1900. The oldest began in Vincennes in 1804, four years after the Indiana Territory was created with the current Knox County seat as its capital.



A trio cranks out *Register Publications* news, one sheet at a time, with a Whitlock printing press.

## Heydays and hard times

Lanman gazes out his office window and laughs.

"I can look out my window and see the only stoplight in our whole county," he comments.

"It's a very rural, very small place. When Vevay was a city of 20,000 people, they had two thriving newspapers (*Vevay Reveille-Enterprise* and the *Switzerland Democrat*). Over time as people began to move away, they consolidated under one roof and printed it different days and it's just sort of evolved from there. From a point of history, we keep both papers alive."

Production – and access – have changed dramatically since Lanman joined the publication as a reporter in 1984.

"We pasted the pages. The computer would set things on columns and print them out on 8.5 by 11 paper. You'd take a pair of scissors, cut them out and run them through a waxer and line them up.

"Everything was black and white. We couldn't run processed color. Now, we run color photographs in our paper as they all do. And we didn't have social media, which people tend to confuse sometimes with, 'They put the word media in it. It must be true. It's on Facebook.'"

Awad cites other challenges.

"There's been a tremendous amount of changes and everybody knows it. It's been difficult. At one point (with *Register Publications*) for 15 years or so, I probably supervised about 12 reporters."

Today, there's a handful.

Lanman and Awad agree that while the number of newspapers is staying steady, the printing industry is facing obstacles.

"Printing facilities are going away," notes Lanman, whose operation no longer prints its publications. "The big press in Columbus, Indiana you used to see when you go up and down (Interstate) 65 is now in Texas. I can see the Ohio River, but if Madison can't print my paper, the next place I can get to that will print it is in Greenfield, Indiana, by Indianapolis. That's a big issue for me."

Awad chimes in, "I don't feel the newspaper industry – and newspaper is kind of a misnomer – is having as many problems or troubles as is sometimes reported. It's the printing industry that's in the biggest danger – to be quite honest – because eventually it is all going to go on the internet."

## Turning a page

Imagine an old Model T driving down the road. Now picture a horse and buggy. Awad draws comparisons when envisioning the future.

"Like many newspapers our size, we've had to make adjustments,

### Vevay Media Group

- Publishes two weekly newspapers: *Vevay Reveille-Enterprise* (the oldest weekly newspaper in the state celebrated its 200th birthday in 2016) and the *Switzerland Democrat* (1868)
- Vevay population: approximately 1,700; Switzerland County: about 10,000 people

### Register Publications

- Launched in 1825. Today, it's a conglomeration of different newspapers
- Includes the *Dearborn County Register*, *Journal Press*, *Harrison (Ohio) Press*, *Ohio County News*, *Rising Sun Recorder* and specialty publications
- While Dearborn County is experiencing growth due to being part of the Cincinnati metro area, Ohio County remains Indiana's smallest both in area and population (about 6,000)

but we remain an integral part of the community and we always will," he imparts. "I often think about photos I've seen in let's say the early 1900s when you see an old Model T going down a muddy road and then there's somebody with a horse and buggy going the other way. The Model T won. And that's the same thing that's going to happen with the newspaper industry no matter how much people fight it. In the end, the platform will be on the internet. It's just that simple."

Conversely, Key emphasizes that while the industry is exploring new ways to deliver news, there always will be a demand for something tangible.

"I just saw a story talking about how after the Cubs won the World Series, people were lined up to buy the next day's paper so they could preserve it forever," he declares. "The headline: 'The Cubs Win.' And you see the same thing in a smaller community. If the local high school has a successful basketball or football season, there are going to be people who are going to be buying those keepsake editions that mark a local historic event."

Lanman doesn't foresee newspapers fading away.

"The reports of our death have been greatly exaggerated, to paraphrase W.C. Fields," he remarks. "There always will be a newspaper. It will always be a news source. It may be something different in time. As long as we stay true to what we're doing and continue to tell the stories people want to read – and at times, the stories that people need to read – we'll be fine."



Remembering the 1937 flood: "It is to this day the biggest and worst thing that ever happened here," Vevay Media Group editor and general manager Pat Lanman declares. A Vevay native who had moved out of state surprised Lanman with a hand-set copy, produced at the height of the flood.