

grassroots editor

*A journal
for newspeople*



**Published by the
International Society
of Weekly Newspaper Editors**

2010 Golden Quill & Golden Dozen Awards



Editorial skills and courage exemplified by winners
of the ISWNE contest

and the

The 35th Annual Gene Cervi Award

volume 51, no. 2 • summer 2010



Editor: Dr. Chad Stebbins

Graphic Designer: Liz Ford

Grassroots Editor

(USPS 227-040, ISSN 0017-3541)

is published quarterly for \$25 per year by
the **International Society of Weekly**

Newspaper Editors, Institute of
International Studies, Missouri Southern
State University, 3950 East Newman Road,
Joplin, MO 64801-1595. Periodicals post-
age paid at Joplin, Mo., and at
additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes

to **Grassroots Editor**, Institute of
International Studies, Missouri Southern
State University, 3950 E. Newman Road,
Joplin, MO 64801-1595.

Volume 51, Issue 2, Summer 2010

Subscription Rate: \$25 per year in
the United States and Canada; \$28 per year
elsewhere.

**Officers of the International Society
of Weekly Newspaper Editors**

President: Jim Painter

West Valley View
Avondale, Ariz.

Vice President: Jeremy Condliffe

Congleton Chronicle
Congleton, Cheshire, England.

Executive Director:

Dr. Chad Stebbins, Director, Institute of
International Studies, Missouri Southern
State University, 3950 E. Newman Road,
Joplin, MO 64801-1595

Phone: (417) 625-9736

Fax: (417) 659-4445

E-mail: stebbins-c@mssu.edu

Board of Directors:

Sandra George
Jonesville, Mich.

Paul MacNeill
The Eastern Graphic
Montague, Prince Edward Island

Kris O'Leary
The Star News
Medford, Wis.

Chris Wood
Wisconsin Web Offset, Brookfield, Wis.

Kelly Clemmer
Star News Inc.

Wainwright, Alberta

Cheryl Wormley
The Woodstock Independent
Woodstock, Ill.

Immediate Past President:

Don Brod
St. Charles, Ill.

2010 Golden Quill contest and Eugene Cervi Award

This year's Golden Quill winner spent more than two decades in the daily journalism field before becoming editor of *The Forecaster* and its four free weekly editions covering 11 towns and three cities in greater Portland, Maine, in 2006.

Mo Mehlsak, a 1977 graduate of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, previously was managing editor of *Automotive Age* magazine in Van Nuys, Calif., a business writer for the *Daily News* of Los Angeles and a city editor, weekend editor, business editor and business writer at the daily *Journal Tribune* in Biddeford, Maine. He joined *The Forecaster*, owned by the Lewiston, Maine-based Sun Media Group, as managing editor in 2004.

ISWNE received 96 Golden Quill entries this year. The 12 best are gathered together as the Golden Dozen. The summer issue of *Grassroots Editor* traditionally contains these editorials along with comments from the judge. It is an opportunity to see the quality of commentary in the weekly press.

Rural journalists Tom, Pat and Ben Gish are the recipients of the 2010 Eugene Cervi Award. Tom and Pat Gish purchased *The Mountain Eagle* in Whitesburg, Ky., in 1956 and published the paper from Jan. 1, 1957, until Tom's death on Nov. 21, 2008. Son Ben continues to serve as editor.

"He was the bravest and most honest man I ever knew," Ben Gish said of his father, who died at the age of 82.

Upon taking over *The Mountain Eagle*, the Gishes changed the paper's slogan from "A Friendly Non-Partisan Weekly Newspaper Published Every Thursday" to "It Screams." When the paper was firebombed in 1974, Tom Gish changed the motto to "It Still Screams."

The Golden Dozen

The judges' comments & About the judges

By Deborah Givens and Elizabeth Hansen..... Page 3

Golden Quill Winner A hijacking in South Portland

By Mo Mehlsak, Editor, *The Forecaster*, November 20, 2009..... Page 4

An explanation from the winner

By Mo Mehlsak, Editor, *The Forecaster*..... Page 5

Bad idea

By Marcia, Editor, *Herald Democrat*, June 18, 2009..... Page 6

Time for a new school board chairman

By Paul MacNeill, Publisher, *Eastern Graphic*, August 12, 2009..... Page 7

School and city need to cooperate on solution for old gym

By Tim Waltner, Publisher, *Freeman Courier*, July 8, 2009..... Page 8

What will it take?

By John M. Wylie II, Publisher, *Oologah Lake Leader*, March 5, 2009..... Page 9

Illinois can handle detainees

By Bill Knight, Columnist, *The Zephyr*, May 28, 2009..... Page 10

Of carts and horses

By Peter Weinschenk, Editor, *Record-Review*, August 12, 2009..... Page 11

Actions vs. words

By Kevin O'Brien, Editor, *Tribune-Phonograph*, April 29, 2009..... Page 12

It's our problem; let's help fix it

By Dick Crockford, Publisher, *Dillon Tribune*, September 23, 2009..... Page 13

High school teenagers should be left alone

By David Giffey, Editor, *Home News*, September 2, 2009..... Page 14

Time to petition

By M. Dickey Drysdale, Editor and publisher, *The Herald of Randolph*, July 23, 2009..... Page 15

Put the contracts for town manager, attorney out to bid

By Mark Brown, Executive editor, *ByTheSeaFuture*, January 9, 2009..... Page 16

The Gene Cervi Award

Tom, Pat and Ben Gish..... Page 17

A few words from the Gishes' supporters..... Page 18

Golden Quill Winners

1961-2010

- 1961 Hal DeCell**
Deer Creek Pilot, Rolling Fork, Miss.
- 1962 Don Pease**
Oberlin (Ohio) News Tribune
- 1963 Hazel Brannon Smith**
Lexington (Miss.) Advertiser
- 1964 Mrs. R.M.B. Hicks**
Dallas (Pa.) Post
- 1965 Robert E. Fisher**
Crossett (Ark.) News Observer
- 1966 Owen J. McNamara**
Brookline (Mass.) Chronicle-Citizen
- 1967 Alvin J. Remmenga**
Cloverdale (Calif.) Reveille
- 1968 Henry H. Null IV**
The Abington Journal, Clarks Summit, Pa.
- 1969 Dan Hicks Jr.**
Monroe County Democrat, Madisonville, Tenn.
- 1970 Richard Taylor**
Kennett News & Advertiser,
Kennett Square, Pa.
- 1971 Edward DeCourcy**
Newport (N.H.) Argus Champion
- 1972 C. Peter Jorgenson**
The Advocate, Arlington, Mass.
- 1973 Robert Estabrook**
Lakeville (Conn.) Journal
- 1974 Phil McLaughlin**
The Miami Republican, Paola, Kan.
- 1975 Betsy Cox**
The Madison County Newsweek,
Richmond, Ky.
- 1976 Peter Bodley**
Coon Rapids Herald, Anoka, Minn.
- 1977 Rodney A. Smith**
Gretna (Va.) Gazette
- 1978 Robert Estabrook**
Lakeville (Conn.) Journal
- 1979 R. W. van de Velde**
The Valley Voice, Middlebury, Vt.
- 1980 Garrett Ray**
Independent Newspapers, Littleton, Colo.
- 1981 Janelou Buck**
Sebring (Fla.) News
- 1982 Albert Scardino**
The Georgia Gazette, Savannah, Ga.
- 1983 Francis C. Zanger**
Bellows Falls (Vt.) News-Review
- 1984 John McCall**
The SandPaper, Ocean City, N.J.
- 1985 William F. Schanen III**
Ozaukee Press, Port Washington, Wis.
- 1986 Henry G. Gay**
Shelton-Mason County Journal,
Shelton, Wash.
- 1987 Ellen L. Albanese**
The Country Gazette, Franklin, Mass.
- 1988 Michael G. Lacey**
The New Times, Phoenix, Ariz.
- 1989 Tim Redmond**
Bay Guardian, San Francisco, Calif.
- 1990 Bill Lueders**
Isthmus, Madison, Wis.
- 1991 Stuart Taylor Jr.**
Legal Times, Washington, D.C.
- 1992 Hope Aldrich**
The Santa Fe (N.M.) Reporter
- 1993 Michael D. Myers**
Granite City (Ill.) Press-Record
- 1994 Jim MacNeill**
The Eastern Graphic, Montague, PEI, Canada
- 1995 Brian J. Hunhoff**
The Missouri Valley Observer, Yankton, S.D.
- 1996 Patricia Calhoun**
Denver Westword, Denver, Colo.
- 1997 Tim Giago**
Indian Country Today, Rapid City, S.D.
- 1998 Gary Sosniecki**
Webster County Citizen, Seymour, Mo.
- 1999 Jeff McMahon**
New Times, San Luis Obispo, Calif.
- 2000 Jeff McMahon**
New Times, San Luis Obispo, Calif.
- 2001 William F. Schanen III**
Ozaukee Press, Port Washington, Wis.
- 2002 Paul MacNeill**
The Eastern Graphic, Montague, PEI, Canada
- 2003 Jeremy Waltner**
Freeman Courier, Freeman, S.D.
- 2004 Charles Gay**
Shelton-Mason County Journal, Shelton, Wash.
- 2005 Bill Lueders**
Isthmus, Madison, Wis.
- 2006 Gary Sosniecki**
The Vandalia Leader, Vandalia, Mo.
- 2007 Lori Evans**
Homer News, Homer, Alaska
- 2008 Melissa Hale-Spencer**
The Altamont Enterprise, Altamont, New York
- 2009 David Martin**
The Pitch, Kansas City, Mo
- 2010 Mo Mehlsak**
The Forecaster, Falmouth, Maine

The judges' comments

By **Deborah Givens** and **Elizabeth Hansen**

In the April newsletter, ISWNE president Jim Painter posed the question, "What happens if the watchdog dies?" After reading the 96 entries in this year's Golden Quill contest, it is apparent that the residents of the communities served by the writers and their respective newspapers don't have to worry. Watchdog journalism is alive and well!

For two journalists who have published, written for and studied community newspapers for a combined 70 years, it was a pleasure to read

so many editorials that were obviously written by people committed to providing a strong editorial voice for their communities.

Number one on our list of evaluation criteria was that the editorial must focus on local issues. Other criteria included: evidence of original reporting; clear statement of the problem or situation that is the focus of the editorial; arguments supported by facts, anecdotes and statistics; and a conclusion that offers a clear call to action, proposed solution or final statement. Finally, we looked for strong and effective writing.

Our problem was not in finding a dozen win-

ners, but in narrowing the many candidates to only 12. After several days of reading, evaluating, selecting and then comparing our lists, we did agree on the dozen presented on these pages. However, we applaud all the writers who submitted entries this year for keeping alive the tradition of strong editorial leadership by community newspapers.

Deborah Givens can be contacted at Deborah.Givens@eku.edu. Elizabeth Hansen can be contacted at Liz.Hansen@eku.edu.

About the judges

Elizabeth Sanders Hansen is a Foundation Professor of Journalism in the Department of Communication at Eastern Kentucky University, where she has taught since 1987.

A native of Arkansas, she has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, a master's degree in journalism and mass communication from Iowa State and a Ph.D. in communication from the University of Kentucky.

Hansen has worked as a reporter and feature writer for small daily newspapers in Arkansas and Louisiana and freelanced for newspapers and magazines in Mississippi, Kentucky and elsewhere.

After completing her master's degree, for which she conducted her first readership study of a weekly newspa-

per, Hansen taught at Iowa State and later Southern Mississippi and Kentucky before joining the ECU faculty.

At Eastern, Hansen teaches community journalism and media ethics, among other courses. Since 1991, her community journalism students have conducted more than a dozen in-depth studies of Kentucky community newspapers and their readers. She is co-adviser of the student chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists with Deborah Givens and on the national SPJ board.

She also chairs the advisory board for the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues and is past head of the Community Journalism Interest Group of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.



Elizabeth Hansen

Deborah Taylor Givens joined the Eastern Kentucky University journalism faculty in 2006 after a 20-year career as a weekly newspaper editor and publisher. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from Ball State University and a master's degree in public administration from Western Kentucky University.

Her journalism career began in 1974 as an editor with Al Smith Communications, Inc., a newspaper group in south central Kentucky.

In 1982, Givens and her husband founded *The Butler County (Ky.) Banner* and later purchased a second news-

paper, *The Green River Republican*.

They sold the publishing company in 1998. Givens joined the staff of the Kentucky Court of Appeals while also teaching as an adjunct in the WKU journalism school. In 2003, she was admitted to the doctoral program at the University of Kentucky and successfully completed the qualifying exam in 2006.

At Eastern, Givens teaches news writing and reporting, copyediting and design, editorial writing and public affairs reporting. She is co-adviser of the student chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.



Deborah Givens

Golden Quill Winner



Mo Mehlsak

**Editor,
The Forecaster**

5 Fundy Road
Falmouth, ME 04105

November 20, 2009

*Mo Mehlsak won a Golden
Dozen award in 2007.*

A hijacking in South Portland

Depending on your point of view, the appointment of Jerald McQueeney to the South Portland School Board was probably either a routine municipal decision or a successful hijacking of the Board of Education.

McQueeney is one of several city residents who expressed interest in filling the board vacancy created in District 3 by the death of Michael Eastman. Because no one opposed Eastman on the Nov. 3 ballot, it was left to the City Council, in compliance with the City Charter, to appoint an interim replacement. Councilors unanimously approved what was presented by Superintendent of Schools Suzanne Godin as the School Board's "request" for McQueeney's appointment.

The problem is the School Board never requested the appointment of McQueeney or anyone else. There was no vetting or questioning of applicants by the board and no formal, public vote or recommendation.

However, there were private telephone calls between Godin and School Board members to gain support for her selection of McQueeney. School Board members allowed the superintendent to usurp their authority. And they ignored the public's right to know.

When city councilors voted on Nov. 16 with no discussion and a surprising level of disinterest, they effectively allowed the superintendent of schools to hand-pick her superior and potentially add an ally to the School Board.

Regardless of McQueeney's qualifications, there's no doubt critics of the School Department will see only conspiracy and ulterior motive — especially after they hear about McQueeney's sympathy for the "vote no, too low" school budget crowd in Cape Elizabeth,

where he previously lived.

And who can blame them? Would city councilors have allowed the city manager, their employee, to pick an interim councilor? Of course not. So why was the school chief allowed to decide who will hold an otherwise-elected seat on the Board of Education?

Godin told reporter Randy Billings this is the third recent School Board vacancy that has been filled this way. There weren't multiple candidates in the first two cases, which may explain why the process never came to light, but that doesn't justify the procedure. The superintendent of schools should play no role in deciding who sits on the board that oversees her department, sets her salary and reviews her performance. That she may now have played a role in appointing three members of the School Board is disturbing.

So was McQueeney's appointment routine or a hijacking? Unfortunately, it appears, it was both.

We're not judging McQueeney, who may prove to be well qualified for the School Board. But School Board members abrogated their responsibility and empowered Godin, who misled city Councilors, who rubber-stamped McQueeney's appointment without the slightest investigation of his qualifications or the qualifications of two other candidates.

South Portland residents deserve better from their elected officials and superintendents of schools, and they deserve apologies from Godin, the board and the council. And to prevent future hijackings of the process, the City Charter should be amended to require special elections, not appointments, when vacant elected offices are filled.

Mo Mehlsak can be contacted at mmehlsak@theforecaster.net.

FROM THE JUDGE

This year's Golden Quill winning editorial, "A hijacking in South Portland," takes an intricate series of school and city official maneuverings and explains them in such a way that readers unfamiliar with the political figures and background events can understand the problem. The neutral language allows the issues to be the focus rather than the personalities of the participants. The editorial educates the reader in the dangers posed by allowing the school board member selection process to be manipulated by the superintendent and compares the situation to another local government board to further highlight the threat. And, finally, readers are given specific remedies for the situation: apologies from all involved and changes to the City Charter to prevent future hijackings. All this in a tightly written piece.

This type of editorial is not sensational, not heart wrenching and not about global issues. But it is an example of the primary duty of weekly newspaper editors: bringing attention to local issues and problems and offering solutions.

An explanation from the winner

By Mo Mehlsak

In my experience, there are basically three kinds of editorials:

The one you write facing a deadline with 10 column inches to fill: "It's a sunny day and there are so many ways to enjoy and appreciate the sunshine here in Sunnyville," etc., etc.

Then there's the "think piece" — the editorial that takes several hours or days to research, write and rewrite. It may fill a couple columns or even an entire page. So what if most readers won't get to the bottom? It's going to have an impact (you hope).

And finally there's the editorial that writes itself. The one you could compose with your eyes closed.

"A hijacking in South Portland" is of variety No. 3. I was so steamed about the subject, the piece was finished and on our Web site within hours after I saw the story it followed, and long before the presses had even started running.

It owes its genesis to good reporting by Randy Billings, who covers the city of South Portland for *The Forecaster*. Randy wasn't the only reporter at a City Council meeting where the new School Board member was appointed, but he was the only one who bothered to compare the school superintendent's verbal presentation to the supporting documents. And when he started asking questions, the School Board's unseemly — and apparently frequent — habit of mak-

ing decisions out of the public's view and without documentation came to light.

What followed were conflicting accounts about the process from the superintendent, School Board chairman and School Board members, and — not surprisingly — attempts to stonewall our story. But by then it was too late to stop Randy.

Or me.

One thing guaranteed to get my blood running is the habit of some elected officials and public employees to keep the public's business away from the public. *The Forecaster* has taken on city councilors who have tried to conceal e-mail discussions about municipal business, we've challenged boards that schedule meetings under the guise of social gatherings, we've demanded access to police records and we've dug into the performance of companies that receive sweetheart development deals.

That's why this editorial took little time to write. Not because it was easy, but because protecting the public's right to know is part of the fabric of *The Forecaster*. We encourage our reporters to watch for right-to-know irregularities and we don't hesitate — on either the news or opinion pages — to bring those irregularities to light.

Mo Mehlsak can be contacted at mmehlsak@theforecaster.net.



Marcia Martinek

Editor,
Herald Democrat

P.O. Box 980
Leadville, CO 80461

June 18, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

The author of "Bad idea" accomplished a seemingly impossible task: defending the need for public notices in newspapers despite the obvious conflict of interest. The first step was to admit that conflict, which the writer did early in the editorial. Then, the reasons to continue public notices in newspapers were clearly explained with the focus on why public notices benefit the citizens and serve as a check on government.

Bad idea

The Leadville City Council, in an effort to save a few dollars, has decided that it no longer wants to publish the full text of ordinances in a newspaper of record, which in this case is this newspaper, the *Herald Democrat*.

This proposal apparently will be placed on the ballot in November so that the voters can decide. In place of publishing the ordinances in full, the city proposes to publish ordinances by title only.

Bad idea.

Granted the dollars saved by the council are dollars that normally would come to the *Herald*, so some might say we're concerned about our own bottom line. Of course we're concerned, but this one issue is not a matter of sink or swim. The issue is really whether you trust your government to be less open.

Councilman Scott Marcella said at the last council meeting that the title of the ordinance is probably enough to let people know whether they want to attend the public hearing or not. We haven't figured out how seeing that an ordinance is named "Leadville snow shoveling ordinance," just as an example, is going to tell someone that the ordinance actually gives homeowners 15 minutes to get their walks cleared or fines them \$100. Sometimes you have to go beyond the title.

Instead, council proposes to put the ordinances on the city Web site. Then people can seek them out and read them there. The people who don't have computers can always go to the library to access the city Web

site. And the people who don't know how to operate computers can always learn. Or not.

Let's see. How hard can we make this?

Why is publication required in the first place? Since this country was formed, it was determined that the public should have access to what government is doing. The current buzzword for that is transparency.

But that isn't the only reason for newspapers to publish public notices. It has always been required that notices be published in a medium independent of the government or any other entity providing the notice.

Publication of the notice should be verifiable. Newspapers provide affidavits attesting to the date and place of publication, and these affidavits are often used if there is litigation as to whether due process has been followed.

Public notices also should be achievable. If someone wants to find an ordinance published in 1953, it's there in black and white in the appropriate issue of a newspaper, and no one can change it after the fact.

Say a city ordinance was archived on the city's computer. Could someone working for the city go back a few years later and manipulate what that ordinance says for whatever purpose? If you completely trust government, the answer is no. But, do you?

We'll likely have more to say on this issue as November approaches.

Marcia Martinek can be contacted at allnews@leadvilleherald.com.

Time for a new school board chairman

Priate day care operators in the Souris area are right to question the decision to grant a non-profit kindergarten free use of a newly closed school for a year.

Why? Pretty simple.

Mix one part incompetence in the form of leadership of the Eastern School Board, with a collusion of silence from the provincial Department of Education. Viola. You have a perfect recipe for a series of decisions that failed to maintain the transparency and integrity of a gut-wrenching school closure process.

The result is a serious erosion in the public's faith in the Eastern School District and its leadership.

It started early on down the road that ultimately led to the closing of eight district schools. Board Chairman Bob Clow offered up a legal opinion that declared trustee Anne Miller in a conflict of interest. She is a paid supervisor of the non-profit Souris Kindergarten, located in Souris Consolidated School.

The conflict ruling meant Miller could not participate in any discussion pertaining to the closure of three Souris area schools.

Here is where the process really became skewed.

Conflict of interest rules are not flexible. If you are deemed in a conflict one day, it does not go away the next. You can't ignore it.

But that is exactly what Chairman Bob Clow did. He ignored the fact that Miller had been declared in conflict and allowed her to vote on a board resolution to proceed with construction of a replacement Souris school. The three closed schools will be replaced with a single new facility for children from early childhood to Grade 12.

As a result Souris Kindergarten is being bumped from its location during the construction process to make way for students from closing schools.

If Miller's job was the basis for a conflict ruling to close the building that housed her employer, surely a conflict also exists when a vote is taken to construct a new building that will likely become her future workspace.

Then things become even murkier.

Shortly after the resolution was passed, a decision was made to hand Miller's employer rent-free space at the now abandoned Rollo Bay School. It is a decision that angers private operators who fear losing pre-kindergarten children to a government subsidized facility. It is a valid concern that government and the board have failed to adequately address.

The only thing we know for sure is that elected members of the Eastern School Board were not consulted, an all too often occurrence under Chairman Bob Clow. On numerous occasions during the closure debate, information was either withheld or the elected board was simply not consulted.

The Eastern School Board is by law supposed to turn surplus buildings over to the Department of Transportation. That didn't happen.

Nor did any discussion occur at the board table. Is the school district stuck with all the maintenance costs? What about liability? Are there extra transportation costs? How much will it cost taxpayers?

We don't know. Neither do elected members of the Eastern School District.

The board has the responsibility to spend taxpayers' money prudently. It is unacceptable that a decision was made with potentially significant financial impacts and the board was not consulted.

Of course this could not have occurred without the collusion of the Department of Education, which stood by in silence while the Eastern School District carried out a flawed process.

Rather than demand an open, transparent and honest process from the start, Education Minister Gerard Greenan sat on his hands and did nothing. He is still doing nothing. Witness the decision to delay rezoning of schools, a political decision rather than an educational one. He and the board are using children as political pawns. Shameful.

Now the department wants people to believe that it is no big deal to hand a closed, surplus school over to a non-profit.

Let's be clear, Souris Kindergarten has a stellar record of serving area children. Unfortunately that record is lost in the controversy because this is not about the Souris Kindergarten. This is about a flawed process. Rules are made for a reason, primarily to protect the public so we can know what the playbook will be when a given situation occurs. Someone in the Eastern School District changed the playbook.

This whole controversy could have been avoided with even a modest level of leadership and transparency. The responsibility rests with Chairman Bob Clow. He has repeatedly failed to show the leadership necessary to maintain the public trust.

Because of that he must be replaced.

Paul MacNeill can be contacted at paul@peicanada.com.



Paul MacNeill

**Publisher,
Eastern Graphic**

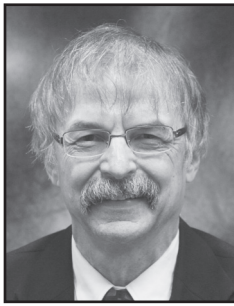
P.O. Box 790
Montague, PEI C0A 1R0

August 12, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

School closings are always controversial. When one of the closed schools is then rented at no cost to a preschool where a school trustee works, the conflict of interest situation demands comment. The editorial goes beyond pointing the finger at officials involved, and instead explains the importance of transparency and consistency in decision making. Details of the events that led to the decision are highlighted as are the points in the process where the safeguards failed.

Paul MacNeill also won the Golden Quill award in 2002 and Golden Dozen awards in 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2009.



Tim Waltner

**Publisher,
Freeman Courier**

P.O. Box 950
Freeman, S.D. 57029

July 8, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

It's a situation all community writers have faced: a turf war between government agencies in which the real losers are always the residents. When school and city officials in this community fail to work together to save a community building, the writer carefully details how the two groups have a history of fighting and how their actions have hurt the community and will do so again. This history gives weight to the writer's call for the two groups to "step up" and get past their history to do what's best for the community.

Tim Waltner also won Golden Dozen awards in 1994, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004, and 2007.

School and city need to cooperate on solution for old gym

It would be a shame if the Freeman Elementary School Gym were demolished.

But the real shame would be if it were demolished because animosity between the Freeman Public School Board and the Freeman City Council prevented finding a use for the gym, which has been a part of community life for more than half a century.

That animosity was apparent during the school board's discussion last week about the possibility of giving or selling the gym and adjacent music and lunchroom to the Freeman Volunteer Fire Department. The fact that the fire department operates as part of the city appears to be a problem for some board members.

The resulting offer to sell the gym to the fire department for \$20,000 — a tax-supported organization that operates with a volunteer force — does not sit well with some people. While not a scientific poll, an online question posed by the *Courier* last week reveals nearly 2/3s of the respondents said they think the school should give the gym to an organization; only about a fourth think it should be sold.

There has not been a close working relationship between the school and the council in recent years generally. But the debate two years ago over whether the city should pay interest to the school because of a billing error in which the school had been overcharged for natural gas resulted in frustration, ill will and resentment that continues to this day.

Now, the lingering tension threatens to derail what could be a win-win-win proposition for the school, the city and the community. It's time to move on and the leaders at the school and city need to use their influence to get things back on track.

The dispute between the school and city began in 2007 when city officials discovered the school and 18 other customers had been inadvertently overcharged for natural gas since the city established the municipal utility. All were paid the amount they were overbilled.

The school was overbilled \$98,562.15 going back to 1998. The school, citing advice from legal counsel, suggested the district could ask the city to pay up to

15 percent interest; as much as \$76,000.

The school was the only customer requesting interest based on the overbilling and the city balked. After threats of legal action, a compromise was reached and the city grudgingly paid \$15,005.74 as compensation.

That was a powerful lesson on what can happen when people dig in and hold positions so firmly that it ultimately harms the common good.

You'd think we'd have learned. But based on what we're seeing now, we appear to be heading down that same disappointing road.

Our community — any community — is simply too fragile for that kind of childish behavior.

The school has said it doesn't need the old gym. If it doesn't sell or donate it to someone, school officials say they will demolish it rather than let it sit and deteriorate.

The gym has a potential new life. An obvious use is as a community center, something the city's been talking about for years. And the fire department has voiced interest in using the building as a training center.

Rather than staking turf and harboring resentment, city and school officials need to sit down and think seriously, realistically and creatively about what is in the best interest not of the city, not of the school, but the entire community. The visit to Monday's city council meeting by Superintendent Don Hotchkiss to explain the school's plans was a good first step.

Getting the building to a point where it can function as a community resource will require an investment of resources. Determining feasibility, costs and how to finance are obvious issues that need to be addressed and the school and city need to be partners in that effort.

The leadership at both the school and city need to step up and set the tone that gets past whatever history is preventing them from taking a step together. It appears that's what the people want.

It's what we all deserve.

Tim Waltner can be contacted at courier@gwtc.net.

What will it take?

Despite the dispatching fiasco Monday that left David and Teresa Parker's home in ruins, Fire Chief David Puckett is much less interested in placing blame for that incident than he is in fixing the underlying problem.

He's on the right track.

As our front page story and the two accompanying transcripts of telephone and radio traffic clearly show, there's plenty of blame to go around.

The individual mistakes from this incident are being identified and will be fixed.

But nothing will really change until Rogers County gets a uniform, unified central dispatching system for its emergency services. As one of the state's fastest growing counties, we should be at the forefront of emergency communications.

Instead, Rogers County Emergency Management Director Bob Anderson says we are 10 to 15 years behind. If anything, he's being charitable.

What we need is a system where:

- Dispatchers and units in the field can talk to each other across agency lines. There would have been almost no delay in getting firefighters to the Parker residence if Rogers County dispatchers had been in constant contact with Northwest firefighters.

- Anyone taking an emergency call or sending units to handle the crisis should have equal access to the computer data generated when a citizen calls 911. Right now, only the 911 dispatchers get such data — and, except for calls requiring county deputies or the Verdigris police department, they are not in direct contact with either the units in the field or the dispatchers directing their responses,

- Dispatchers have extensive training in the geography of the county. The dispatch tapes of Monday's

fire call would be funny for those who know Rogers County roads were the results not so tragic.

- Dispatchers be cross trained to handle emergency medical, fire and law enforcement calls — and be paid accordingly.

- The dispatch center is adequately staffed, so those taking phone calls have time to think about the underlying reason when they are suddenly flooded with calls wondering where the police, ambulance or fire department is. If it has only been five minutes since the initial report, such calls can be written off as the natural excitement of a citizen confronted with an emergency. When it has been 20 minutes or more, alarm bells should start going off. Monday, they did not.

We have top-notch emergency personnel, but their efforts are hampered by our outmoded dispatching system. (There was another near miss Tuesday night on a medical call. Fortunately, an alert medic immediately recognized that the address dispatched was faulty. Dispatchers at two different centers, Mercy in Owasso and the center in Chelsea serving OTEMS and the Oologah and Talala police departments also reacted quickly and effectively.)

Perhaps the fire Monday and the realization that the next such problem could be fatal will light a fire under the officials who can make a change.

Various officials, even before Monday, have begun talking about a solution that crosses long sacrosanct jurisdictional lines.

That makes this the perfect time for positive citizen support to make centralized dispatch a top priority.

We simply can't afford any more dispatch fiascos.

John M. Wylie II can be contacted at lakeleader@sbcglobal.net.



John M. Wylie II

**Publisher,
Oologah Lake Leader**

109 S. Maple St.
Oologah, OK 74053-1175

March 5, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

In the news hook for this editorial, a series of emergency service problems, especially in dispatching, led to a home being destroyed by fire. All too often, editorial writers take the easy "Monday morning quarterback" position and look for people to blame for a disastrous event. Instead, the editorial writer praised the fire chief for seeking solutions instead of placing blame and then clearly identified the steps needed to improve the situation and called for citizen support to help with the process.

John M. Wylie II also won Golden Dozen awards in 2007 and 2009.



Bill Knight

Columnist,
The Zephyr

251 E. Main St.
Galesburg, IL 61401

May 28, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

This editorial helps readers in west-central Illinois, one of the areas considered for housing prisoners from Guantanamo, move beyond the political posturing. With a detailed historical analysis of the area hosting a prison facility for German prisoners during World War II, the author points out that the country, and the state, have faced difficult situations before and handled them well — and can do so again.

Illinois can handle detainees

President Obama on Thursday said the use of Guantanamo to indefinitely detain terrorist suspects helped America's enemies, echoing a previous Pentagon observation that al-Qaeda and their ilk gain recruits by pointing to such activities. In spite of opposition on Capitol Hill, Obama said he will close the facility on the naval base in Cuba and bring some suspects to U.S. high-security prisons.

Congressional opponents — not including the principled U.S. Sens. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) — stripped \$80 million from a military funding bill the day before, arguing that no place can handle the 240 detainees.

Bring them to west-central Illinois.

Here, prisons have been an odd economic development option for years anyway.

Further, we have a history of safely handling enemies sworn to destroy our nation.

In rural Fulton County from 1943 to 1945, the 18,000-acre Camp Ellis housed almost 5,000 German prisoners of war. And those were mostly Nazi troops, part of an army that had assaulted Europe and Africa and killed many Americans and other Allied soldiers, plus civilians.

So 240 detainees — less than 10 percent of who actually face charges — shouldn't be a problem.

That perspective was ignored Wednesday, when the Senate voted to stop Obama's planned shutdown of Guantanamo until a plan to move the detainees was clear. Lawmakers made speeches implying the grave threat the suspects pose to the country.

Some of these fear-mongering grandstanders made it sound like Obama was relocating the terrorist suspects — none yet convicted of anything; three being prosecuted — like they'd be in some reverse Witness Protection Program, running Casey's General Stores maybe, or rounding up shopping carts at Kroger's or opening Wells Fargo branch banks.

Speaking in front of the National Archives' display of the U.S. Constitution, Obama criticized the most strident opposition as "political posturing" and dismissed claims that bringing terrorist suspects to the United States to be tried would pose a threat to Americans or national security. Describing Guantanamo as a legal "mess" left by the Bush administration, Obama said the Congressional debate resulted in comments "calculated to scare people rather than educate them. We are not going to release anyone if it would endanger our national security; nor will we release detainees within the United States who endanger the American people."

The scare tactics and politics of fear have been used

since the criminal attacks on 9/11, but leaders sometimes let a desire for revenge overwhelm a need for justice.

"Instead of strategically applying our power and our principles," Obama said, "too often we set those principles aside as luxuries that we could no longer afford. And during this season of fear, too many of us — Democrats and Republicans; politicians, journalists and citizens — fell silent. We went off course."

Torturing suspects and using Guantanamo divided us from our allies, broke our laws and treaties, and emboldened "the will of our enemies to fight us," Obama added.

"There is also no question that Guantanamo set back the moral authority that is America's strongest currency, in the world," he continued. "The existence of Guantanamo likely created more terrorists around the world than it ever detained."

"We are indeed at war with al-Qaeda and its affiliates, [but] we do need to update our institutions to deal with this threat...with an abiding confidence in the rule of law and due process, in checks and balances and accountability."

In contrast, the United States during World War II treated prisoners of war more humanely. At Camp Ellis — concrete water towers remain visible from U.S. Route 136 between Table Grove and Ipava — POWs could work under guard and earn a dime a day to spend on movies and recreation, had church services, were permitted to play sports and were given monthly physicals.

Camp Ellis was big, with 25,000 U.S. troops guarding prisoners and being trained for overseas duty, with more than 2,000 buildings, including one of the largest Army hospitals in the country.

"The Greatest Generation," those Americans are called, but surely today's patriots could handle a couple of hundred ragtag detainees — most of whom have no evidence against them.

Many Senators see their opposition as their role as a check on the executive branch.

U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Ha.), who co-sponsored the measure to stop the funding, said, "This amendment is not a referendum on closing Guantanamo," which he called "a symbol of the wrongdoing" committed in our names.

This Memorial Day, maybe we should remember back five decades when we faced challenges, much more grim, and did so while upholding the Constitution, the Geneva Convention and common decency.

We can do it again.

Bill Knight can be contacted at knights@elmnet.net.

Of carts and horses

First, you get a cart and, next, a horse. Importantly, you put the horse before the cart.

These are transportation basics, but, when it comes to planning freeways, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation seemingly cannot put first things first.

Last week Tuesday, the DOT presented three options for converting STH 29 between Edgar and Marathon (Section 3) to a freeway where all at-grade accesses would get closed.

All three options drove landowners along the stretch crazy.

"There wasn't a happy land owner at the meeting," reported local dairy farmer and affected landowner Maynard Matthiae.

The reason all options agitated the property owners is because all include an overpass at CTH S, while none include what the locals want, a diamond interchange at the intersection. A diamond interchange would best preserve local businesses and minimize impacts to emergency response times, according to the property owners.

The DOT, of course, has its reasons for denying locals a diamond interchange. They are that such an interchange would violate the 6-8 mile interchange spacing rule for "rural" freeways, that the CTH S accident history is not abnormally high and that, with only 1,500 cars a day, the intersection fails to meet the 2,000 average traffic count threshold for interchanges.

We don't challenge any of this. We understand that if the state is going to build highways statewide it must have rules to follow.

Yet what we cannot accept is a planning process

for this section of STH 29 that puts an environmental review at the tail end of the highway planning process, rather than at the beginning.

This truly puts the cart before the horse.

The DOT is thus willing to consider constructing a service road north of STH 29 that, in connecting both County Materials and Morgan Sand and Gravel to STH 107, would require a new bridge be placed across the Big Rib River.

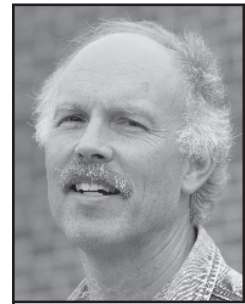
The DOT has laid this option on the table, but, to date, has no cost estimate from the Department of Natural Resources or Army Corps of Engineers over what it would cost the DOT to mitigate any loss of wetlands or river habitat.

And this makes no sense. Our hunch is that it will prove far more expensive to install another bridge across the Big Rib River, especially when all environmental repair costs are added in, than to add ramps for an interchange at CTH S that the DOT is already committed to.

We might agree that the DOT has to ration interchanges by spacing, accidents and traffic count, but not if the planning process demands that the state build a more expensive highway than it has to and one that makes all affected property owners upset.

Here, the solution is simple. Put the cart before horse. Get a good grasp of the environmental realities early, not late. Possibly, then, the state can be heroes by both saving money and answering the legitimate concerns of landowners in designing a badly needed highway upgrade.

Peter Weinschenk can be contacted at pweinschenk@tpprinting.com.



Peter Weinschenk

**Editor,
Record-Review**

P.O. Box 677
Abbotsford, WI 54405

August 12, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

The writer of this editorial clearly got it right and put the horse before the cart: a humorous lead, appropriate for a transportation editorial, supported by background on the issue including the viewpoints of the parties involved and an ending that offers a solution.



Kevin O'Brien

Editor,
Tribune-Phonograph

P.O. Box 677
Abbotsford, WI 54405

April 29, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

Comparing the Obama administration to the local city council, the writer reminds the reader that "openness" is important at all levels of government. And by pointing out that the new mayor is all talk and no action when it comes to openness, the writer served notice that the newspaper is not going to back away from its responsibility to point out hypocrisy, even when pressured with the old "you're picking on..." charge.

Actions vs. words

More openness in government" is a popular campaign promise among politicians, whether it's Barack Obama vowing to roll back the shroud of secrecy established by the Bush administration or Abbotsford's newest mayor, Sue Sossaman, asking that more of the city's business be conducted at public meetings. On the national level, Obama's release of the so-called "torture memos" set off a fiery debate about the need for transparency in a democracy versus the demands of national security. While the issues facing Abbotsford may be much less morally frustrating or weighty, the principles of open government are still the same.

At the start of the Abbotsford City Council's reorganizational meeting April 21, Mayor Sossaman promised to usher in a new era of public participation and increased awareness by encouraging more people to attend meetings, and asking council members to discuss their questions and concerns at these meetings. She said this would be a change from the days when council members would come to city hall on their own time and get all of the answers to their questions before meetings.

"Any action taken by the council should be done in an open session meeting and voted on by the full council and recorded in the council minutes," Sossaman told the council and members of the public. We applaud her for this sentiment.

Unfortunately, one of her first actions as mayor betrayed her words just a few minutes later. When council president Bob Morrow objected to her proposed committee appointments, they only debated the issue for a few minutes out in the open before retreating into the city hall offices to discuss the matter privately — away from the rest of the council and the public.

Now, legally, there is nothing wrong with what Sossaman and Morrow did. Because the two of them could not form a quorum or block the committee appointments, open meetings laws do not prevent them from hashing out a deal behind closed doors. Still, after just talking about the need for the city's business to be done out in the open, it seems hypocritical for the mayor to stop a public meeting and talk to the council president alone. Even though the conversation may have gotten heated and embarrassing, the public has a right see all of the deliberations regarding municipal matters — unless it involves personnel or another topic specifically shielded by law. Bob Dreps, an attorney working on behalf of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association put it this way during a phone interview Tuesday: "If I were a citizen of Abbotsford, I'd be pretty curious about what happened in there."

Sossaman also remarked that "all council members are equal, regardless of their title," so why was the council president granted a private audience with her during a public meeting? Are these behind-closed-door chats going to become commonplace during meetings? We think this would directly contradict what Sue herself said at the meeting: "I would like to see the full council be made part of the decision-making process."

Some have accused us of "picking on" Sue Sossaman. But scrutiny shouldn't be mistaken for malicious attacks; we are simply pointing out what we see as a contradiction in the words and actions of our city's top elected official. If you disagree, let us know in a letter to the editor.

*Kevin O'Brien can be contacted at
kobrien@tpprinting.com.*

It's our problem; let's help fix it

Dillon's public schools have a problem. Dillon has a problem. It's not someone else's problem. We own it.

The dilemma lies with the Mary Innes, Parkview Elementary and Dillon Middle schools, and how to not only maintain them but also to extend their service life so that the community is not saddled with huge replacement costs in the not-too-distant future.

Last spring — for the second time in 13 months — local voters turned down a School District 10 request for permission to levy additional property taxes to pay for much needed maintenance for district buildings. The intent was to generate \$1 million — collected over a five-year period, \$200,000 a year — to establish a permanent building reserve levy to be used primarily to repair, rehabilitate and upgrade the three buildings and to establish a permanent reserve fund for ongoing maintenance.

The improvements laid out at that time included not only upgrades to keep the buildings in usable condition, but also to make them useful and compliant in accordance with present-day and future educational standards and mandates.

The reality at this point is that district taxpayers — or at least those who participated in the election process last May — have made their wishes known. The money for building maintenance will not be built up in a reserve fund, but will come from the district's regular budget.

With that in mind, a new approach is being considered.

Now, the district trustees and school administration are asking for a different kind of help. At an informal meeting last week, school officials met with school staff members and members of the public. At least, that was the intent.

In an effort to move forward in light of last spring's levy failure, District 10 Superintendent Glen Johnson invited participation by faculty and other staff, and especially the Dillon community (those with ownership in the facilities themselves) to attend an evening public meeting held Sept. 15.

There, Corey Johnson, an architect with CTA Architects in Bozeman, and Dan McGee, an energy consultant with McKinstry Co. of Missoula, reviewed the school district facility assessment published at the end of June by CTA. That assessment, a frank look at the current condition of each of the three buildings, as well as how they could best meet the future needs of the community, offers cost estimates and options.

They also described a way for the district to proceed

with some needed improvements in such a manner that the upgrades pay for themselves over time. So-called "performance contracting" would create a process whereby savings from such things as lower energy consumption and lower maintenance costs would pay for the improvements.

Unfortunately, nearly every one of the invitation letters sent out to the community at large, including business, club and civic leaders, was ignored. According to Johnson, the respondents to his call for help — those who showed up to listen to the presentation and offer suggestions — included school district personnel...but only a couple of persons from the community itself.

The downside to performance contracting is that to get the process started, there must be a capital outlay, with the money coming from who knows where. That was one of the main reasons for last week's brainstorming session. No matter how the problem is solved, money will be at the heart of the situation.

Those who might advocate another attempt at passing a building reserve levy would be wise to proceed cautiously. Taxpayers have spoken, and it would be somewhat foolish to try to solve this problem by some sort of "end run" to ram through an additional levy on district taxpayers, even though the impact on households would likely be less now than at a future date. Rather, setting a new course of action is the best approach.

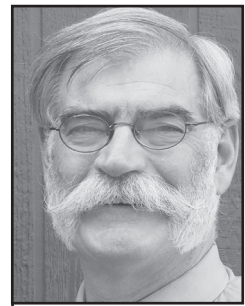
Most importantly, we must keep in mind that this is not someone else's problem; it's ours, and it's not going to go away, simply because voters turned down a mill levy request. So, where do we go from here?

Board Chairman Mike Basile is correct when he says the trustees need to go to the public with a specific plan. We agree, and add that the public needs to be open to honestly reviewing any such plan and taking an active part in the solution.

There is a real need for community intercourse on this matter, both in the aspect of settling on solutions and coming up with ways of paying for their implementation. The longer we, as a community, put this off, the harder it will be to address the problem in an economical and practical manner.

We hope the school trustees and administration see fit to continue to investigate alternative solutions to the dilemma of how to preserve, protect and enhance our schools, and strongly encourage them to do so.

Dick Crockford can be contacted at publisher@dillontribune.com.



Dick Crockford

**Publisher,
Dillon Tribune**

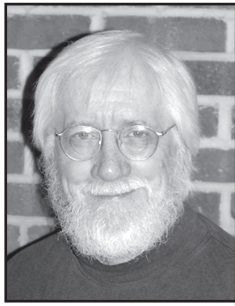
22 S. Montana St.
Dillon, MT 59725

September 23, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

Few issues can more quickly divide a community than tax referendums on school construction projects. In this community, voters for a second time turned down a property tax hike. Instead of chastising school personnel for not making their case or residents for a lack of attendance at informational meetings, the writer uses the editorial pulpit to urge everyone involved to work together and sets an example for community discussions rather than accusations.

Dick Crockford also won a Golden Dozen award in 2007.



David Giffey

Editor,
Home News

120 N. Worcester Street
Spring Green, WI 53588

September 2, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

The writer takes what first appears to be a national story, military recruiting practices at high schools, and makes it local. Starting with a thorough explanation of the provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act that require schools to give military recruiters the same access to high school students as colleges or face the loss of federal aid and the implementation of a range of penalties for non-compliance, the local impact is highlighted with specific examples of actions at area high schools. The editorial does not call for a change in the law, but instead does a good job of informing parents and students about the requirements and urging parents to talk with their children about available opt-out options.

High school teenagers should be left alone

In late July, River Valley parents and guardians were mailed letters from the high school clearly informing them that the military will have access to student information unless they “opt out” by October 1, and choose not to provide student data to the military.

The letter, signed by Principal Kim Kaukl, explained that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 “gave the military access to directory information of all students and this has raised much concern over the past few years.”

The letter continued: “In an effort to follow the law and protect your rights as parents and guardians, our school board policy 347 has changed. I hope our new policy has provided you with the opportunity to protect your rights to privacy and maintain control over who receives this directory information.”

On the reverse side of this important letter to parents is Form 347-2, which is easy to follow. All it asks for is the name of the student and a listing of “any groups to which you would not like information to be released.” The forms must be signed and dated by parents or guardians and returned to the high school office no later than October 1.

“By completing this form,” the letter said, “you will restrict access of Student Directory Data information to the groups listed on your form.”

Kaukl was correct to include in his letter the point that military access to student information has raised much concern. Concern was raised in the River Valley and across the U.S. after the weighty No Child Left Behind Act included, tucked away in Section 9528, a provision giving military recruiters the same access to high school students as is provided to colleges and prospective employers. If schools fail to comply, their federal aid (about 2 percent of total revenues) could be shut down, and a list of enforcement procedures for non-complying schools was put in place. The punishments stopped short of water boarding.

The problems created by Section 9528 are obvious. Can any rational comparison be made between recruiting minor age children to join a branch of the military before they graduate from high school as opposed to talking to them about going to college or getting a civilian job? Of course not. To pretend that the military is just another job — while deadly wars are being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan — is the height of deceit.

In fairness to them, and respectful of their youthful lack of life experience, high school students should be spared from making such a life and death decision, at least until they reach the age of majority.

But the No Child Left Behind Act leaves no child behind when it comes to military recruitment. And it also left school districts in a quandary about how to

comply with the law while protecting student privacy rights. The result has been an incredible unevenness in policies from district to district. In the River Valley, after years of revisions, the policy is clearly stated. Some districts, however, among the 425 in Wisconsin, have no policy whatsoever and don’t even offer students a chance to opt out.

Another issue is the military recruiters’ in-person access to students. Most schools, like the River Valley, provide a table in the cafeteria during lunch hours on pre-scheduled days for recruiters to offer information to students. With varying degrees of hospitality, most schools also provide similar chances for other legitimate groups to present students with information about alternatives to the military.

The resulting tension has led some districts, like Dodgeville, to restrict both military recruiters and advocates of alternative points of view to the guidance office on pre-arranged days, leaving it up to the students to visit if they are so inclined.

After eight years, the mandate for high schools to yield student data to military recruiters remains controversial. But much more is known about military recruitment thanks to research by the National Priorities Project and to inquiries submitted through the Freedom of Information Act.

It’s clearly documented that the highest recruitment rates are found in counties with incomes below the national average, and that high-income neighborhoods are under-represented and low and middle-income neighborhoods are over-represented. My Army colleagues and I joked about such discrepancies 45 years ago when we couldn’t find a corporate CEO’s son among our ranks.

It’s also known that recruiting teenagers is costly. The cost per recruit has been reported as ranging from \$24,000 to \$40,000.

From 2004 to 2008, according to *The Washington Post*, annual funding for military recruiting doubled from \$3.4 billion to \$7.7 billion. At the federal level, the Pentagon was recently ordered to cap recruiting and retention funding at the 2009 level. That could mean lower enlistment bonuses, reduced military advertising, and fewer recruiters.

No matter where your sympathies rest, high school teenagers should be left alone to study and socialize and grow up into adults that can make wise decisions when needed. Parents and guardians would be well advised to talk to their children about opting out and to file the form if that’s their choice. It’s one thing to go to college or get a job. The military is another story.

*David Giffey can be contacted at
giffeyhomenews@yahoo.com.*

Time to petition

The first Exit 4 Committee said, yes, this is a good compromise.

The second Exit 4 Committee added some changes and said yes, this is a good compromise.

The Randolph Planning Commission took two years, made important changes as the result of legal advice, and finally said yes, this Exit 4 zoning proposal is a good compromise, which can allow careful development to proceed at Randolph's most valuable property.

This July 15, however, the Randolph Selectboard said no. Or maybe. Or, "We can't decide."

It's time for the people to have their say.

It's time for a petition.

The 2-2 vote of the selectboard July 15 in effect rejected the Exit 4 proposal that had been passed to it a year ago by the planning commission. Another 2-2 vote decided not to return the issue to the commission.

Combined, the two votes created a stalemate on the most important land-use, zoning, and development question Randolph faces: How to use the properties around the interstate interchange to take advantage of the economic value of that access while protecting the town from unsightly and unsuitable development at its most visible gateway.

The 2-2 tie results from the fact that one of the selectmen, properly recuses himself from voting, because he is working for the major landowner in the area.

The stalemate is particularly unfortunate because almost everyone who has studied the issue agrees that the Mixed Use zoning now in force at Exit 4, which is 20 years old, is outdated to the point of being almost unusable. It's a situation which has kept anyone from attempting constructive development that might mean jobs or additional services.

The recent dramatic filing before the Development Review Board, presenting a "sketch plan" for varied development of 172 acres, points out anew what an important piece of property lies around the Exit 4 interchange. It's important, both for the developer and for the town, to have in place a set of regulations that can be depended upon to make development possible and at the highest possible quality.

That's why it is very unfortunate that the current Randolph town government does not seem to have the gumption to put such regulations in place. One solution does present itself, however. State law says that if the selectboard turns down a zoning ordinance proposed by the planning commission, a petition of 5% of the voters may bring that proposal before the entire citizenry.

The petition must be filed within 20 days of the selectboard action, a time period which expires Aug. 4. It's time to start that petition. It's time to end the stalemate.

M. Dickey Drysdale can be contacted at editor@OurHerald.com.



M. Dickey Drysdale

**Editor and publisher,
*The Herald of Randolph***

P.O. Box 309
Randolph, VT 05060

July 23, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

After a rezoning process that took more than two years grinds to a halt following a tie vote, community members are left asking, "Now what?" The editorial writer doesn't hesitate to point out the city officials lack "gumption" to get something done, but goes beyond placing blame to explain to readers the importance of addressing the zoning situation and to provide information on legal remedies available.

M. Dickey Drysdale also won Golden Dozen awards in 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, and 2004.



Mark Brown

Executive editor,
ByTheSeaFuture

4737 N. Ocean Drive,
Suite 139
Lauderdale-By-The-Sea, FL
33308

January 9, 2009

FROM THE JUDGE

While it is more common for editorial writers to focus attention on elected officials, this editorial calls for updated contracts for those providing services to the community along with performance reviews for those in staff positions. The editorial justifies this position with clear examples of how persons working in support positions wield enormous power and how their decisions can benefit or hurt the residents of the community.

Put the contracts for town manager, attorney out to bid

It has been nearly a year since the town commission hired the law firm of Weiss, Serota to serve as the town attorney for LBTS. Although the firm was only hired on a day-to-day basis, the contract made sense at the time because the outgoing town attorney was anxious to leave, and the town needed an interim attorney so the commission could continue to conduct its business.

Today, the day-to-day contract with the law firm doesn't make sense any more. Either the firm and the attorney it has assigned to LBTS — Dan Abbott — deserve a more secure contract or not. It's not fair to the firm, Abbott, the commission or the general public to keep their status in limbo.

It is difficult for an outsider to judge the performance of the town attorney, since most of his work is done behind the scenes — drafting legal documents, providing counsel and so forth. There is no reason to believe that Abbott has done anything other than a solid job in those respects. However, based on the glimpses of his performance that we do get, it seems the best course, of action would be for the town commission to go out to bid on a new contract for a town attorney, to see if any other firms are interested in competing against Weiss, Serota, and then offering the winner of the competition something better than just a day-to-day contract.

And while they're at it, this would be a good time for the commission to begin a top-to-bottom review of the entire town government staff, starting with Town Manager Esther Colon. When Colon was promoted from finance director to town manager two years ago, it was a spur of the moment decision by the town commission. The position was not put out to bid, there was no search for other qualified candidates, no comparing of resumes, and not even a verification of Colon's credentials.

Colon has made no shortage of controversial decisions since she was handed the job of town manager, from the purchase of the overpriced and unnecessary firefighters' dormitory to her handling of the pavilion which is being constructed at the beach on Commercial Boulevard. Putting the town manager's job out to bid would provide a perfect opportunity for an independent firm to evaluate Colon's credentials and performance over the last two years, and reassure the commission and the public that she is indeed the best person for the job.

The same goes for all other high-lever town employees who, like Colon, may have been hired or promoted without a formal search and review process, or who have been in the same position for a long time. Periodic reviews are standard practice in most lines of work, including government. These reviews are useful because they help keep the employees motivated and focused on their jobs. They help ensure that our elected officials get the staff support they need to make the best decisions, and that the taxpayers get their money's worth out of their government. Town employees are not hired for life, so let's make sure we are employing the best people out there by putting them through job reviews and performance evaluations, starting at the top.

In the case of the town attorney, the need to go out to bid for new applicants is pretty clear. The commission was far from enthusiastic when it hired Weiss, Serota in the first place. To begin with, they were the only law firm that bid on the contract, so there was no competition. Newly-elected commissioners Birute Clotney and Stuart Dodd were so uncomfortable hiring them under those circumstances that they wanted to go out immediately on

a second round of bids, but they were overruled when Colon said it would cost too much.

Even Vice Mayor Jerry McIntee had his doubts, saying he had surveyed several communities which employed Weiss, Serota and determined "60 to 40 percent that you guys are pretty good." McIntee went on to recommend only a short-term contract, saying: "then we're in no jeopardy if you turn out to be stiff. We'll just put out a new RFP."

Abbott has not turned out to be a stiff, but he is no Jim Cherof either. As anyone who follows LBTS town commission meetings knows, former town attorney Cherof knew the LBTS town chatter by heart, and he always came to commission meetings prepared for the nightly agenda. By comparison, Abbott often seems disinterested, unprepared and uninformed about the town charter or the commission agenda. When called upon to speak, he often prefaces his remarks by saying he is not familiar with an issue, but he then goes on to give an off-the-top of his head legal opinion anyway, without regard to the impact that his words might have.

For example, by winging his legal opinion about the commission's authority to repeal the town's overlay districts by ordinance, rather than through a voter referendum, Abbott may have, put the town at risk for lawsuits from property owners whose property was devalued. That might be good news for the lawyers who will try the cases, but it is not very good for the taxpayers who will pay for them.

Unlike Cherof, Abbott also seems to be reluctant to stand up to the commissioners on everything from parliamentary matters to substantive concerns. He seems particularly reluctant to challenge Vice Mayor McIntee, who hand-picked him as town attorney after he rejected the law firm's original choice of lawyers. Abbott's persistent habit of telling McIntee what he wants to hear, rather than what he needs to know, suggests that he has never gotten over McIntee's threat to fire him and seek new bids for a town attorney the minute he is dissatisfied with his performance.

The town commission has everything to gain and nothing to lose by reviewing its contracts with Colon and Abbott, evaluating their job performances, and issuing new requests for proposals to fill the jobs of town manager and town attorney. Colon and Abbott are certainly welcome and encouraged to reapply for their positions, and if they turn out to be the best candidates, they should be rehired. If better candidates emerge, then it will be in the best interest of the town to hire them instead. In the end, that's what matters the most — hiring the best people to help run the town, especially during these times of serious fiscal constraints.

The town commission should get the new year off to a good start by advertising the positions of town manager and town attorney, hiring an independent headhunting firm to evaluate the applicants, and making a renewed commitment to good government in LBTS. If the commission feels it is necessary to seek competitive bids on the most mundane spending projects, such as an electronic voting system, then the least it can do is go out to bid on the two highest-paid, most important staff positions in the entire town government. LBTS should not be the only community that hires its top employees without so much as a competitive process, or a standing review of their credentials and performance.

Mark Brown can be contacted at markbro26@aol.com.



The 35th annual Eugene Cervi Award

The Eugene Cervi Award was established by ISWNE in 1976 to honor the memory of Eugene Cervi of the *Rocky Mountain Journal* in Denver by recognizing a newspaper editor who has consistently acted in the conviction that “good journalism begets good government.”

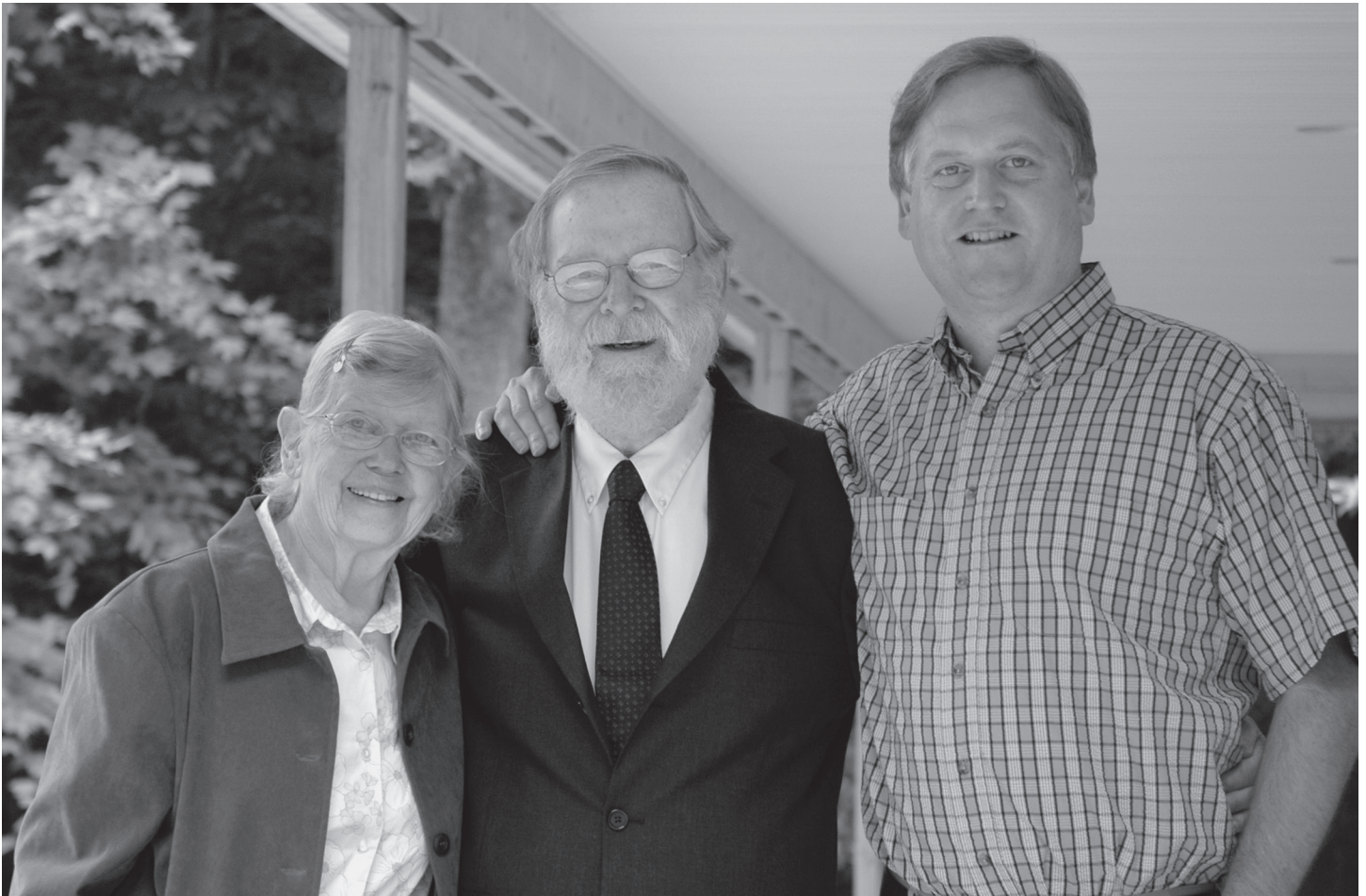
The award is presented not for a single brave accomplishment, however deserving,

but for a career of outstanding public service through community journalism and for adhering to the highest standards of the craft with the deep reverence for the English language that was the hallmark of Gene Cervi’s writing. The award also recognizes consistently aggressive reporting of government at the grassroots level and interpretation of local affairs.

Following his death at 64 in 1970, the *New York Times* described Cervi as “one of the most outspoken voices in American journalism.” Today, several ISWNE members still regard him as their “journalism conscience.”

This Year’s Winners Are...

Pat, Tom and Ben Gish



The Mountain Eagle, Whitesburg, Ky.

Gishes willing to follow the story wherever it took them

By Al Cross

Director, Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues
University of Kentucky

This letter nominates the Gish family of Whitesburg, Ky. for the Eugene Cervi Award. Tom, Pat and Ben Gish have exemplified the award's criteria for more than 50 years. They have consistently acted in the conviction that good journalism begets good government, and have aggressively reported on, and interpreted, government at the grassroots level. They have provided outstanding public service through community journalism and adhered to the highest standards of our craft, including reverence for the English language.

When Tom and Pat Gish gave up their big-city and state-capital journalism careers to take over *The Mountain Eagle* on Jan. 1, 1957, they changed its slogan from "a friendly non-partisan newspaper" to something much more simple, blunt and meaningful: "It screams." They brought first-class journalism values to one of the most isolated, economically distressed and politically corrupt counties of Appalachia. For more than five decades they have held onto those values in the face of boycotts, rumors, harassment, shunning and even arson. The last incident was perpetrated by scowling coal operators, abusive local police, or both of them acting in concert. After it, Tom Gish sat on his front porch for all of Letcher County to see, hammering out stories and editorials on his manual typewriter for the next edition, which came out on time with a slightly revised slogan: "It still screams."

At one time or another, the Gishes managed to offend nearly every influential or powerful person in the county and many beyond, all the way to the state Capitol and Washington. In his humble fashion, Tom Gish once told an interviewer that the controversial stories were almost generated by local people who complained about abuse, fraud, waste or environmental degradation. Their in-depth coverage of issues made the *Eagle* a first stop for national reporters and politicians trying to catch up with Tom's understaffed, budget-challenged paper on major topics such as strip mining and the Tennessee Valley Authority's role in it, poor schools and their causes, anti-poverty programs good and bad, coal-mine health and safety, and malfeasance of local, state and federal officials. The *Eagle* covered and challenged school boards that didn't care about children, county government that regularly failed the public, economic development "experts" who mostly developed their own incomes and officials at the state and federal levels. More recently, it spotlighted big salaries and pay raises in the regional anti-drug program sponsored by the powerful local congressman.

In a tribute read at Tom Gish's funeral in November 2008, former *Eagle* reporter and McGraw-Hill executive James Branscome said, "In a time when the ethos of the age is 'every man for himself and government is the enemy,' Tom still believed that government could be made to serve the people, to ensure that all have food on the table, an opportunity for a job, the right to have their property protected, and the right to be happy, joyous and free. That is the measure of Tom Gish and, sadly, a marker of how far we have strayed in journalism, politics and business that he seemed to be in a distinct minority."

Tom Gish once said, "There's no excuse for not being able to explain serious issues in a way that people can understand and respond to." Tom had nothing but contempt for editors who might pass on a story or dumb it down to a few bland inches of text because they thought it too complex for readers to grasp. He wanted *Eagle* reporters to report thoroughly, incorporate their own views if warranted, and never talk down to readers. That, he felt, was what newspapers can and should do. His son Ben carries on that mission, and his son-in-law Freddy Oakes manages the business side to keep the paper going against local competition. And Sally Oakes, Freddy's daughter and Tom and Pat's granddaughter, is a reporter for the paper. The Gishes have inspired others, including Homer Marcum, the only Kentuckian who has won the Eugene Cervi Award.



Pat and Tom Gish hold a print of a house ad that ran in *The Mountain Eagle* in 1926, the year Tom was born. This photo was taken in the late 1980s by Thomas N. Bethell.

Despite its national reputation, *The Mountain Eagle* is far from a crusading scandal sheet. It is a complete community newspaper, with rural correspondents and all the features that local readers and expatriates expect. "They have always paid close attention to what could be described, wrongly, as the small stuff," wrote Tom Bethell, who worked with Tom and Pat in the 1960s. "In the pages of *The Eagle* you can count on knowing when the redbuds are blossoming and how the mist looks on Pine Mountain, who has come home for the holidays, who owes back taxes, and who has died."

A key to the Gishes' greatness, Bethell wrote, "is that they have always understood that there is almost no such thing as a strictly local story, and they have been willing to follow the story wherever it takes them. That, surely, should be a model and a mantra for rural journalists wherever they are." The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues agrees, and that's one reason our award for public service through courage, integrity and tenacity in rural journalism is named for Tom and Pat Gish. We gave them the first Gish Award, and are proud to nominate them and the rest of their family for the award named for the great Gene Cervi.

'Happy news' not a staple of this newspaper

By Pat and Tom Gish

Editor's note: The following is based on an excerpt from The Business of Journalism: 10 Leading Reporters and Editors on the Perils and Pitfalls of the Press, edited by William Serrin and published by The New Press in 2000.

The small-town newspaper editor willing to risk everything to publish that one important story is becoming a thing of the past. One of the major reasons for this is the trend of consolidation that has hit small-town newspapers in recent years. Almost all weekly and small-town daily newspapers in Kentucky, for example, have been purchased by large corporations, most of them based outside the state. The same is true elsewhere.

Some 20 Kentucky newspapers were swallowed in one gulp in recent years by a publishing company financed by loans from the Alabama Teachers Retirement System. One of the newspapers in this buyout was another mountain newspaper that we have read and respected for many years.

For the past decade this newspaper has had perhaps the best coverage of any Kentucky school system, thanks to a gutsy reporter. Her stories detailed just about every kind of fraud and corruption and misuse of school funds you could find anywhere.

One consequence of that school system's failure is that far too many students drop out or are pushed out of school and are doomed to follow the path that leads about half the adults in Eastern Kentucky to be functionally illiterate.

Not long after the chain took over the paper, we received a phone call from the reporter, who told us that as soon as she hung up the telephone she was getting in her car and leaving the community. What had happened? She was called in by the newspaper's new manager and told that she had to stop writing all those bad stories about the schools. She heard that her stories made people unhappy and that wasn't what the owners wanted to do. "Happy news" makes people happy, and happy people make a prosperous community, they said.

The sad truth is that happy news has become the prevailing philosophy in all too many community newspapers.

We have been at this business of community journalism for more than 40 years. They have been years of great challenge, but also years of great satisfaction — the feeling, the knowledge, that we were doing something worthwhile, that we were happier where we were than we could possibly be in any other career choice.

We bought our newspaper in 1957 when it was 50 years old. We brought to the community a combined 20 years of newspapering experience and a certain amount of smugness that we knew what news was. There is no good answer as to why we bought *The Mountain Eagle*, other than that it was the paper Tom had read as a child growing up in a Letcher County coal camp, it was for sale and we shared the dream of so many reporters of owning our own newspaper.

We are still surprised at our lack of knowledge about Eastern Kentucky at that time. We didn't know that the coal economy was falling apart. We didn't know that one of every two mountain adults couldn't read or write. We didn't know that tens of thousands of families had been plunged into the extremes of poverty, with children and adults alike suffering from hunger and some dying of starvation.

We didn't know that mountain pride and independence caused mountain people to suffer in silence — it was God's will that they lived such destitute and, by national standards, hopeless lives.

With what we now recognize as either stupidity or ignorance, we set about doing what we knew how to do. We started reporting on public affairs in the county. As reporters, we attended meetings of two school boards, three city councils and the county governing body, known as the fiscal court. We wrote and printed detailed stories of what happened at those meetings — the kind of reporting that is commonplace in newspapers everywhere.

What we also did not know was that the Letcher County officeholders were not accustomed to detailed public disclosure of their activities. School board meetings were considered gatherings of friends and allies. What the board did was regarded as private business. No reporters wanted, no news stories allowed.

Several government agencies passed motions declaring their meetings off limits to reporters. We found ourselves in a fight for fundamental freedom of the press. It was a battle that took up much of our time and energies for a decade, and it got downright nasty at times.

Fiscal court not only banned us from meetings but hit us financially by canceling its printing contracts. The county school board chairman tried to ban us from the board's meetings and told teachers, parents, and the public in general to boycott the *Eagle*. The board of a city school system passed a resolution banning the *Eagle* from its meetings.

It would be nice to say that the community welcomed our reporting, but it didn't. Just about everything we wrote was treated with suspicion, often with disbelief. "Who paid you to put that in the paper?" was a taunt we often heard.

Eventually, we realized that the suspicions were not without reason. We learned that for years the paper had sold front-page stories to candidates for local offices. And we were confronted in one tense moment at the office by the county's leading criminal figure.

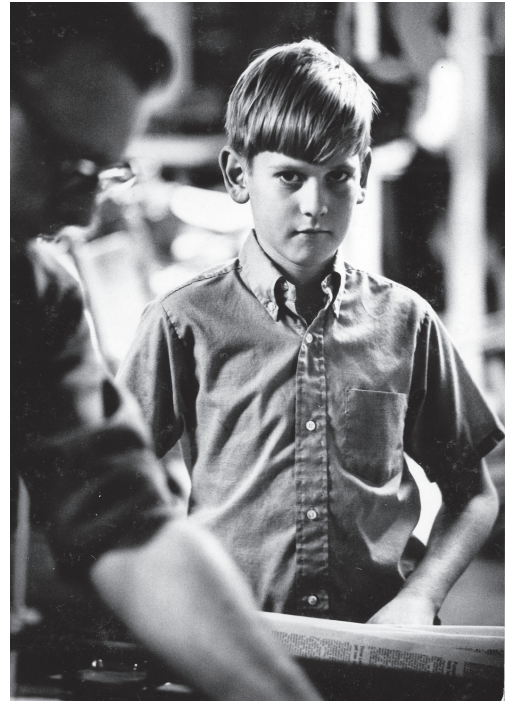
He was a man with several shootings and convictions on his record. He wanted to buy that week's front page to advance his political candidate. "Name your price," he said as he displayed a giant wad of bills. We knew the man's reputation; we had heard stories of his foes who had disappeared. We were scared, and saying "no," when the paper was having serious financial problems, was one of the toughest decisions we ever made. But, we said "no," and he left us alone.

In fact, as our problems continued over the next several years, there were times when we would walk the two blocks from our office to the post office and we would be in such universal disfavor that no one on the street would speak to us except that man. He seemed to know what we were going through, and we shared the common bond of community shunning.

The problems of coal mine explosions and mine safety issues, coupled with the enormous environmental damage caused by strip-mining, became the targets of years of editorials and news reports. Bethlehem Steel Corp., owner of the largest coal mines in our county, reacted by telling the Letcher County business establishment that the *Eagle* was a communist publication and should be put out of business.

Powerful enemies

In the early 1960s, when national attention focused on Appalachian poverty, there was talk of a new effort to help the region. The *Eagle* editorially urged a development patterned after the Tennessee Valley Authority. Along with others, we



Ben Gish, at age 11, operating an automatic folder that always gave the family so much trouble they usually ended up having to fold the sheets by hand. Tom is on the left.

proposed that coal be used to produce electricity to be shipped by transmission lines to places such as New York City. This drew the anger of the American Electric Power Co., the public utility for most of Eastern Kentucky and one of the largest in the nation.

AEP sent representatives into Letcher County to visit every business establishment, urging them to withdraw advertising from the *Eagle* and cancel subscriptions because the publishers were communists.

The power company canceled its own weekly ads. It is hard to pinpoint who canceled what ad for what reason or at whose urging, but the paper declined to the point that it was often only four tabloid-size pages in the 1960s and early 1970s.

We had one loyal advertiser during that period who saw issues much as we did. He was Ray Collins, an Old Regular Baptist minister who made his living as a bottler of Royal Crown Cola products. Collins supported the *Eagle* by purchasing a full-page ad every week for 10 years. This paid us enough hard cash to buy newsprint and stay in business.

I am happy to report that he did not waste his advertising dollars. His bottling firm climbed to the proud position of No. 1 in per capita sales in the United States, and Collins delighted in spreading the word to local merchants about the effectiveness of *Eagle* advertising.

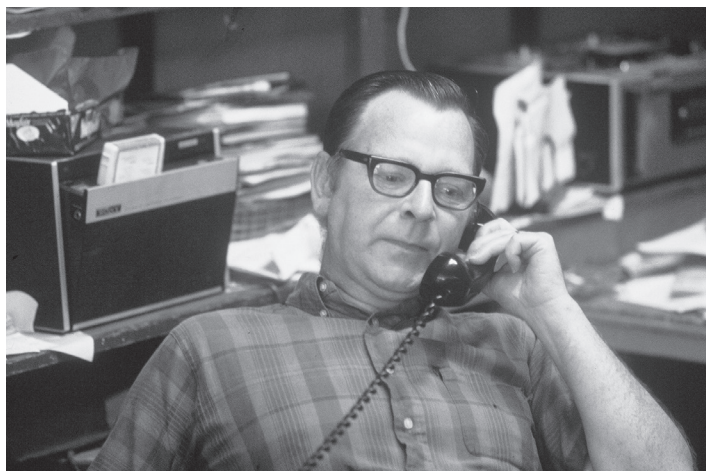
We are convinced that knowledge is power and that the more the *Eagle* can help inform its readers about local and far-away developments that affect them, the more good things can happen. We made it our business to be spokesmen for the coal miners who had to work in unsafe conditions and the landowners whose property was being destroyed by strip-mining or whose wells were being ruined by deep mining.

We were also concerned about children who were not getting an adequate education, people who couldn't afford good health care, communities that didn't have adequate public water and sewer systems. We were among the first papers to write about the problems caused by strip-mining.

Until the federal government passed laws regulating the process in 1977, mining companies were free to get the coal out any way they wanted to and were not required to reclaim the hillsides they had scarred. It took a 30-year effort by many people to get a law limiting the use of the infamous "broad-form deed." Something of a war was fought — sometimes with words, sometimes with guns and dynamite, sometimes with sabotage.

Threats and a firebomb

In the early 1970s, Whitesburg police, joined by sheriff's deputies, confronted young people in the community over such offenses as boys charged with whistling at girls and women who passed by and with playing their car radios too loud.



Tom Gish on the phone in 1968. Note the 8-track player behind him.

Several kids were beaten by officers in various incidents and some were jailed for questionable reasons. Some youths were shot. The paper detailed it all, and this angered the lawmen.

While this was going on, there developed a situation involving the coal industry and overloaded coal trucks, which were destroying poorly paved mountain roads. Coal operators and truckers met to discuss plans for dodging the problem. One coal operator told the crowd, "If Tom Gish gets word of this and prints anything, we'll burn his paper down." A reporter from *The Courier-Journal* was present and reported the threat.

During this period we were getting frequent threats about our children, our business and our home. A few weeks later, the newspaper's office and most of its contents were destroyed in a predawn fire caused by a kerosene firebomb tossed through a window by a student in a law-enforcement curriculum at a state university. A long, painful investigation followed. We found ourselves and our son accused.

Eventually, however, state police established that a Whitesburg city policeman, who also was a sheriff's deputy, had hired some boys to burn the newspaper. The policeman and the boys were arrested.

Most charges were plea-bargained away, but the policeman was tried by a special commonwealth's attorney who came up from Lexington, and the policeman was convicted by a Letcher Circuit Court jury on a charge of procuring arson. He was sentenced to a two-year prison term, which was probated on condition that he leave the state for those two years.

It appeared that those who plotted the *Eagle* arson hoped to pin it all on police-youth confrontations. But an attorney hired to represent one of the boys told us later that the boys involved had been shown a big roll of bills — he cupped his hands to illustrate — and were told there would be plenty for everyone. Everyone knew it was coal money, the attorney remarked.

A news story that appeared in the fall of 1998 also had an effect on us. Most mountain people can't afford to build or buy a home. Local banks don't want to finance homes except for short periods at high interest rates.

Our residents are paying 10 percent interest or more for a 10- or 15-year home mortgage, even though branches of the same banking firms make loans available to home buyers in Central Kentucky at 7 percent interest over longer periods.

We asked some questions, wrote a story and printed it on the front page. That produced a result. The bank, which had been an every-week advertiser since the Depression, canceled all its advertising.

We no longer panic when such things happen. We have developed dozens of smaller advertising accounts from all kinds of locally owned small businesses.

Part of the community

One problem with being a small-town editor is that as soon as the paper is out, you may walk out the door and run into the guy you mentioned unfavorably in an editorial or someone who was involved in some questionable activity you reported.

This you learn to accept. But it's a little bit harder for your five kids when their best friends may be the children of someone you have taken to task.

There's a lot of discussion these days as to whether it's proper for editors to take an active as well as an opinionated part in the development of their communities. Some people think the role of the press is to observe and comment, and not to drive outsiders around explaining local conditions and problems.

We decided early that we had to take an active role in bringing the problems of Eastern Kentucky and Letcher County to the attention of those who might help.

We're still doing it. We also were determined to give our mountain readers the facts and information needed to confront their many problems. We're still doing that, too.

Although the paper's reporting was not welcomed by subscribers or public officials 40 years ago, today we get loud complaints if we fail to attend meetings and report what happens. And most public officials accept our presence.

We still think we have the best job in the country. And we still have not learned how to report happy news.

Crusading publisher Tom Gish dies at 82

By R.G. Dunlop
The Courier-Journal
Nov. 22, 2008

Tom Gish, the legendary publisher of *The Mountain Eagle* newspaper in Letcher County who crusaded for openness in government and against public corruption and the abuses of strip mining, died yesterday afternoon at the Pikeville Medical Center.

Gish, who suffered from kidney and heart problems, was 82.

Ben Gish, one of Tom and Pat Gish's five children and the current editor of *The Mountain Eagle*, said of his father: "He was the most honest and brave man I ever knew."

Steve Cawood, a Pineville attorney and former state legislator, called Gish "the conscience of the mountains, and also the conscience of the press. When the statewide press, the regional and national press, weren't paying attention to the principal issues of the region, it was his coverage that brought that press in."

The Mountain Eagle, whose masthead slogan is "It Screams," endured advertising boycotts, faced threats of violence and had its offices firebombed in 1974. Showing their grit, the Gishes churned out another issue a week after the incident, with the masthead stating, "It Still Screams!"

The Gishes, who were married for 60 years, met in a Spanish class at the University of Kentucky. Tom, who grew up in the Letcher County community of Seco, was the son of a coal-mining superintendent and himself was a mining engineering student at UK.

But Pat, who eventually became editor of *The Kentucky Kernel*, the student newspaper, piqued his interest in journalism, and before graduation he had served as editor of *The Kentuckian*, UK's yearbook.

After a stint in Frankfort as bureau chief of United Press International, the Gishes bought *The Mountain Eagle* in 1956 and quickly transformed it from a staid, run-of-the-mill community newspaper into one that combined often-scathing public-service journalism with the gentler aspects of a rural county, voiced through the observations of a series of community correspondents.

"He let them speak, and be read, in a voice to which they were accustomed," said Al Cross, director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at UK. "He respected them."

Cross said that when he joined the institute in August 2004 and realized "that we had to have an award for courage, integrity and tenacity in journalism, there was no question who it would be named for."

The first Gish Award was presented the following February to Pat and Tom Gish. In remarks accompanying that presentation, Rudy Abramson, chairman of the institute's advisory board and a former *Los*

Angeles Times reporter, recalled that shortly after the Gishes acquired *The Mountain Eagle*, they began prying into long-ignored corners of Whitesburg and Letcher County government and the local schools.

Those who ran those institutions were not amused.

Not long afterward, said Abramson, who died last February, the school board adopted a resolution barring press coverage of its meetings. Other "public" agencies soon followed suit.

But that was only the beginning. Efforts to drive the Gishes out of business with advertising boycotts and, eventually, arson followed.

Abramson said the doctor who delivered Tom Gish was "the school board chairman and the political boss of Letcher County, and he put out word that school board employees were not to buy *The Mountain Eagle*. Along Main Street in Whitesburg, word was spread that Tom was a Communist. The *Eagle* lost for all time its major advertiser, an automobile dealer, which had been largely responsible for keeping the paper's books in the black."

In 1960, Abramson said, a *Mountain Eagle* editorial "leveled scathing criticism at Bert Combs, an Eastern Kentuckian who would long be regarded as one of the state's most progressive governors, for failing to take a stronger stand against strip mining and for doing too little to address the economic distress of the mountains."

When Tom and Pat Gish were inducted into the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame in 1986, the accompanying citation described *The Mountain Eagle* as "a powerful editorial voice in Letcher County and Eastern Kentucky" that attracted international attention.

Mimi Pickering, a filmmaker at Appalshop, a non-profit, multi disciplinary arts and education center in Whitesburg, who is working on a film about the Gishes and *The Mountain Eagle*, said what struck her most about the couple was their "amazing tenacity and leadership."

While the Gishes bought the paper with the intention of being part of the fabric of the community, Pickering said they quickly discovered that the type of news coverage they wanted to offer readers "put them at odds with the powers-that-be, in Letcher County and beyond."

"I think they put their belief in honest, fair journalism above everything," Pickering said. "In a small town, that can be pretty rough. They said they found out they weren't going to be the country club set in Whitesburg."

Pickering said Tom Gish liked to garden and cook, and could be both charming and loquacious, but also could be provoked to anger.

"He was known for his temper," Pickering said. "I wouldn't have wanted to go against him if I was trying to cover something up."



Tom Gish

Ben Gish confirmed that while his father "had a helluva wicked sense of humor, he had a temper too." He added, with a chuckle: "I was the victim a time or two."

Cross said he thought one of Tom Gish's most significant achievements was that he didn't "burn out," despite a half-century at *The Eagle*.

He recalled that Tom Gish was interviewed years ago by the legendary CBS television correspondent Charles Kuralt. Kuralt observed that the prevalence of violence in the area undoubtedly was stressful, and that Gish could simply leave journalism behind and take life easy.

"Tom basically said, 'I just can't do that,'" Cross said. "He wasn't made that way."

Gish also served on the Kentucky Board of Education from 1991-98, immediately after passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act, a critical period for the state's public schools.

Helen Mountjoy, currently secretary of the state Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, served with him and recalled his unflagging commitment to children.

"He was not an educator by trade, and while the rest of us worried about trying to get the education part right, he worried about the people and how to get them a better education," Mountjoy said. "The rest of us would get real excited when we'd be making progress in one direction. He'd sit there and shake his head and say, 'We can be happy now, but tomorrow we have to worry about how far we have to go.'"

"I don't think it's possible to overstate the influence that Tom had on so many people in Kentucky."

Gishes were my role models during 13 years of harassment

By **Homer Marcum**

1983 Eugene Cervi Award recipient

Editor's note: Homer Marcum is a member of the advisory board of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues. He wrote this note to IRJCI Director Al Cross in 2004 when the Institute created the Tom and Pat Gish Award for courage, integrity and tenacity in rural journalism.

It's a great thing you're doing by naming a community journalism award for the Gish family and *The Mountain Eagle*. One of my bones of contention with the newspaper business is that large newspapers have resources reserved specifically for taking on projects that will win them a Pulitzer Prize. Small papers don't have that luxury, although their contributions, cumulatively, are often more meaningful and have more impact in their local communities than work that wins Pulitzers. I hope the Gish Award changes that.

When I was in the weekly newspaper business in Martin County, the Gish family was a giant in my eyes. In retrospect, I don't think I would have been able to weather the storm of harassment leveled at me for 13 years without Tom, Pat and

Ben Gish as role models. When fire was set to my building, my initial reaction was that I was fortunate the fire department was able to put it out before much damage was done. But after the shock, my enduring thought was that it wasn't as bad as the fire that destroyed *The Mountain Eagle* building, and that if the Gishes could bring their paper back even stronger, so could I.

I sought the Gishes out for counsel every time I saw them at a KPA convention, but mostly for inspiration. During my darkest times, facing legal costs that I feared would sink the paper, I looked to the Gishes for the confidence that I could make it.

Later on, when I was enrolled as a student at the University of Tennessee as a master's degree student, Dr. Dwight Teeter, the dean there, told me a story from his days of teaching at the University of Kentucky. He said that a really good student had missed several classes, and that was not like him. When the student returned, Teeter asked him what had caused the out-of-character class absence.

"I had to help Mom and Dad put out the paper, because somebody burned our building down." That student was Ben Gish, and Teeter proudly tells that story to inspire journalism students.

Every community journalist owes a huge debt of gratitude for the example the Gishes have set.



Tom Gish in *The Mountain Eagle* office in the mid- to late 1960s.



Tom Gish leaning on his sheet-fed Harris offset press in the mid-1960s.

GENE CERVI

AWARD WINNERS

- 2010 **Tom, Pat & Ben Gish**, *The Mountain Eagle*, Whitesburg, Ky.
- 2009 **Garrett Ray**, Fort Collins, Colo..
- 2008 **Burt & Ursula Freireich**, Litchfield Park, Ariz.
- 2007 **Guy & Marcia Wood**, Angel Fire, N.M.
- 2006 No award given
- 2005 **Frank Wood**, De Pere, Wis.
- 2004 **Frank Garred**, *The Port Townsend Leader*, Port Townsend, Wash.
- 2003 **Gary & Helen Sosniecki**, *The Lebanon Daily Record*, Lebanon, Mo.
- 2002 **Bill Meyer**, *Marion County Record*, Marion County, Kan.
- 2001 **Marg Hennigar**, *Lighthouse Publishing*, Lunenburg, Nova Scotia
- 2000 **Allan A. Seiler**, *The Pike Press*, Pittsfield, Ill.
- 1999 No award given
- 1998 **Jack Authelet**, *Foxboro (Mass.) Reporter*
- 1997 **Carol Wilcox & Cary Stiff**, *Clear Creek Courant*, Idaho Springs, Colo.
- 1996 **Charlotte & Marvin Schexnayder**, *Dumas (Ark.) Clarion*
- 1995 No award given
- 1994 **Jim MacNeill**, *The Eastern Graphic*, Montague, Prince Edward Island
- 1993 **Bob Bliss**, *The Montgomery County News*, Hillsboro, Ill.
- 1992 **Robert Trapp**, *Rio Grande Sun*, Espanola, N.M.



G. Ray



B. Freireich



U. Freireich



G. Wood

- 1991 **Henry Gay**, *Shelton-Mason County Journal*, Shelton, Wash.
- 1990 **Karl Monroe**, *Collinsville (Ill.) Herald*
- 1989 **William Rotch**, *Milford (N.H.) Cabinet*
- 1988 **Bruce Brugmann**, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*
- 1987 **James Russell Wiggins**, *Ellsworth (Maine) American*
- 1986 **Rollin McCommons**, *Athens (Ga.) Observer*
- 1985 **McDill (Huck) Boyd**, *Phillips County Review*, Phillipsburg, Kan.
- 1984 **Richard McCord**, *Santa Fe (N.M.) Reporter*
- 1983 **Homer Marcum**, *The Martin Countian*, Inez, Ky.
- 1982 **Kieth Howard**, *Yellow Springs (Ohio) News*
- 1981 **Edward DeCourcy**, *Newport (N.H.) Argus Champion*
- 1980 **Robert Estabrook**, *Lakeville (Conn.) Journal*
- 1979 **Houstoun Waring**, *Littleton (Colo.) Independent*
- 1978 **Tom Leathers**, *The Squire*, Kansas City, Mo.
- 1977 **Charles & Virginia Russell**, *Dewitt County Observer*, Clinton, Ill.
- 1976 **Blair Macy**, *Keene Valley Sun*, Kennesburg, Colo.



M. Wood



J. MacNeill



Hennigar



H. Marcum

Tom Gish was truly an American patriot

By Jim Branscome

Jim Branscome is a former Mountain Eagle reporter who recently retired as Standard & Poor's equity research director for the McGraw-Hill Companies. He lives in Montrose, Colo., and is on the advisory board of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues.

The indelible picture in my mind of Tom Gish is the day in 1974 when I showed up in Whitesburg to offer whatever assistance I could after the firebombing of *The Mountain Eagle*. Tom was sitting on his front porch, banging away on a typewriter to get out a very rudimentary version of his paper. Across the masthead he had typed, "It Still Screams!"

One measure of Tom is how far the news of his death spread. I found obituaries in papers from Louisville, Lexington, Williamson, Nashville, Buffalo, Boston, New York, Washington — all around America, all around Asia, all around the world. In some he was called a "renowned" editor. In others he was called a "crusader." The Associated Press, with whom Tom was a fierce competitor when he was the Frankfort bureau chief of the rival United Press, cited his courage in "shining a spotlight on corruption and environmental degradation." One obituary noted that local critics had accused Tom and Pat of being communists. Others described him as an environmentalist. But it takes a much longer yardstick to really measure this man.

Tom Gish, above all else, was truly an American patriot. Born of Republican parents in a coal mining family in Letcher County, he was an accidental crusader, if indeed that word is even apt. Tom simply took the Founding Fathers at their word: A free people, properly informed, will seek justice, and their elected representatives will ensure that all men and women are treated equally and receive their fair share of the bounties that are bestowed upon us all. That was the hope of Thomas Jefferson, a mountain man himself, when he enshrined in the Bill of Rights freedom of the press, speech, religion, right of petition, and all the other liberties we enjoy.

The true measure of Tom Gish is the extent to which he found those promises unfulfilled and the enduring battle he fought — and the sacrifices he and his entire family made — to try to make those promises a reality. In a time when the ethos of the age is "every man for himself and government is the enemy," Tom still believed that government could be made to serve the people, to ensure that all have food on

the table, an opportunity for a job, the right to have their property protected, and the right to be happy, joyous and free. That is the measure of Tom Gish and, sadly, it is a marker of how far we have strayed in journalism, politics and business that he seemed to be in a distinct minority.

Tom and Pat have had an incredible influence on our government in righting many of the wrongs they saw. *The Mountain Eagle's* reach to legislators and the national and international press corps shaped legislation ranging from food stamps, Head Start, Title I of the education act, Black Lung compensation, mine safety legislation, stripmining legislation, housing assistance, to name only a few — all incubated in a weekly newspaper.

In February 2007 I had a chance to talk with Tom about a variety of topics at his home in Thornton. I found him at 81 to be a man still burning with a sense of justice. He had thought through what this nation would reap from its profligacy of indebtedness, its embrace of empire-building abroad and its disdain of regulation. We are now reaping the economic calamity he saw coming from the policies of the past few decades. Surprisingly, perhaps, to some, Tom had already concluded that both political parties were committed to the same tired agenda and the only hope was that the people of the country would wake up in time to see the crisis before them and decide to change course. It is sad that Tom won't have a chance to influence the Obama administration, but hopefully others with the best interests of the people in the mountains will have that opportunity and Washington will listen.

Tom's other hope was that the internet would put into the hands of the public the tools to be really informed on where the power in the region and the nation lies and where the money trail inevitably leads. To that end, Tom, Pat and the *Mountain Eagle* family have inspired journalists all over the mountains and the nation to follow their example.

Finally, I found Tom to be remarkably at peace with himself for the battles he had waged over the decades. His sense of humor was intact, his intellect as incisive as ever, his hope for the region and the nation still alive. He was mellow. His smile and laughter were larger than ever. This man was not a crusader. Rather, he was truly an American patriot, a man consumed with a passion for democratic action and a deep belief in the ultimate triumph of the common man and woman in achieving the American dream. He seemed happy, joyous and free.

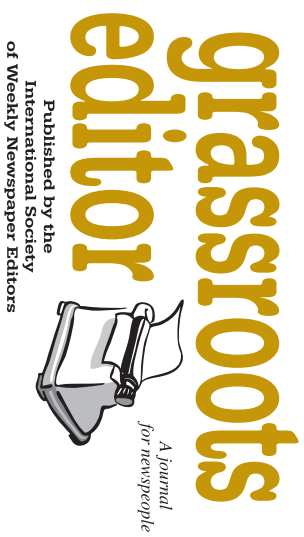
His was truly a life well lived and an example to others well engraved. We will miss him more than we know.



Ben Gish at his desk.



Pat and Tom Gish at the layout table, with Ben in the background, 2001.



Institute of International Studies
Missouri Southern State University
3950 East Newman Road
Joplin, MO 64801-1595
(417) 625-9736